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The debate between postmodernism and historiography: An accounting historian's manifesto

"The human intellect demands accuracy while the soul craves meaning."

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Introduction

Garry Carnegie (2014: 728) recently stated that, “the key development in accounting historiography between 1983 and 2012 has been the advent of new accounting history.” We agree, and would add that impassioned exchanges between new and old (i.e. traditional) accounting historians have been heated and appear ongoing. In our view, the debate within accounting history reflects a greater debate between postmodern and traditional historians – one which questions the nature of historiography, the use of evidence, and the historian's role in society.²

As a participant in this debate, Gaffikin (2011: 237) criticized traditionalists [in accounting] for failing to assess developments in the general history literature. He also stated that, “the high priests have manoeuvred opinions back to traditional approaches,” and later that, “the ‘traditional’ historiographical research predilections of a few have dominated accounting history thought.” Gaffikin never defined what he meant by “traditional”, but in our view, traditional *topics* include professionalism, biography, and financial reporting - as viewed from a Eurocentric perspective; traditional *approaches* uphold the efficacy and use evidence to form conclusions about past events.

Parker (2015: 146) recently identified a set of “broader agendas” that have expanded the domain of accounting history. These included “race, gender, colonialism, slavery and indigenous people.” These “new” accounting histories appear to have entered the mainstream literature, in part, as a result of articles published in three specialized accounting history journals during the 2001-2005 period (Tyson and Oldroyd, 2007).³ We informally examined the most current literature in one of these journals. On 23 December 2015 we queried the *Proquest Central* data-base for the journal *Accounting History for the year 2015*. Fifty-nine distinct items were returned, 20 of which were single or co-authored articles.⁴ They included articles on health care and hospital accounting; budgetary practices and excess profits during World War I; accounting history and the Enlightenment; accounting and accountability for earthquake relief and recovery in New Zealand; accounting and accountability in early companies in the Qing dynasty; documenting, monetizing, and taxing Brazilian slaves; and the antecedents of double-entry bookkeeping and Buddhist Temple Accounting. This finding clearly suggests that accounting historians continue to expand research beyond traditional topics.

The balance of the paper is organized as follows. We initially describe the key issues in the debate between new and old accounting historians and discuss how this debate relates to the larger debate between traditional historians and postmodern social critics/theorists. We review the general history literature and identify a number of recent “turns” in that literature. We then

recount how the debate played out in three recent episodes in accounting historiography. We conclude by assessing the current state of accounting historiography and discussing whether traditional and new historians should seek a common ground or maintain their core beliefs.

New vs. traditional (old) accounting history

A higher proportion of international, female and other accounting historians appear to pay closer attention to social and political factors, and they address overlooked episodes and segments of society. Their scope and conclusions often differ from the older breed of accounting historians who tended to focus on financial reporting-related issues which lent an economic bias to their research. We have participated in this broadened agenda through a number of papers on marginalized workers. In most cases, we found that accounting's classification and measurement practices directly contributed to the denigration of workers, especially on slave plantations. In others, we concluded that accounting practices helped stabilize wages and protect worker interests. In all cases, we clearly disclosed the factual information we used to form our conclusions. We believe that the vast majority of new accounting historians have conducted studies in similar fashion. That is, they identified source materials used and presented their evidence such that others could either verify or refute conclusions.

Parker (2015: 149) recently noted that, "The range of theories brought to bear in accounting history scholarship since the advent of new accounting history has included Marxism/labour process theory; Foucauldian theories of archaeology, genealogy, disciplinary power and knowledge; Giddens' theories of structuration; neo-institutional theory; Latourian concepts; gender theory and more." While Gaffikin (2011: 245) criticized those who lump theory-based histories together, we have chosen to characterize studies that are *predominantly* theory driven *and* that reject the efficacy of evidence, either implicitly or explicitly, as "postmodern." And by postmodern, we refer readers to Himmelfarb's (1994: 133) comments that, "In history, it [postmodernism] is a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past."⁵

In our view, relatively few new accounting historians have embraced postmodernism, as defined above. Those few have moved *beyond* simply examining non-traditional areas that include gender, culture, households, displaced workers, and suppressed peoples. Instead, they have embraced a philosophy that rejects as naïve and unachievable, 1) the efficacy of factual evidence, 2) the attempt to accurately reconstruct the past, and 3) the search for historical truth(s). Napier (2001: 21) concluded that sociologically-based new historians were, "driven by a desire to theorise and generalize, rather than to particularise... as well as, "a wish to critique society." The next section presents the underpinnings of the postmodernist approach and its place within the greater debate between historians and social critics/theorists.

