

# History, Politics, and Culture

Anthony Grafton

In 1990, Princeton University Press published a slender book by one of its longtime authors, Felix Gilbert: *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt*. This learned and eloquent study of two of the nineteenth century's greatest historians, Leopold von Ranke and Jacob Burckhardt, sums up many of the Press's accomplishments in two of its central fields. Gilbert was one of the many distinguished European émigrés whose work appeared on the Press's list in the second half of the twentieth century, transforming American scholarship. A scion of the Mendelssohn family of Berlin, he studied history there with Friedrich Meinecke. Coming to America in the 1930s, he worked in the OSS during World War II, taught at Bryn Mawr, and eventually became a professor in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

Though Gilbert never formally sponsored a doctoral dissertation, he inspired many younger students of the Italian Renaissance with his mastery of both archival sources, which he had studied intensively in Italy since the 1930s, and textual analysis. His own scholarship transformed the study of political and historical thought in the High Renaissance, the age of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, as he rooted the texts in the institutions in which their authors served, the crisis of the Italian Wars through which they lived, and the language of the political and social elite, which Gilbert reconstructed from archival records of their debates. A preeminent cultural historian, he taught generations of specialists in the Renaissance that they would impoverish it if they ignored politics, economics, and warfare. At the end of Gilbert's life, when he returned to two master historians of the modern German tradition, one of whom had studied with the other, he dedicated his packed, concise essay to the big question their work posed: should history concentrate on the state, the great organizing force in history, and on its efforts to shape society by making laws and waging wars, or on culture, the rich tapestry of meanings woven by ordinary men and women, not only through art and literature but also through manners, rituals, and clothing?

Gilbert, as his wonderfully fluent but heavily accented English made clear, was a European, the product of a culture and an academic system radically different from the American. He saw most

things—including American military and foreign policy, on which he wrote an important book—from a distinctive, non-American point of view. At Princeton University Press, however, his work marked not an exception but one among many examples of a characteristic style. Though Princeton University Press has always been connected to a great university, it has also always been open to the wider perspectives of scholars from other countries and traditions. The origins of this tradition go back as far as 1925, when the Press published Henri Pirenne's *Medieval Cities*. But its real heyday, which has never quite ended, began with the rise of the Nazis and the Second World War. Hitler shook the trees, to adapt a metaphor first applied to art history, and the Press caught the apples. A generation of European scholars, expelled from their homes and deprived of their careers, found new places in the American university. Princeton University Press became one of their preferred publishers—and after it took over Bollingen Series, perhaps their favorite.

The histories these scholars wrote ranged widely in scale and period—from the erudite, tightly structured studies of Gilbert and Hans Baron, sharply focused on a few decades in the history of the Italian Renaissance, through the sprawling books of Ernst Kantorowicz and Richard Krautheimer, which spanned the medieval centuries, to the work of Siegfried Kracauer and others on modern European and American culture. But all of them were linked—linked, first of all, by an erudition founded in the great European secondary schools and universities that Erwin Panofsky described, in an essay first published by the Press; linked again by long years of scholarly apprenticeship; and linked, a third time, by the need to make their findings accessible to an English-speaking public. Princeton University Press, with its traditions of fine book design, its passionate concern for craftsmanship and accuracy, and its openness to new forms of scholarship, brought this new intellectual style into the Anglo-American world.

At the same time, the Press offered opportunities to the most original American scholars to bring their own distinctive approaches to European history. Princeton University Press enabled Ira Wade and R. R. Palmer, for example, to bring out pathbreaking studies of the Enlightenment, rooted in new research methods, before World War II, and encouraged both to attack wider problems and reach larger audiences after the war. The Press also published Joseph Strayer's distinctive inquiries, both monographic and comparative, into the medieval state; Jerome Blum's pioneering investigations into the lives and fates of peasants, from Russia

to Western Europe; and Charles Gillispie's challenging synthetic history of the long trajectory of Western science as well as his richly particular monographs on French science and its larger eighteenth- and nineteenth-century context. A small press in New Jersey became the site where European history, medieval, early modern, and modern, was renewed, over and over again. The Press remained hospitable as a generation of younger American scholars, many of them the students of the émigrés—Robert Benson and Robert Brentano in medieval studies; Gene Brucker, Lauro Martines, and Donald Weinstein in the Renaissance; Theodore von Laue, Charles Maier, and Jerrold Seigel in modern history—developed their own new styles of inquiry into the European past. At the same time, the Press also continued to welcome the results of foreign scholarship. It was a hospitable venue for the New Zealand-born, British-educated, and absolutely individualist historian John Pocock, for the publication of his comprehensive revisionist history of republican thought in Europe and the United States, which reoriented the discussions of historians and political theorists as dramatically as Hans Baron had done a generation before.

