Response to Thomas Fallace’s ‘The (Anti-)Ideological Origins of Bernard Bailyn’s Education in the Forming of American Society,’

Milton Gaither
I enjoyed reading Thomas Fallace’s fine essay connecting Bailyn’s famous critique of our discipline’s history prior to 1960 to several intellectual trends emanating out of postwar consensus liberalism. I think he is correct about all of it. His work adds nuance and particularity to claims I made myself some years ago.¹

However, there is one aspect of Bailyn’s work, present in *Education in the Forming of American Society* and everything he has written since, that still needs to be explained. Bailyn was, and has remained, everything Fallace claims. He was clearly influenced by the anti-ideological strain of thought associated with the postwar milieu, by anthropology’s granular and empirical approach, by the concept of culture as “fluid, dynamic, and grounded in lived experience,” and especially by Perry Miller’s history of ideas approach unpacking an “internally consistent mental universe.” But for all that, despite his most cherished beliefs about history, Bailyn has always been a progressive at heart when it comes to his understanding of his own discipline. History might be contingent, but historical scholarship is not. Let me explain.

As Fallace notes, several of Bailyn’s reviewers familiar with the educational historiography he canvassed in the first part of *Education in the Forming of American Society* were quick to point out that his account was deficient in many respects. It overstressed some works, undervalued others, ignored the cross-fertilization between historians connected to education programs and those in history departments, and, most egregiously, judged previous generations of historians by his own generation’s ideals. In my book I provide a lot more detail about all of this, concluding that Bailyn simply got the story wrong. Why? Because of his ideology.²

To get at Bailyn’s ideology about the discipline of history we will have to go a little outside of *Education in the Forming*. The ideology is implicit in that work, informing the historiographical narrative.

²Ibid. pp. 5-6, 91-107, 138-144.
He would make his commitments explicit in subsequent writings. Taken as a whole they reveal that Bailyn’s basic outlook has been consistent over many decades. He has always been a living embodiment of the very thing he finds most fascinating about early America—contradictions, complexities, and contingencies. Bailyn is a narrative historian with a fondness for quantification, a grand synthesizer with a specialist’s eye for fine-grained detail, a social historian who just can’t stop writing about famous men, a contextualist who can’t resist making connections to the present, and, most importantly for our purposes, all of the things Fallace claims wrapped in a self-image that is pure progressivism.

Fallace’s Bailyn, the postwar consensus Bailyn impatient with ideologically-driven accounts, has been a constant presence over seven decades of work. Bailyn has chafed against “intemperate, impassioned, remorseless-peculiarly venomous” historians who dwell long on Jefferson’s many failings, just as he has castigated the “scholastic... self-absorbed, self-centered” hagiography that sometimes passes for history of the Constitution.³ He has had no patience for critics of his work on the ideological origins of the American Revolution who substitute theories of economic determinism or subliminal race and class interests for careful presentation of evidence.⁴ In his clearest and most expansive explanation of his views, a charming book from 1994 called On the Teaching and Writing of History, Bailyn put it this way:

Perceptive historians...see connections, parallels, and implications that suggest new patterns, whole worlds, large or small, that have not been seen before. They have an intellectual—but not a political or ideological—stake in the outcome. They don’t insist that the explanations come out in a particular way.... Historians motivated chiefly by political and ideological concerns, however, commonly do have a stake in the outcome.... They want the story to prove something.

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to support certain policies, to send certain messages. They are likely, therefore, if only unconsciously, to exaggerate or otherwise bias the stories they tell.\(^5\)

Despite this bluster against apodictic impositions, Bailyn has smuggled in, unawares it seems to me, an ideology of his own that is entirely in keeping with the progressivism he has spent his career denouncing. In the quotation just cited you can see it clearly. Perceptive historians are not the splitters forever finding counterexamples to any and every generalization hazarded by lumpers. Anybody can write a monograph drowning in unassimilated detail. \textit{Perceptive} historians see connections, parallels, patterns. If the progressive baby is the belief in civilizational advance through reform, its bathwater is the sweeping grand narrative style. Bailyn most emphatically rejects the baby, but he loves, even pines for the bathwater:

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It is difficult now for anybody in any major field to keep up with the technical writings, let alone work them back into a clear and consistent narrative. Yet, in the end, that is what has to happen. The details have to be drawn back into some kind of large-scale narrative structure, within which further studies can somehow be integrated.\(^6\)
\end{quote}

Bailyn thought he had found that large-scale structure. He dedicated the latter years of his career for the most part to expounding it. Atlantic history provided Bailyn with a canvas large enough to contain everything. Just as the Mediterranean Sea had been the hub around which the peoples of what are today called Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa had once radiated a complex but recognizable civilization, so the Atlantic Ocean became in the 16\textsuperscript{th}-19\textsuperscript{th} centuries the nucleus around which Europe, Africa, and the Americas orbited, their fates bonded together through cultural, economic, technological, military, ideological, and demographic exchanges. Atlantic history proferred Bailyn “a

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\footnote{Bailyn, \textit{On the Teaching and Writing of History}, 30.}
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fresh look at the whole story,” an interpretation that drew together “the great mass of available
material—literary and statistical, new and old, local and cosmopolitan.”