The greater debate – postmodernism vs. traditional history

We believe the debate in accounting historiography echoes a more substantive debate in the general history literature – one that had once been as heated, but now seems largely dissipated. In our view, this greater debate occurred between *historians*, who believed in the sanctity of factual information, and *postmodernists* (i.e., social critics and/or political philosophers) who rejected modernity and employed past events to bolster a particular theory or social agenda. Himmelfarb (1987, 1994) was one of the earliest traditional historians to sound the alarm about postmodernism. One of her concerns was that postmodernism would achieve dominance in history as it had in the humanities and social sciences. For example, she wrote (1994: 140) that,

“What the traditional historian sees as an event that actually occurred in the past, the postmodernist sees as a “text” that exists only in the present – a text to be parsed, flossed, construed, and interpreted by the historian, much as a poem or novel is by the critic...In postmodernist history, as in postmodernist literary criticism, theory has become a calling in itself.”

Although Himmelfarb has been portrayed as obsessed with history’s elites (Scott, 1989),⁶ she did enunciate a set of core principles to which traditional historians like ourselves can ascribe. Himmelfarb (1994: 134) noted that historians were keenly aware of three vulnerabilities associated with archival-based evidence: 1) the deficiency of the historical record; 2) the selectivity inherent in the writing of history; and 3) the subjectivity of the historian. She (1994: 135) summarized them as, “the frailty, fallibility, and the relativity of the historical enterprise” and argued that every historian should be aware of or be reminded of them when doing their writing and research. Zagorin (1998: 202) expressed similar sentiments:

Historians know that they may be called upon to justify the veridicality, adequacy, and reliability of particular statements, interpretations, and even of their entire account. Their form of writing is apt to incorporate many justifications for the judgments they make, the opinions they express, and the descriptions and analyses they present in their treatment of the past.

Windschuttle was also concerned about the threat of postmodernism to traditional historiography. In contrast to Gaffikin’s concerns about undue lumping, Windschuttle (1997: 12) commented that, “These [postmodern] theories are united in the view that inductive reasoning and empirical research cannot provide a basis for knowledge. They challenge the concepts of objectivity and certainty in knowledge, arguing that different intellectual and political movements create their own forms of relative knowledge.” In regard to Foucault-inspired historians, Windschuttle (1997: 137) wrote that they believed, “objectivity is impossible, so historians should be deliberately biased in their interpretations.”⁷

On the other side of the debate are several noted non-traditional historians, including Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, and Alun Munslow, all of whom presented fundamentally different conclusions about the nature of an historian’s work, the sanctity of factual information, and the search for truths about the past. White is often accredited with providing the philosophical underpinnings of interpretive, theory-driven histories. According to White (1998: 16), historical

narratives mostly are “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.” In other words, historical writing is constructive and embodies “emplotments” that manifest the author’s personal beliefs and experiences and cannot, by definition, uncover meaningful truths about the past. White (1998: 32) concluded that, “history as a discipline is in bad shape today because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination.”

Frank Ankersmit similarly criticized the predominance of evidence-based histories. Ankersmit (1998a: 183-184) revealed his belief in the prioritization of interpretation over evidence when writing that, “Evidence is not a magnifying glass through which we can study the past, but bears more resemblance to the brushstrokes used by the painter to achieve a certain effect.” He also clearly distinguished postmodern from modernist approaches in historiography:⁸

The modernist historian follows a line of reasoning from his sources and evidence to an historical reality hidden behind the sources. On the other hand, in the postmodern view, evidence does not point towards the *past* but to other *interpretations* of the past; for that is what we in fact use evidence for. (*italics in the original*)

Alun Munslow was cited by Gaffikin (2011) as one of the historiographers to whom accounting historians have given little attention.⁹ Similar to White, Munslow believed in the inability of historians to separate factual information from their implicit biases and experiences. For example, Munslow (2002: 20) wrote that, “Quite simply, there can be no historical facts without the application of theory and language-use somewhere along the line;” and a bit later that, “It is the historian’s narrative acts – emplotment process, arguments, ideological and moral positions and all the other epistemic choices and preferences – that ultimately invest the past with meaning.” More recently, Munslow (2007: 3) stated that, “It is never possible to empty ‘history’ of the **author-historian** and/or his or her theories, attitudes, values, arguments, ideologies, and so forth” (**bold in original**).

These two sets of historians hold substantially differing views regarding the historians’ role in society and the nature of their work. While we unabashedly embrace traditional views, we do not believe that these interpretive historians *deny* the existence of past events or believe that *all* historical narratives are fictional. Instead, they contend that an historian’s representation of past events can *never* be entirely objective, since all narratives are indelibly imprinted with their authors’ personal experiences, predilections, and biases. They also argue that because the choice of evidence to examine, compile, and interpret is necessarily subjective, evidence-based conclusions are always problematic.

