

“Striving for Incompleteness”

by Kenneth Pomeranz

It says some wonderful things about the University of Chicago that my instructions for today were “talk about your research”: something that is rarely part of convocation speeches elsewhere. But even here, we do not talk about research at *convocation* the same way we talk about it at academic conferences. So relax: there will be no estimates of peasants’ caloric intake, analyses of deforestation, or reflections on the evolution of Chinese statecraft.

Looking back for guidance – an occupational hazard – I checked what the last historian to have this honor, my colleague Adam Green, had said. He discussed a trend well outside history– what is sometimes called “positive psychology” or “happiness research” -- and its possible connection to his own research in African American history. It’s U of C: Inter-disciplinarity R Us. I also noted a sobering comment in Adam’s talk , about a famous early 20th century historian of slavery: that though he was clearly a gifted scholar, his work had made the world worse by painting a persuasive but false picture of harmonious plantations, and of people unsuited for freedom.

Let me also start with a psychologist’s work -- that of Daniel Kahnemann, who won a Nobel Prize for fundamental contributions to behavioral economics – and with another idea about how compelling history can be bad for you. This joint exercise is, I hope, not a bad proxy for thinking about what U of C achieves by insisting that education be more than technical. So while this talk is, of course, about congratulating you and wishing you well, it aims more squarely at part of a question that nags at many graduates (and parents): What did I learn here? What am I prepared for?

Kahneman’s basic point is that humans are hard-wired to *resist* thinking statistically, relying instead on snap judgments and emotionally powerful stories that are rationalizations of those snap judgments. In one illustration, he describes telling people that the counties in the US with the lowest rates of kidney cancer are mostly small rural ones, which tend to be in the South or Midwest, have high

rates of church attendance, vote Republican, etc. Many people hearing this will quickly put these facts together, framing a story in which outdoor living, fresh food, and firm morals explain good health. But then Kahnemann notes that the counties with the *highest* kidney cancer rates are mostly small and rural, usually Southern or Midwestern, have high rates of church attendance, and lean Republican; people hearing *this* assemble a story about poverty, ignorance, and lax regulation. The real explanation is simply that kidney cancer is rare. Thus counties with big populations will have rates clustering around the national mean, while some counties with small populations will be very far from the mean, at both ends – just as roughly 51% of any major hospital’s births over a *year* will be boys, but the figure for some *days* will be 20% or 80%. The only *relevant* fact about the exceptional counties is their small populations – but we are misled by our desire to have a story explaining *all* the facts, , and perhaps also confirming our stereotypes.

This has disturbing implications for the “common sense” we use in daily life– and you can probably see why it is also disturbing for historians, even those (like myself) who like to quantify when we can. Unable to do experiments, we often begin evaluating arguments by asking if they are *consistent* with all confirmed facts – which can easily slide into preferring the argument that claims to *explain* all confirmed facts, as Kahneman catches people doing. And indeed, the only index entry for “history” in his 400-plus page book references the assertion that “our tendency to construct and believe coherent narratives of the past” deludes us into trusting incompetent “experts.” To avoid this, history must always bear in mind that being *consistent with* all confirmed facts is different from *explaining* them all. Parsimonious explanations are a two-edged sword.

Historians talk endlessly about reading “*in context*”: that you only really “get” Lincoln’s Second Inaugural when you know how its key words were being used in 1865 and what others wanted to do with the South, and that to grasp why people joined China’s Taiping Rebellion one must read what they (or their literate neighbors) said about everything from landlord-tenant relations to spirit possession to

rumors about collusion between Manchu officials and British opium traders. This may seem to call for constructing a total story from the fragmentary record: Geoffrey Elton's 1967 classic *The Practice of History* urged us to study our subjects "until one knows what they are going to say next." But contextual knowledge *never* yields predictive certainty – at best, it lets us bound the *range* of things our subjects *might* have said (and done) next, and see how those possibilities were changing. In other words, reconstructing "context" shows us what room was left for actors to matter. Thus the "incompleteness" that the historian reaches. And one has to strive for that because Kahneman is right: our default is to want a total, deterministic picture, and it takes intellectual (perhaps even moral) discipline to simultaneously accumulate knowledge, arrange it systematically, and stop ourselves before we go too far. This is incompleteness achieved and preserved against our natural but dangerous tendency to think we know enough to close our stories, and to render new information unsurprising.

