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Capitalism and the Science of History: Appleby, Marx, and Postmodernism

The fascinating thing about telling stories is that they start with the end. It is a conclusion that arouses our curiosity and prompts us to ask a question, which then leads back to the beginning from which the eventual outcome unwound.

– *Telling the Truth About History*

Joyce Appleby is an important and influential historian of capitalism. She has been publishing books and articles on the subject for almost forty years; however, reading Appleby's works from the 1970s in juxtaposition with her newest work *The Relentless Revolution* reveals an inconsistency in the way she addresses the nature of capitalism. While it is true that all scholars mature and develop over the course of their careers, a combined understanding of Appleby's perspective on the 'science of history' and the contextual differences between the 1970s and today suggests that more is at play. Appleby argues that an historian's context and politics shapes his or her work, and implies that a single historian can change his or her approach over time, depending on circumstance. In this paper, I argue that understanding Appleby's historiographical approach to capitalism allows us to see the policy recommendations implicit in her work and to explain why those recommendations change over time.

In *Telling the Truth About History*¹, Appleby examines history's implications in the rise and fall of science. The science of history emerged as a distinct discipline during the nineteenth century under the influence of the positivist worldview that dominated the modern period. The Scientific Revolution kicked-off three centuries of investigations into the mechanics of the natural world. Natural philosophers impartially and objectively discovered the predictable laws of nature. Through the Enlightenment, "heroic science," as Appleby calls it, became the "guarantor of progress and power," defeating its traditionalist opponents in the battle for

¹ Even though this work was co-authored with two other historians, the acknowledgements page states, "This book has been a real collaboration, and as a consequence all of the chapters express the views of all of the authors." Therefore, I feel justified in reading it as if it were Appleby alone. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), xi.

explanatory supremacy.² Taking science as its paragon, history branched off as "as an organized, disciplined inquiry into the meaning of the past," and historians assembled comprehensive explanations of historical change that emphasized the progress of humanity.³ Many early theories relied on teleological explanations and buttressed nascent nationalisms. By the mid-20th century, three major schools of "heroic history" had developed: Marxism, Modernization Theory, and the French Annales school. These approaches all desired to discover the laws of history just as scientists discovered laws of physics. The development and progress of the human species was as understandable as any natural system.⁴

Despite centuries of popularity, scientific and historical objectivity came under attack during the later-20th century. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* unintentionally undermined heroic science by explaining that paradigm shifts are necessary for scientific advancement. Critics interpreted Kuhn's work as collapsing the rational, objective, and universal with the irrational, subjective, and particular by smuggling ideology into scientific investigation.⁵ Likewise, heroic history suffered its destruction at the hands of progressive historians and social historians. In the 1930s progressive historian Charles Beard "[smashed] the pedestals upon which the Founding Fathers had stood for over a century."⁶ Later, social historians fragmented national histories by proving existing narratives to be inherently biased and exclusionary. With a plurality of possible perspectives, history could no longer be united into a single account. "Having been made 'scientific' in the nineteenth century," Appleby explains, "history now shares in the pervasive disillusionment with science which marks the postwar era."⁷

² Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 30-33.

³ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 52.

⁴ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, Chapter 1 and 2.

⁵ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 160-171.

⁶ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 137.

⁷ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 244.

The latest threat to the science of history comes from the Postmodernist movement, which claims that all 'objective' views are merely biased particular views. Postmodernists argue that because people are trapped inside a world of language, scientists and historians cannot "achieve separation from the objects they study; they simply invest them with their own values."⁸ Words, or signifiers, do not correspond with the objects they represent, the signified, so scholars cannot escape their perspectives. Thus, "Human beings do not discover the truth in concordance with nature; they invent it."⁹ But the construction of truth goes beyond subjectivity because Postmodernists also reject the existence of the subject, the singular identity that investigates the world. If we were to follow the Postmodernists, Appleby says, we would see the "disappearance of history" because there cannot be a postmodern history.¹⁰

Appleby situates herself between the impossibility of objective heroic history and the Postmodernist impossibility of history. On one hand, she appreciates the Postmodernists' ability to knock over "the straw men of heroic science and its history clone," of which Marxism is paradigmatic.¹¹ Appleby describes Marxism¹² as historicist and determinist because it relies on objective economic laws to explain historical change, and she criticizes Marx for "assuming the existence of a market mentality before there was a capitalist market."¹³ On the other hand, Appleby responds to Postmodernism by claiming that even though "absolute objectivity" is impossible, historians can still exercise "qualified objectivity."¹⁴ She believes historians should seize the occasion provided by postmodern criticism to revise 19th century standards of truth and

⁸ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 211.

⁹ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 209.

¹⁰ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 205.

¹¹ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 247.