The questions Gilbert addressed in his last book, moreover, were central to the Press's authors over the decades. Princeton University Press has always dedicated close attention to the state, which for Gilbert constituted the central object of serious historical and political thought. From Edward Corwin, whose great study of the American Constitution first appeared in 1920, onward, original students of political and constitutional thought have made the Press their natural home. Over the generations, their methods and concerns have changed, as new analytical methods came into play. The interpretation of texts has been enriched both by new approaches to the relations between political thinkers and the state—the subject of a groundbreaking book by Nannerl Keohane—and by new hermeneutical methods, many of them devised by Quentin Skinner and debated in a rich volume edited by James Tully.

Like Gilbert, an impenitent admirer of Ranke, those who have written about the state for Princeton University Press have taken at least as much interest in the institutions and day-to-day practices of government as in its theoretical foundations. Medieval historians from Joseph Strayer to William Chester Jordan have traced the development of central Western institutions, from legal systems to tax offices, over the centuries. Political scientists have made the Press a center of innovation in their field. Princeton produced

most of Robert Gilpin's many pioneering studies on the economic context of international relations and on the relations between science and the state. It published both *Small Groups and Political Behavior*, the book with which Sidney Verba began his long career as a specialist in political participation and citizenship, and *The Civic Culture*, in which Verba and Gabriel Almond, focusing in a precise, comparative way on the citizens of five democracies, transformed the study of democracies and how they come into being. Studies of participation and civic behavior remained a central concern for the Press. In 1993 it brought out Robert Putnam's acclaimed analysis of Italian civic institutions, *Making Democracy Work*—a monographic study with major implications, which has spawned an immense progeny of political and social commentary. From the Cold War to the present era of globalization, specialists in international relations like George Kennan, Robert Keohane, and Richard Falk have drawn attention to the changing nature of world politics and have kept the larger political contexts of diplomacy at the center of the Press's concerns. No one, perhaps, has done more to shape discussion in this field than the historian Edward Muir and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose studies of ritual politics in Renaissance Venice and nineteenth-century Bali focused the attention of scholars across the humanities and social sciences on the multiple ways in which public ceremonies shaped—and shape—the relations between governments and the governed.

Ranke and Burckhardt both knew that all governments are rooted in particular social worlds, and both set themselves to explain how laws and institutions took shape in particular social and economic circumstances. Over the decades, the Press has sponsored a vast set of inquiries into the larger history of society and its relation to politics. John Franklin Jameson, one of the founders of professional history in the United States, delivered at Princeton the series of lectures that the Press published as *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement*. This essay of 1926, which insisted that the social divisions within Revolutionary America had been in some ways sharper than the split between the colonies and England, was the harbinger of a vast array of inquiries into everything from the demographic foundations of modern society—later explored in a massive series of monographs organized and edited by the Princeton demographer Ansley Coale—to the social histories of Western and non-Western societies. Early in the 1960s, Lee Benson brought the new social

history, based on quantitative study of groups and their behavior, to bear on the development of Jacksonian democracy—and used it to argue, in the teeth of interpretations that went back to the revisionist histories of Charles Beard, that economic status had not determined the ways in which Americans voted. Later, the Press published William Aydelotte's pioneering quantitative analysis of the British House of Commons.

Princeton's tradition in politics, as in history, has been eclectic. Rather than specializing in quantitative or qualitative approaches, it brought out a celebrated interdisciplinary work by Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, which teases out the common logic of social inquiry that links the two sets of approaches. The Press has produced both powerful monographs, like Putnam's study of Italy, and wide-ranging comparative studies, like Jeffrey Herbst's *States and Power in Africa . . .* And it has warmly encouraged efforts to draw tools from other disciplines and apply them to the study of politics—as in Robert Jervis's groundbreaking *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (1976), which used cognitive psychology to elucidate the ways in which decision makers read and misread history.

Ranke and Burckhardt knew that many forces shaped societies and states. Religion, for example, was central to the history of the modern West. And religion—considered from every point of view, from institutions and theology to ritual and religious art—has always been at the core of the Press's interests. In the 1960s, medievalists like Robert Brentano and Robert Benson published with the Press what remain classic studies of the institutions of medieval Catholicism. Students of the Reformation, such as Horton Davies, and of the French Revolution, such as Timothy Tackett, pursued similar themes into later centuries. Tightly focused, dazzlingly written studies by Mark Pegg, Jeffrey Freedman, and Brendan Dooley have kept the institutional history of Christian churches at the very center of the Press's offerings in European history. Jewish history—which the Press entered with a splash in 1973, when it published Gershom Scholem's extraordinary study of Sabbatai Sevi and his followers—has become one of its special interests. Amos Funkenstein's *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, for example, brilliantly traced remarkable and little-known connections between the greatest Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, Maimonides, and the founders of the seventeenth-century New Philosophy. A whole series of recent monographs by Mark Cohen, Susan Einbinder, and others have pursued this interest

into new sources and periods. Meanwhile learned and subtle studies by David Frankfurter and Seth Schwartz have tracked relations between Christianity and rival religions backward into one of the most fertile areas of all—the study of late antiquity, a field largely inspired by the Princeton historian Peter Brown.