As mentioned earlier, we accepted the challenge voiced by Gaffikin (2011), and echoed to a lesser degree by Carnegie (2014), and Gomes et al. (2011), to consult the general history literature. We did so, in part, to assess where the debate between traditional (archive-based) and non-traditional (interpretive) historians currently stands. The next section addresses the ‘turns’ we discovered in this literature.

“Turns” in the general history literature

Eskildsen (2013: 10) noted that history was not one of the original seven canonical liberal arts, and prior to the 19th century, historians often relied on a variety of non-archival materials (i.e., “autobiographies of historical actors, newspaper articles, philosophical reconstructions, or accounts of past historians”). In the mid-19th century, history first became a separate discipline, and only thereafter did consulting archives become a “privileged and indispensable source of knowledge.” It appears that “consulting archives” remained largely unchallenged well into the mid-twentieth century. And a belief in the ability to achieve greater understanding of the past through archival research, often with a desire to learn from past mistakes, became one of the core principles of modernism. In this regard, Appleby et al. (1994: 56) noted that, “progress and modernity thus marched hand in hand. Belief in modernity meant faith in accumulated knowledge, when diffused and applied, could lead to improvement, to better living standards.” That said, the field of historiography has undergone continual self-reflection beginning after the Second World War and has experienced a series of “turns” ever since.

A discussion of major turns in historiography was presented in a forum of six papers in the June 2012 issue of the *American Historical Review (AHR)* entitled, “Historiographic ‘Turns’ in Critical Perspective.” The authors identified these turns, assessed their impact, and speculated on the future course of historiography. In their short introduction to the forum, the editors [unnamed: 698] concluded that, “while the contributors to this forum present different views on this intellectual trajectory, for the most part they, “refuse to see ‘turning’ as a simple or unproblematic feature of the recent past of our profession.” Surkis (2012) indicated that the initial linguistic turn in the 1960s and 70s was followed by cultural, imperial, transnational, global, and spatial turns. The linguistic turn questioned traditional objects and subjects of historical knowledge. Surkis (2012: 703) then noted that there were many contentious debates, “between Heideggerians and Marxists, psychoanalysts and literary critics, structuralists and historians of science.” As a consequence, the linguistic turn’s coherence was continually challenged and became difficult to sustain. In Surkis’ view, while turn talk has continued to proliferate, the best way to narrativize turns remains problematic. Surkis also felt that turn talk was reductive and constraining and presumed “a supersession of one disciplinary trend by another.”

Wilder (2012) opened his discussion by stating that, “we are now witnessing the untimely return of elements of the ‘doctrinal realism’ that Hayden White identified with the legacy of Leopold von Ranke: documentary evidence, descriptive particularism, and ‘explanation by narration’ in the service of a reconstructive history of ‘what actually happened.’” Wilder described three recent turns – linguistic to social history, social to cultural history, and now back to archival/descriptive approaches. Similar to Surkis, Wilder (2012: 723) bemoaned recent trends away from rigorous self-reflective practices associated with linguistic and cultural turns and towards “descriptive realism and archival objectivism.” Wilder (2012: 724) attributed the re-migration to overreaching by those who were most vested in interpretative approaches:

Moreover, because the linguistic turn conflated positivist social history with structural

analysis more generally, and because it tended to restrict “theory” to poststructuralism, its advocates often marginalized history informed by critical *social* theory.¹⁰

Ghosh (2012: 773-774) described three recent turns in his field of imperial history: “the global, the postcolonial, and the archival.” She believed that scholars were now far more attentive to, “exceptions to the norm that are produced from marginal, feminist, subaltern, and minority perspectives.” She (2012: 790) also expressed mixed feelings about the archival turn, in imperial history, when noting that, “the centrality of archival research is an important problematic for all historians, but particularly so for those of us who rely on archives that were created by a colonial government.” However, Ghosh (2012: 793) was more sanguine in that new scholars who consulted the archive were more reflective than in the past,

Notably, this archival turn originated with scholars whose imperial turn is invested in postcolonial ways of reading, in gender and sexuality studies, and in following the minutiae of court cases, catalogues, and archival indexes.

Perl-Rosenthal (2012: 805-807) focused his comments on twenty recent unpublished dissertations that were, “drawn from my areas of specialization, early modern Western Europe and North America.” He noted that the three topics attracting interest from “younger early modernists” were communication, transportation, and material culture. Like Ghosh, Perl-Rosenthal felt that, “each of these studies and others like them rest on a substantial base of archival research.” Perl-Rosenthal noted that, “younger scholars seem to be taking positivist stances toward their sources and in some cases even believe themselves to be reconstructing the objective reality of the past.” He also noted that while this [re]turn alarmed Surkis and Wilder for its potential to decrease self-reflection, it was less disconcerting to Ghosh, although she did warn about “uncritical positivism.”