¹² On a side note, it would not be surprising to find out that Appleby has never read Marx. She frequently misinterprets him, especially on the relation between economic change and class development and original accumulation, and even though she makes passing reference to Marx in nearly all of her major books and articles, I have been able to locate only one footnote that references one of Marx's works directly, and it does not identify a page number. See *The Relentless Revolution*, 437n.6.

¹³ Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), 18; also see *Telling the Truth About History*, 71.

¹⁴ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 254.

objectivity because truth need not be an absolute. Even if two historians evaluate the same event from different perspectives, like viewing an object from different angles, they are not necessarily in conflict;¹⁵ in fact, having more perspectives can give a fuller picture of the phenomena that need explanation.¹⁶ Thus, Appleby has "redefined historical objectivity as an interactive relationship between an inquiring subject and an external object."¹⁷

If history as a science is possible but not free from the historian's perspective, then it is also not free from the historian's politics, and Appleby certainly has politics. "The discipline of history," Appleby says, "does not disengage its practitioners from the demands of politics, nor does the objectivity of science guarantee benign applications."¹⁸ Social, historical, and cultural context is all-important because it enables "the historian's essential creative effort" in reinvesting "historical knowledge [...] with contemporary interest."¹⁹ This means that not only could successive generations reframe historical interpretation based on the political climate, but that a single scholar could over the course of her career.

Appleby openly expresses her political views and how they relate to her work on capitalism. She identifies herself as a "left-leaning liberal with strong, if sometimes contradictory, libertarian strains," who has a "keen interest in progressive politics" and believes thinking about capitalism as a self-sustaining, "disinterested" system "[diminishes] our capacity to think intelligently about the range of choices we have."²⁰ In an interview with *Rorotoko*, Appleby explained "when capitalism is approached historically instead of analytically a fuller

¹⁵ Appleby exercises this approach in her debate with J. G. A. Pocock about the ubiquity of capitalist thinking and its relationship to the Tory-Whig disputes in early modern England. See Joyce Appleby, "Ideology and the History of Political Thought," in *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), especially 138-139.

¹⁶ Here Appleby, knowingly or not, accords with Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectivism, an important influence on postmodern thinkers. Perhaps her unwitting agreement suggests that postmodernists may not be relativists like she believes. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 256-257.

¹⁷ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 259, 261.

¹⁸ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 206.

¹⁹ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 229, 263, 265.

²⁰ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 18-19.

account of its inner workings emerges."²¹ In *The Relentless Revolution*, she supplements this sentiment, insisting that "Clarity about the nature of the capitalist system could enable us to make wiser policy decisions."²² While Appleby is a clear supporter of capitalism, claiming there is "no conspicuous alternative,"²³ the challenges faced by the system in the late 1970s were far different than during the recent financial crisis, a difference that colors her work.

The recession of the late 1970s signaled the end of postwar prosperity and Appleby's historiography of that time reveals her policy recommendations.²⁴ One passage from *The Relentless Revolution* is a helpful guide in this analysis: "few had the courage to cut off popular spending programs when they were no longer needed to boost the economy," a "negligence [that] contributed to inflation."²⁵ After 1973, unemployment grew, production slowed, and prices rose; inspired by Milton Friedman's economic theory, the governments in England and the United States responded with over two decades of sweeping deregulations and reduced social spending.²⁶ The assumptions grounding these decisions were that people were forgetting how to work hard and that government policies were inhibiting entrepreneurial ventures. The objective was to restart the economy, putting people to work and promoting growth.

Appleby responded to these issues by supporting the new policies and explaining that coercion was the only alternative to the economy in matters of social control. She draws a parallel between the early modern period and the 1970s, arguing that social spending had become a burden on job creators. "While much has been made of the congruence between

²¹ Joyce Appleby, interviewed by Rorotoko. *Rorotoko*, January 6, 2010. http://rorotoko.com/interview/20100106_joyce_appleby_on_relentless_revolution_history_capitalism/

²² Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 25.

²³ Joyce Appleby, "Reason TV: The Relentless Revolution – Joyce Appleby on the History of Capitalism," interviewed by Ted Balaker. Reason.tv, September 17, 2010. <http://reason.com/blog/2010/09/17/reason-tv-the-relentless-revol#commentcontainer>

²⁴ Here I primarily draw on several of Appleby's works originally published between 1976-1980. For another concise account of changes in political economy since 1970, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁵ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 331.

²⁶ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 325-330, 332, 403.

freedom and capitalism," she explains, "it was the freedom of property owners from social obligations which was critical to capitalistic growth in the seventeenth century."²⁷ Businesses had been forced to carry social responsibility, which tied up needed capital, hindering clever, inventive people from exercising their talents. Appleby does not reject social spending in principle; she merely believes that innovation is the key to growth and progress, and that social spending should be reduced in times of economic prosperity.