In 2012 the culmination of Bailyn’s longstanding commitment to the synthetic potential of
Atlantic history was released to the public. *The Barbarous Years* it was titled. Here was no paean to the
genius of the American experiment. The tale was one of marchland chaos and violence, as men and
women on the outskirts of civilizations that had developed in isolation from one another for centuries
were suddenly thrust together in geographic competition and carnage. The book is a stunning
achievement of erudition and literary talent, showcasing a scholarly work ethic that would please the
most uncompromising Puritan. And yet.

Bailyn knew all along that the idea of Atlantic history might itself be construed by others as a
passing fad made popular by its affinities with the preoccupations of the present. In 2005 Bailyn
published a short book titled *Atlantic History* that readers of his *Education in the Forming of American
Society*, published 45 years before, will find eerily familiar. Both books have the same structure. They
begin with a tendentious historiographical essay that provides a scholarly context. They then proceed to
lay out in a series of impressionistic generalizations a sweeping synthesis of the field. In 1960 the
historiographical critique lambasted educationist historiography as a set up for Bailyn’s own
contextualist synthesis that sought to place educational history within the mainstream of postwar
cultural and social history. In 2005, however, while the sweeping synthesis was much the same, the
historiographical account was antithetical. This time he was not critiquing what had gone before as
presentist. He was defending Atlantic history *against* charges of presentism.

Bailyn’s account of Atlantic historiography’s origins acknowledges that its early practitioners
were deeply committed to the post-WWII “western civilization” concept, hoping that their work unifying
Europe and the Americas into a common culture would contrast the West’s democratic essence with the

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collectivist East then in the thrall of communist dictatorships. As the field gained in status in the 1960s and afterward, was it a coincidence that its emphasis on the indigenous cultures of Indians and Africans emerged at the very moment of anti-colonialist political movements and Red Power? Bailyn had cast his lot with Atlantic history, but was Atlantic history itself not just a historiographical emulator of intellectual fashions?

For Bailyn, the answer is no. His historiographical survey in *Atlantic History* hammers away at the point on almost every page. Historical scholarship, declares Bailyn, “has its own internal dynamics.” Works like those of Robert Palmer and Jacques Godechot on the transatlantic nature of 18th century revolutionary movements “had developed not abstractly or deductively but empirically, from their own documentary research.” Such work emerged “simply by the force of scholarship itself” rather than being “reflective of its environment and responsive to social pressures and rewards.”

Studies of the transatlantic slave trade were the same. This scholarship grew “naturally, organically, in response to creative impulses of scholarship..., enhanced but not defined by social pressure.” So were studies of Plantation economies, where “no extrinsic forces had been at work; the impulses that sustained this universally creative enterprise were intrinsic,” driven primarily by “the excitement and satisfaction of recovering a lost world.”

What about the highly controversial studies of the demographic collapse of the Indian populations after European contact?

It was a subject that had political overtones in that it was relevant to postwar concerns with the human costs of European imperialism and was relevant too to struggles over shades of racial differences in contemporary Latin American social and political life. But from the start the

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proliferating writing on Latin American population history was impelled by interests in and energized by controversies within the boundaries of historical scholarship.

Bailyn insists that key historians like Magnus Mörner “had no political agenda, however useful his findings might prove to be for those who did,” insisting that even these scholars’ critics “did not charge them with political correctness for their high initial estimates” of the pre-contact population. Bailyn cites approvingly the words of James Lockhart, who claimed that historians like himself were “more likely to be motivated by a positive fascination with their subject than by...moral outrage.” Even political history was pure, according to Bailyn:

One of the major developments in the historiography of the postwar generation—impelled by the inner forces of scholarship, by the curiosity aroused by newly gathered information and new questions generated dialectally by answers to old questions—was a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of Atlantic politics.¹⁰

What’s going on here? We see, finally, that when it comes to his own historical profession, Bailyn embraces not only the progressive bathwater of grand synthesis but the progressive baby too. He always has. In 1960 he and his generation of younger historians were going to sweep in and save the day, bringing reform and progress to the field of the history of education. In his 1994 explication of his views he optimistically predicted:

Twenty years from now kinds of history will be published that we haven’t yet thought of, things which our students will conceive, write, and publish that will supercede what we’ve managed to do. Historical writing has its history too.¹¹

That it does. What is odd, though, is that for Bernard Bailyn, the history of historical writing is the history of dialectical progress. It is not shaped by the contingencies and complexities of the broader

¹⁰ Ibid., 39, 40, 42, 49.
¹¹ Bailyn, On the Teaching and Writing of History, 97.
society within which it operates. It has its own inner logic that unfolds gradually, systematically, inexorably, progressively. Generation builds upon generation, replacing old syntheses with newer, better ones as we all march steadily to historiographical weltgeist. How lucky we are to be alive right now.