Thomas (2012: 795, 798) concluded that the forum’s four authors and two commenters “diverge sharply over the nature of the changes in historical practice over the last forty years,” and there were no clear rationales for why particular turns gained or lost prominence. She supported comments by Sukis about the absence of a clear literary turn, and felt that all contributors “still share her anxiety that doors are closing on rigorous self-reflective practices.” Thomas also felt that the next turn should be environmental, although this was not addressed in the current forum or in recent historiography.

In summary, the participants in the *AHR* forum appear of varying mindsets – both as to the current condition of historiography and whether the recent turn back to archival methods was a good or a bad thing. They felt that the decline in self-reflection was an unwanted trend, but not all were inclined to blame that on the recent archival [re]turn. In our view, the lack of consensus in this literature should not be disconcerting, since disagreement stimulates debate and specialized journals, both in accounting and history, accommodate a variety of approaches, domains, and subjects. The recent historiographical debates in the general history literature do appear more sophisticated and dynamic than their accounting history counterparts which were at their height in the 1990s. However, in both literatures there appears to be a return to a

reliance on archival evidence, but *in conjunction with* a growing sensitivity to marginalized/neglected populations, overlooked historical episodes, and non-Western geographic locales. This finding adds support to Gaffikin's comments about traditional approaches – although we do not share his concerns.

We believe that several recent debates in accounting historiography were not between *historians* of differing persuasions whose main concern was the interpretation of evidence, but between traditional historians and certain authors who employed past events primarily to bolster a particular social theory or political philosophy and who stretched the sentiments of White, Ankersmit, and Munslow beyond history's customary domain. We acknowledge that historians can take a moral stance and critique society within their narratives. However, we support Evans (1997, 250) who noted that, "Politically committed history only damages itself if it distorts, manipulates or obscures historical fact in the interests of the cause it claims to represent." It is distortion (on page 250 Evans qualifies this as "wilful" distortion) that is grounds for criticism, not taking on a political position as such.¹¹

In our view that the temptation to wilfully distort or omit key factual information can overwhelm the susceptibilities that Himmelfarb and others cautioned historians to be ever mindful of.¹² We next describe three episodes in which we believe certain authors crossed the line between politically committed history and social/political advocacy. Interestingly, given the foregoing comments about the decline of postmodern perspectives in mainstream history, only one of these studies (Sy and Tinker, 2005) questioned the validity of evidence gathering, and here their main criticism was not a decline in "self-reflection", but the pointlessness in eschewing moral judgements.

Tyson vs. Hoskin and Macve

In the late 1980s, Hoskin and Macve (H&M) (1986, 1988a, 1988b) authored papers that would become among the most frequently cited in accounting historiography. The papers invoked Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, paradigm shift, and discontinuity to provide an entirely new perspective on the timing and development of standard costing in the U.S. Their 1986 paper developed the theoretical underpinnings which the 1988 papers applied to specific practices at the Springfield Armory (SA) – a 19th century, government-owned arms manufacturer. The 1988 papers were especially persuasive, in part, because they included archival evidence to support innovative and stimulating conclusions.

The idea that norm-based standard costs were used by a mid-19th century governmental entity was especially intriguing. If true, this practice occurred some 50 years before its first appearance in the accounting and industrial engineering literatures. Conventional wisdom held that standard costing was first adopted in the U.S. in the early 20th century in conjunction with Frederick Taylor's promotion of scientific management principles. Tyson (1990, 1993) reviewed the chronology of standard costing and undertook an in-depth review of H&M's thesis and source materials. This resulted in two papers (1990, 1993) which refuted H&M's conclusions

and led to a series journal articles and conference presentations that expanded the debate to include other early 19th century cost and financial reporting developments.¹³ It was followed by H&M's 1994 paper which offered a "refutation" of each of the three major claims made in Tyson (1990), and which in each case was supported by the authors with chapter-and-verse evidence supplied in text or footnotes.¹⁴

One of the key issues in the SA debate concerned H&M's alleged misrepresentation of particular terminology. In the 1993 paper, Tyson noted that H&M (1988a, p. 18) correctly cited Deyrup's (1970) use of the phrase "average skill and energy" to describe how piece rates were set by SA officials. However, Tyson also noted that in their 1988b paper, H&M altered the wording to, "what the diligent worker working a full day ought to produce," and that in a 1990 follow up paper (Ezzamel, Hoskin and Macve: 159), the authors changed this wording once more to, "a norm of what the good worker working solidly could and should achieve." Tyson examined the source documents cited by Deyrup (1970) and verified that her wording reflected original intent.¹⁵

Based on their evidence, H&M concluded that workers were expected to (i.e., should) meet preset targets and were held accountable for not doing so according to "norms" set by SA officials. Tyson countered that the original and modified terminology had far different meanings, and that the appropriate wording was crucial to a proper interpretation of the episode. Tyson reported there was no evidence indicating that cost variances were ever computed at the SA or that workers were evaluated against cost-based norms. In other words, SA officials did *not* employ standard costing procedures (i.e., cost-based norms and variances) in the mid-19th century, and conventional interpretations and dating should still hold true. Tyson concluded that H&M altered terminology to make a more compelling argument for their thesis. The matter was debated intensively at the time, but to date, the authors are aware of no other studies reporting that standard costs and cost variances were employed in the U.S. before the early 20th century.