Excessively "complete" history has often taken a very specific form: that of tales held together by focusing on a nation and imputing to it a single, pervasive, and self-perpetuating character. We know, of course, that nations have never been either homogeneous within nor isolated from broader influences without; yet national identities (and the interests reinforcing them) have been so strong in modern times that we have repeatedly succumbed to the temptation to make nations into units for unifying and explaining *all* the facts, reading their "social structure" or "culture" as destiny. And while more and more cutting-edge historical research works with other kinds of units -- tracing long-distance flows of people, commodities, ideas, and germs, and networks of co-religionists, trading partners, practitioners of some craft or science, or denizens of some ocean basin -- our curricula, at Chicago and elsewhere, are still dominated by units such as "China," "Mexico," and "the United States." (This is less true of, say, anthropologists or sociologists.) We may have here *elements* of the kind of laziness Kahneman points to: indulging our own or our students' weakness for all-inclusive stories that re-create known "types," albeit in more sophisticated forms, even though, we know enough to be more rigorous.

Yet there is also something more positive going on. While few of us want to argue anymore that one can tie falling birth rates, Third Republic politics and *fin de siècle* artistic movements into a neat package called “France 1870-1914,” we can legitimately expect **some** explanatory gain from juxtaposing those things because we know that the same people experienced all three. Sobered by the failures of various all-encompassing models – from classical Marxism to modernization theory -- we bring these different registers together not to reduce them all to effects of some new master variable, but because our search for **differentiated** explanations of what was possible in specific realms must cast a wide net. The most crucial constraints in any sphere of action are often not enunciated, because they are taken for granted. They include, on the one hand, material conditions like rainfall and the location of mineral deposits that really **are** given, or rules devised to cope with those givens which change so slowly that we can take them as fixed over long periods, and track their effects (as some of my work does). On the other hand, they include a given group’s strongly held assumptions, which may be equally binding in the short run, and equally invisible. Mainstream lives may, for instance, be shaped by ideas about what is natural to men and women which seem so obvious that they only surface **explicitly** in non-mainstream sources: the archives of an orphanage that found it had to teach these “natural” roles after all, local miracle tales that encode exceptions to “nature,” or the manifesto of an organization that always remained on the fringes precisely because it denied the common sense of its time. In fact sometimes what is taken for granted only surfaces when the historian him or herself introduces comparisons with a partially analogous situation elsewhere. So the “contexts” –national or otherwise -- through which we seek to understand what was possible aren’t simply things we read in the documents, or inherit from the last historian to study something: we build and rebuild them, somewhat on the fly, to answer an ever-shifting set of questions. By doing so, we get better –at understanding the interplay of structure, agency, and culture in some particular time and place, and at developing ways for understanding that interplay in other half-known situations.

That brings us back to why we are here today – because while only a handful of you are or will be historians, all of you are and will be historical actors. And because our university, both in its curriculum and in its culture – a culture you have both reproduced and left your mark on, in a nice example of structure and agency – is unusually insistent that you reflect, from many different angles, upon what you learn and what can be learned, you are equipped, not only to find and act on the stories in the facts, but to stop yourself from leaping on stories that the facts don't need. For those of us who remain here as you leave, one joy of our work is teaching people who will carry on what we do; but an equal joy is helping people who will do very different things get *some* sense of what we do, and how doing likewise may help them as they assess and shape the limits of what's possible in their fields. So along with congratulations and good luck, let me say thank you. Your educations here are complete; now go forth and strive for incompleteness.