Like Gilbert's heroes, the Press's authors have always been willing to break new ground. For almost half a century, for example, the Press has been a major publisher of work in the relatively new discipline of history of science. From Gillispie's *The Edge of Objectivity*, a pioneering work of synthesis, through his own later work on science in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, the Press has pursued closely textured studies of modern science and the larger contexts—religious, political, institutional—in which it took shape. During this period, the history of science has developed multiple approaches to its endlessly varied object. Methods used in the field range from tight, internal study of individual scientific projects and writings to richly detailed, micro-historical accounts of the social and material worlds in which investigators and authors worked. The Press has followed every one of these branching trails. Its offerings have spanned the continuum from the precise and demanding studies of Kepler by Bruce Stephenson and James Voelkel to the deeply detailed, almost archaeological study of individual scientists and their work practiced by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer in *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* and Gerald Geison in *The Private Science of Louis Pasteur*. Some of the Press's most innovative and influential products have been devoted to traditions of thought about nature that now lie entirely outside the world of scientific practice—as traced over the long term in William Eamon's massive study of books of secrets and crystallized in microscopic form in Ann Blair's path-breaking book on Jean Bodin.

Ranke and Burckhardt both understood—as some more recent professional scholars have not—that warfare and violence form a central theme in both politics and history, with its own forms and its own cultures. The Press has shown a clear understanding of this point as well. Its publications run the gamut, from classic studies of decision-making elites by Edward Meade Earle and Richard Challener, through Peter Paret's penetrating analyses of Clausewitz and his place in the history of military thought, to the collective studies of Vietnam and international law organized by Richard Falk, and the fearless analysis of civil violence during wartime by the political scientist Jan Gross, *Neighbors*. In main-

taining this tradition, the Press has contributed to the political education of a readership that proved all too ready to believe, as the twentieth century came to an end, that warfare was ceasing to be a central concern of governments and their advisers.

Ranke and Burckhardt—and Gilbert—were adepts of technical scholarship, but they were also great stylists, who set out to address and educate a broad cultured public. The Press—as Gross’s case suggests—has always been willing to do the same. Works like Robert Palmer’s best-selling *Twelve Who Ruled*, Pietro Redondi’s *Galileo Heretic*, and Gross’s *Neighbors* have reached tens of thousands of readers, acquainting them with the results of professional scholarship in highly accessible forms. Many other Press books—like Corwin’s study of the Constitution and Blum’s work on Russian social history—have become durable textbooks, used by thousands of students over the generations. Studies of “public intellectuals” in the United States have tended to concentrate on the magazines in which professional scholars set out to address a wider public. In its own way, however, Princeton University Press—with its policy of encouraging authors to combine monographic studies with synthesis, its ability to edit and market books of both kinds, and its consistently high reputation in the academy—has contributed as much as any generalist periodical to informing and provoking a wide public.

The Press’s long tradition of openness to new questions and new methods has occasionally given rise to problems. A few books have revealed serious flaws when exposed to systematic criticism, while others, though praised by the reviewers, have not immediately found a large audience. But no publisher willing to attack new subjects can avoid these risks. On the whole, the Press has succeeded, to an astonishing extent, in preserving into the current age of new production methods and high competitive pressures the standards set half a century ago and more, when writers and editors agreed that it was worth spending years on editing and production.

At a time when outside critics of the academy rant on and on about the politicization of scholarship, the hegemony of jargon, and the abandonment of standards, the Press has maintained a great tradition in history and politics. Its editors and advisers have managed to combine broad interests, a focus on questions of public as well as intellectual concern, and a willingness to take chances with an absolute commitment to rigorous refereeing, precise editing and printing, and handsome, distinctive design.

Felix Gilbert—whose scholarship was characterized by all of these qualities—would undoubtedly be as pleased by the newer company in which his Princeton books appear as he was by their older companions.

*Anthony Grafton is the Henry Putnam University Professor of History at Princeton University, where he teaches the cultural history of Renaissance Europe, the history of books and readers, the history of scholarship and education in the West from antiquity to the nineteenth century, and the history of science from antiquity to the Renaissance. He is a longtime friend of the Press and served on the Press's editorial board from January 1988 to December 1993.*