Tyson and Oldroyd vs. Sy and Tinker

In 2005, Sy and Tinker (S&T) published a paper that criticized conventional accounting historians for failing to expand their research beyond archival triviality to instead address matters having broader and more important social consequences. S&T (2005) argued that archive-based scholarship was out of step with current thinking, that accounting historians were focusing on the wrong issues, and perhaps most grating, that traditional historians needed to take a moral stand against particular social inequities. S&T charged accounting historians with a preoccupation with "great [white] men" in their history, for maintaining a "Eurocentric and post-colonial ideology," and being fully preoccupied with double-entry procedures, rather than how the accounting was used to reinforce existing social and political structures. They also echoed White and others who charged that archival evidence could never be accurately rendered and it was hopeless for historians to try. S&T concluded that accounting historians would be far better off in taking a moral stand than continuing the illusion of objectivity. For example, S&T (2005: 49) wrote that,

Any assertion as to the verity of a statement of fact – any declaration about “what actually happened”, or the meaning of “what actually happened” is inescapably a truth-statement that requires a philosophical warrant. Claiming exemption from the laws of philosophy is akin to claiming exemption from the laws of gravity.

Tyson and Oldroyd (T&O) responded in a 2007 paper that challenged S&T on a variety of levels. One of their main concerns was that S&T applied a broad brush that lacked all specificity. Accounting historians were collectively charged for particular behaviors and omissions, but there was no factual information provided to evaluate S&T’s claims. For example, the claim that accounting historians were pre-occupied with the great men in their history was one of many sweeping, unsubstantiated comments that was directly refuted by a review of journal articles in the mainstream accounting history literature.¹⁶

Equally troubling to T&O was the charge that history, accounting or otherwise, could *never* be impartial, and it was a futile exercise for historians to consult archives in an attempt to provide a reconstruction of the past. Instead, S&T argued, history should become, “an emancipatory exercise, where knowledge of the past becomes an instrument of edification and ennoblement [sic]; not subjugation.”¹⁷ In T&O’s view, acceding to this appeal would effectively undercut the historian’s accustomed role in society, which is to compile and interpret enumerated, verifiable, factual information in order to gain a better understanding of past events.

S&T’s call for social action raises a host of questions and implications that in the present authors’ views are essentially ahistorical. For example, who determines the criteria for edification, what does ennoblement entail, does the end (ennoblement) always justify the means, and at what point is ennoblement actually achieved? These are complex, philosophical matters that have perplexed societies for centuries, and attempts to achieve any particularly ennobling outcome, (e.g., gender equality) require different strategies in different locales that are far beyond the scope of an *historian’s* expertise. In essence, we believe that when authors employ selective past events solely to advocate social policy they are not writing as historians.

Fleischman, Tyson, and Oldroyd vs. Rob Bryer

Fleischman, Tyson, and Oldroyd (FTO) authored three papers that responded to three papers by Rob Bryer (2012, 2013a, 2013b). In each paper, FTO rebutted Rob Bryer’s (RB) unabashed Marxist interpretation of U.S. accounting history.¹⁸ In his first paper, RB (2012) argued that America made the transition to “full” capitalism in the 1900–1920 period, some 40-50 years later than the conventional transition point - the post-Civil War era during the accelerated growth of large, multi-unit manufacturing businesses. Up until the 20th century, RB (2012: 380) contended, the American “spirit” was dominated by “simple commodity producers and merchants as evidenced by the absence of particular ‘accounting signatures’ in various business accounts.” RB stated that the absence of the ROI “signature” supported Marx’ theory of capitalist development.

FTO argued that RB was driven by an insatiable desire to fit the Marxist model to the American experience. Consequently, RB ignored and/or misinterpreted evidence that supported long-standing views which countered his thesis.¹⁹ FTO cited renowned historians and provided archival examples indicating that in America, 19th century business owner/managers displayed an *undeniably* capitalist mentality – i.e., a desire to increase profits, control costs, and expand market share. Whereas RB argued from a purely theoretical perspective and relied exclusively on secondary sources, FTO provided evidence showing that costs were carefully tracked and owner/managers assessed and controlled operating efficiency. FTO explained that the absence of ROI and other accounting “signatures” was attributable to the paucity of large public corporations until the turn of the 20th century – but these absences did not suggest, either to them or to other traditional historians, that 19th century large-business magnates and smaller-business entrepreneurs were *not* capitalists.