The potential ramifications of social disorder required public officials to restore prosperity, production, and, most importantly, consumption. Appleby attends to the cultural importance of consumption because it gives insight to "self-indulgence, personal identity, and privacy."²⁸ It reveals human intentionality, drives production, and shows that people can make wise, independent choices about their lives and earnings. For Appleby, the first consumers were innovators, stepping outside of accepted social norms and stimulating economic change. Over time, consumer goods persuaded people to act on rational, calculated self-interest and "to defer pleasure, to save, to compete and to shun prodigality."²⁹ Such long-term, disciplined planning ensures a minimum of social stability conducive to economic prosperity and material comfort.

Even though Appleby agrees with Thomas Malthus that putting people to work will make them "less disposed to insubordination and turbulence,"³⁰ she knows "the capacity of the market to act as the voluntary integrator of social tasks depended upon the number of jobs it offered."³¹ Without employment, people had no incentive to perfunctorily manage themselves and the "new social reality in which human beings possessed an internal regulator more effective than master

²⁷ Joyce Appleby, "Political and Economic Liberalism in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 54.

²⁸ Joyce Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 171-172.

²⁹ Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought," 169.

³⁰ Malthus qtd. in Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought," 170.

³¹ Joyce Appleby, "Modernization Theory and Social Theories," in *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 108.

or magistrate" would fall by the wayside.³² As Appleby explains, "only the vanguard of entrepreneurs operated as economic rationalists" in early modern England, "the economic irrationality of the poor was assumed; the solution was to train them up to habits of work" with "external control and direction."³³ This analysis does not implicate Appleby as an authoritarian; it simply reveals the connection she makes between economic prosperity and social stability in a capitalist system, hardly a controversial concept. It is imperative that liberal states ensure opulence because it would lose its legitimacy if it were required to use force to maintain order.

As a budding scholar in the 1970s, Appleby joined in on cutting edge debates about history and political economy and developed a unique body of scholarship, but over the next two decades there was a shift in her approach. *Telling the Truth About History*, published in 1994, contains passing reference to the ideological hegemony that liberalism enjoyed after the Cold War. She lamented the bitter academic rivalries surrounding Marxism and Liberalism during the Cold War because it "politicized all social thought." However, she was comforted by democratization of global politics and historical discipline. Totalitarianism receded as democracy flourished, and "absolute claims to knowledge [gave] way to the recognition of the multiplicity of points of view."³⁴ Appleby believed that, with politics out of the way, historians could get down to business and integrate (American) history to represent the new multicultural context. It is possible to read her as concurring with Francis Fukuyama's thesis about the "end of history:"³⁵ with "no conspicuous alternative," all political – and by implication historical – questions will be settled from within the framework of liberal democracy. Interestingly, in the very same book

³² Appleby, "Modernization Theory and Social Theories," 102.

³³ Appleby, "Political and Economic Liberalism in Seventeenth-Century England," 56.

³⁴ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 276.

³⁵ It is surprising to see Appleby take such a position, given that Fukuyama would qualify as "heroic history" by her standards. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

Appleby reiterates her point that "One of the distinguishing features of a market economy is that its coercion is veiled."³⁶ Apparently concealing force is more just, even if it is less honest.

After a 1995 interview concerning *Telling the Truth About History*, Michael Phillips suggested to Appleby that she write a book on the history of capitalism.³⁷ The product of this suggestion was published in 2010 as *The Relentless Revolution*, fifteen years later. It is possible that she did not have time to write it, or that it took her years to complete her research. However, Appleby is a scholar of high caliber, so these possibilities are unlikely. It is more likely that the recent financial crisis inspired her to follow through on Phillips' suggestion. Compared to her previous work, she is sure to put capitalism under a positive light. Appleby also identifies reckless financiers and not inefficient government policies as responsible for the recession.

Unlike her previous work, in which she was fairly candid about the forms of control implicit in capitalism, Appleby's most recent work describes capitalism as a much more benevolent, democratic system. In her discussion of capitalism's development in England, she claims, "Capitalist values could not be imposed by authority because the genius of the new entrepreneurial economy was individual initiative."³⁸ Apparently the English elites had no trouble recognizing "that quite ordinary people could take care of themselves and make responsible decisions about their welfare."³⁹ Even when Appleby admits that people had to "adapt" to the new economy, her language is far less abrasive: "new English consumers had to discipline *themselves* to hard work before they could enjoy their fancies."⁴⁰ She semantically transfers the disciplining from an external authority to an internal one.

³⁶ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 120. Of all the words in this co-authored work these are certainly Appleby's, given that they appeared in her earlier essay "Modernization Theory and Social Theories," 121.

³⁷ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, xii. For the transcribed interview see: www.well.com/user/mp/t1.html

³⁸ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 89.