In his second paper, RB (2013a) continued his narrative on America’s transition to capitalism. RB (2013a: 273) specifically addressed Alfred Chandler’s view that, “the ‘modern business enterprise’ brought ‘a new type of capitalism’ from around the mid-19th century.” RB examined three 19th century industries in more specificity (the Boston textile mills, the railroads, and the iron and steel industry) and found further support for the thesis he espoused in his first paper. In this paper, RB introduced new terminology to differentiate two stages in capitalist development – semi-capitalism (pre-1900), and full capitalism (post 1900). RB (2013: 273) concluded that full-blown capitalism only arrived in America in the early 20th century.

America did not catch up with British capitalism until the late 1920s because its ruling elite faced an ideological problem created by its exceptional transition from a society of simple commodity producers and semi-capitalists, particularly the threat of popular socialism

As before, FTO reviewed RB’s arguments, source material, and citations. They noted that RB’s two-stage model and definitions of “capitalist” were particularly idiosyncratic, and they identified numerous incidents where RB misrepresented the views of renowned historians who had devoted years of study to their areas of specialty.²⁰ FTO again provided factual information to show that owner/managers of RB’s three 19th century industries *clearly* displayed a capitalist mentality, and included evidence to counter the claim that America lagged behind Britain in terms of industrial development.²¹ FTO also addressed why the absence of a particular “accounting signature” (i.e., cost-based depreciation) should *not* be an essential prerequisite of capitalism or its full development. Their principal conclusion was that, “RB’s research methodology is suspect given his dependence on secondary sources and his dismissal of scholarship based on paradigmatic interpretations other than his own” (Fleischman, Tyson, and Oldroyd, 2013: 616.)

RB’s third paper (2013b) addressed the rise and fall of socialism in America and the critical influence that Irving Fisher’s “pathological” theory of financial accounting exerted on financial accounting. RB (2013b: 572) presented a detailed and unique interpretation of both Adam Smith’s legacy and Irving Fisher’s influence over the FASB, and he reiterated views that,

“America lagged behind Britain because it started from a society of simple commodity producers and semi-capitalists.” RB maintained that America’s delayed transition to capitalism (post 1900) vis-à-vis Britain was due to its exceptional circumstances (i.e., a sustained background of simple commodity/independent producers.) As in his two earlier papers, RB presented extensive theory-based rationales, but he included no primary-source materials that readers could examine, and he provided examples from only a few prominent firms.

FTO reviewed RB’s key points and provided evidence and alternate theories to explain the same events RB scrutinized. They argued that because RB appeared constrained to apply Marxist ideology to American history, he ignored and/or misconstrued particular events and prioritized others that were of little consequence. In summary, they felt that, “RB has misinterpreted this elemental facet of the American spirit, which was more nuanced and deeply rooted than simply being attached to a particular mode of production during a particular period in history” (Oldroyd, Tyson, and Fleischman, 2015: 212).

FTO included evidence from noted scholars showing that there were far too many exceptions to sustain RB’s unique reading of American history. FTO also provided counter arguments which, in their view, logically emerged from a more open-minded review of the American experience and provided a better explanation and interpretation. They found no compelling evidence to support RB’s unique characterization of Irving Fisher’s special influence in financial accounting, and as before, provided a more complete citation from a source RB used to bolster his case.²² In summary, FTO’s two biggest concerns regarding all three of RB’s papers were 1) his mono-theoretical interpretation of past events, and 2) his near-total reliance on secondary sources. Regarding the latter issue, they concluded (Oldroyd, Tyson, and Fleischman, 2015: 216) that:

Differences of interpretation are inevitable given that RB’s evidence consists entirely of interpretations of secondary sources that are themselves interpretations of primary data extracted by researchers who had a different objective in mind than proving the existence/nonexistence of capitalism through the accounts.

Discussion, summary and conclusions

One of our purposes in writing this paper was to evaluate where the general history literature stood vis-à-vis recent debates in accounting historiography. Clearly, several noted theory-oriented historians (e.g., Hayden White, Alun Munslow, and Frank Ankersmit) have influenced accounting scholars like Michael Gaffikin to be more receptive to non-traditional approaches. We also recognize that journal articles are a function of many factors, including the need by newer faculty to be perceived as innovative, as well as the need to pass through the filtering process that leads to funded grants, tenure and promotion, and professional recognition.

Notwithstanding, our review of the general history literature indicates that despite recent linguistic, literary, cultural, social, and other turns, general historians continue to rely on traditional approaches, perhaps even more so in recent years. That is, they use factual information typically housed in archives as a basis for their hypotheses, conclusions, and interpretations, albeit with an increasing sensitivity to marginalized groups and overlooked

locales.²³ Furthermore, as Ankersmit (1998a) presciently noted, the attention of the vast majority of current historians appears to have moved away from grand explanatory narratives, postmodern or otherwise, to examine smaller data sets, narrower time periods, and more remote locales. We also support Simon and Kuukkanen's (2015: 161) conclusion regarding the vibrancy of the current general history literature:

Those who are engaged in a quest for a new integrative framework, those who wish rather to push more particular agendas within a pluralistic theoretical universe, and those who decide to continue the narrativist project while being open to connecting it to freshly emerging concerns, can all be equally excited.

Funnell (1996: 57) promoted the narrative as common ground between new and traditional historians, arguing that, "the narrative form of historical discourse has attracted the approbation of new historians." Funnell's (1996: 53) assertion that, "there is still an overwhelming attachment throughout the different schools of new accounting history to a belief in a reality evidenced by historical facts, and new accounting histories *by definition* are not belligerently relativist in their approach to interpretation" (italics in original) is borne out by the failure of postmodernism to gain lasting ground amongst historians, accounting or otherwise.

Thus, despite several recent collaborations among scholars favouring opposing paradigms,²⁴ we would be wary of seeking common ground that entails a compromise in an historian's belief in the efficacy of evidence. Some of the most stimulating articles and conferences in the mid/late 1990s involved spirited "academic antler clashing" among scholars holding widely different perspectives, but the disagreements tended to revolve around the interpretation of events rather than the underlying nature of the enquiry. In our view, common ground truly exists when explanations and interpretations, however inspired and different they may be, are derived from factual information that can be verified by others, or in Funnell's (1996: 46) words, "on the veridicality of its facts."

Many new, *non*-postmodern, new accounting historians have examined subjects that have now entered the mainstream journal literature. Their more social and/or politically-oriented histories are compatible methodologically with traditional, economic-based ones since their narrative explanations are derived from a belief in verifiable factual information. However, when studies that seek to reinterpret past events and are based *exclusively* on a theoretical framework, contain *no* verifiable evidence, or include data that are *intentionally* manipulated, the gulf between the postmodern, new and the traditional, old is basically irreconcilable. In our view, authors that employ past events to bolster a particular agenda but who reject the principle of veridicality, are not writing as historians. Thus, we support Appleby et al., (1994: 237) who concluded that, "in the final analysis, then, there can be no postmodern history."

We are also disinclined to support calls for historians to "strive to identify the 'lessons to be learned'", or to act as, "agents of change" (Gomes et al., 2011: 393, 395). We appreciate that historians may hold strong views, and they have every right to express calls for political action

and/or social action. However, they enter a potential mine field whenever these views appear to override the efficacy of evidence, and if so, may foreshadow Windschuttle's (1997: 36) warning that, "if historians allow themselves to be prodded all the way to this theoretical abyss, they will be rendering themselves and their discipline extinct." While Windschuttle may be opposed to *any* role for theory in writing and researching history, our views on historiography are far less restrictive - we believe in the efficacy of evidence, the importance of evidence-based conclusions, and that past events are contingent on innumerable contextual variables and unique circumstances. These events are largely time-bound, personality-specific, cannot necessarily be duplicated, and should rarely if ever be applied to contemporary situations.

As historians, we are keenly aware that our predilections, experience-based biases, and inherent pleasures of discovering documents that support our own prior findings and reaffirm our beliefs directly impact our narratives. We *readily* acknowledge that the same or comparable data could lead others having a different perspective to form dissimilar interpretations and conclusions (Fleischman and Tyson, 1996). We are also reluctant to de-contextualize our conclusions – instead, we much prefer to reaffirm "the pastness of past ideas" (Butler, 2012: 169). For these reasons, and assuming that Gaffikin is referring chiefly to accounting academics writing as historians, we do *not* ascribe to his (2011: 239) admonition that, "as accounting historians we are *obliged* to consider the broader social implications of our discipline" (italics added). Accounting academics are certainly entitled to advocate for particular social policies and political action, but if past is prologue, doing so will tempt certain authors to cross the line between history and social advocacy and/or political philosophy.

We recognize that scholarly debates are intellectually stimulating and help to broaden authors' perspectives about alternative ways to interpret evidence. As authors of numerous articles on slave accounting practices, we benefitted from new ways of thinking about accounting's impact on social and political practices. That said, traditional historians need to remain vigilant over attempts to undercut historians' *distinct* societal function - uncovering, compiling, and interpreting factual information drawn from the past – especially when narratives are inordinately clever, innovative, and persuasive.

Lastly we willingly acknowledge *as individuals* that there are innumerable inequities in society, both in the past, the present, and undoubtedly the future. For example, deadly terrorist acts directed against innocent, unarmed civilians are deeply troubling to us *as human beings*. But *as historians*, we believe that we are neither well qualified nor best situated to advocate particular pathways to a better, more equitable, terror-free world. Those tasks are more appropriately undertaken by politicians, public ethicists, and social activists, all of whom have greater access to civic forums and, as importantly, can be held accountable for their recommendations and undertakings.

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Notes

¹ Appleby et al., (1994: 262)

²See Oldroyd (1999) for more detailed comments on the debate between historians and social scientists.

³ The three journals examined were *Accounting Historians Journal*, *Accounting History*, and *Accounting, Business and Financial History* (now *Accounting History Review*.)

⁴ The balance included book reviews, editorials, lists of manuscript reviewers, upcoming conference and special-issue descriptions.

⁵ We also support Zagorin's (1998: 200) similar remarks: "One of the characteristic moves of postmodernist and deconstructionist theory has been to try to obliterate the boundaries between literature and other disciplines by reducing all modes of thought to the common condition of writing."

⁶ For example, Scott (1989: 689) wrote that, "The pluralization of the subject of history challenges the notion, dear to Himmelfarb and her associates, that "man" can be studied through a focus on elites. Instead, attention to women, blacks, and other Others demonstrates that history consists of many irreconcilable stories.

⁷ We wish to accredit a reviewer for advising us that Windschuttle's comments are in response to Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History" and suggest merely that every historian has his or her own personal biases and comes from a particular time and place, and historians should be open about this rather than "erasing" this.

⁸Ankersmit's views were directly challenged by Zagorin (1998: 194) who concluded that, "Ankersmit's postmodernism may be regarded as an extension of his earlier commitment to White's narrativist principles. It represents a further step in the attempt to aestheticize history and sever it from its formerly accepted grounding in conditions of truth and reality."

⁹ A review noted that Napier (2009) used Munslow's discussion of constructive, reconstructive and deconstructive history in his chapter on "Accounting Historiography", in *The Routledge Companion to Accounting History*.

¹⁰ Wilder (2012: 725-26) identified a number of other reasons for the decline of the linguistic/cultural turn and a return to traditional approaches: "Insights about the constitutive power of language or the ways that discourses mediate subjectivity and shape social life led some historians to overturn the conventional notions of individuality, intentionality, agency, and causality upon which traditional historiography depended. But they led others to reaffirm these very concepts, often through histories of marginalized actors whose subjectivity was purportedly reconstructed and experience valorized."

¹¹ We would like to acknowledge a reviewer for informing us about Evans' comments.

¹²Zavorin (1998: 201-202) expressed this sentiment unequivocally: "Historians operate within definite constraints, of which they are fully conscious, arising from the nature and limitations of evidence. While it is for them to determine that something is evidence and what it is evidence for, when they have done so the evidence exerts a continuous force upon them. They are not free to ignore it or make of it whatever they please. Its pressure acts as a major determinant in giving shape to the historical work."

¹³ For example, See Hoskin (1994), Hoskin and Macve (1994, 1996, 2000), and Tyson (1992, 1995, 1998a, 1998b.)

¹⁴ We acknowledge a reviewer of an earlier version of this paper for clarifying this point.

¹⁵ See Tyson (1993: 9) for more detailed comments about source documents and H&M's specific terminology. See also H&M (1994) for a point-by-point rejoinder to Tyson's claims.

¹⁶ See T&O (2007: 185-188) for direct rebuttals to this and other S&T claims.

¹⁷ Macintosh (2009) also supported S&T's calls for more proactivity by accounting historians in behest of correcting societal ills.

¹⁸ See Fleischman, Tyson, and Oldroyd (2013); Oldroyd, Tyson, and Fleischman (2015); and Tyson, Oldroyd, and Fleischman (2013).

¹⁹ For example, see 'Section 3. Evidence' in the first rebuttal paper (Tyson, Oldroyd, and Fleischman, 2013: 385-390.) where the authors identified RB's citations that overlooked or misrepresented original intent.

²⁰ See Fleischman, Tyson, and Oldroyd (2013: 617-618) for specific examples of selective/incomplete citations and misrepresentations.

²¹ RB (2013a) specifically examined three 19th century American industries: textiles (Boston Associates), railroads, and iron and steel.

²² See our comments regarding Mouck and Hopwood concerning Fisher's legacy (Oldroyd, Tyson, and Fleischman (2015: 215.)

²³ For example, Butler (2012: 161) concluded that, "intellectual historians have also moved aggressively to the archive in recent decades, where they have mined published and unpublished correspondence, diaries, notebooks, academic papers, magazine writing, lectures, white papers, blue books, and on and on."

²⁴ See Fleischman et al., (1995) and Toms and Fleischman (2015).