³⁹ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 362-363.

⁴⁰ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 362. Emphasis added.

While capitalism does not necessitate democracy, as 19th century Germany and contemporary Asian countries show, Appleby believes that the two belong together. The Founding Fathers integrated capitalism and democracy, and India's democratic culture is its advantage over China (especially since India is dropping many of its socialist practices).⁴¹ She insists that "in a free market economy, even though some people have much more power than others, no one is in charge."⁴² Citizens in capitalist societies can consume all the cars, computers, fashionable clothing, birth control, and antidepressants they want *and* decide their own government.⁴³

Not only has Appleby abandoned her discussion of capitalism's veiled coercion, she has also taken care to distance capitalism from the horrors of slavery and colonialism. "Fueled by an insatiable drive for profit," agrarian capitalists in the new world and traders on the ocean exploited Africans and Native Americans and presided over them as property, hoping to extract their labor and earn increased returns on their investment in human beings. But neither the exploitation nor the racism that justified it can be attributed to capitalism. "One thing that we can say for certain," according to Appleby, "is that the use of slave labor produced no sustained economic developments" anywhere employed. Slavery is "more like a footprint in the sand."⁴⁴ Appleby also blames the economic stagnation of the American South on Jim Crow policies.⁴⁵ Thus, capitalism and racialized slavery are incompatible, which is why Pennsylvania ended the institution peacefully and democratically.⁴⁶ Appleby hardly mentions the Civil War.

⁴¹ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 363, 385.

⁴² Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 279.

⁴³ Appleby actually lists antidepressants as an achievement of capitalism. *The Relentless Revolution*, 361.

⁴⁴ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 134-136.

⁴⁵ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 388.

⁴⁶ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 161-162. Appleby also says that the Jeffersonian Republicans understood the contradiction between owning slaves and arguing for freedom, which is the opposite stance she took in 1984 when she said, "What was vital to the success of the Republicans was not abolition but rather their ability to divorce slavery from their social vision." *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 102.

Just as capitalists did not cause slavery, neither did they cause colonialism. Appleby explicitly blames governments, not entrepreneurs or investors, for imperial expansion. She argues that "Governments had what companies lacked, the power to commandeer workers by extorting concessions from their compliant leaders or moving in with force where there was no recognized political order."⁴⁷ Generally, capitalism does not have the ability to conquer entire continents; only after "governments took the initiative away from the private investors" was such inefficient devastation possible.⁴⁸ In a final measure to sweep colonialism under the rug, Appleby ignores the resistance mounted by native peoples everywhere by identifying the Soviet Union as the first – and presumably only – country to oppose capitalism.⁴⁹ The point of this discussion is not to debate the degree to which capitalism is or is not complicit in these events; it is to show that Appleby employs much of her "essential creative effort" to exonerating it.

In contrast to these historical problems, Appleby addresses several contemporary issues: poverty, climate change, and banking deregulation. Poverty and climate change are indeed serious issues that need to be dealt with and, for her part, Appleby implicates capitalism in the impending ecological crisis. She devotes much space to outlining the ecological damage done by Western nations over two centuries and sees the current developments in Asia doing the same harm. Her answer is that capitalism will give incentives to innovators to develop sustainable, environmentally friendly technologies. Likewise, global poverty can be solved by the wealth-generating system of capitalism through financial innovations like microfinance and international organizations.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 230.

⁴⁸ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 241, 247.

⁴⁹ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 288.

⁵⁰ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 424-433.

Appleby's final policy recommendation targets banking and financial institutions, calling for "a return to regulation."⁵¹ She insists that risk-taking and innovation are essential traits of great inventors but deplorable traits of incompetent bankers. Passive nineteenth century banks "rarely initiated ventures;" instead, they "mediated market development" through cautionary support of daring entrepreneurs.⁵² When "trading in corporate stock become the main activity in stock exchanges around the world [...] governments kept a close eye out to ensure order."⁵³ Like 19th century French bankers who focused their energy on foreign "exotic investments," our contemporary bankers have lost their way.⁵⁴ The deregulation that opened the door to risky investments, such as derivatives, implicate out politicians in the collapse. Appleby advises our civic leaders to learn from India, a country that avoided the financial collapse by utilizing strong regulations, conservative policies, and secure investments.⁵⁵

As the epigraph of this essay states, history begins at the end and a question about that end leads the historian to the beginning. We began with Appleby's conflicting accounts of capitalism and concluded that her historiographical approach makes this conflict possible. As a good historian, Appleby is reflexively aware that historiography is political. Historians may write about the past, but they do so from the present with an eye on the future; Appleby's policy recommendations are evidence of this. Depending on the nature of the crisis, she emphasizes different characteristics of capitalism in order to make appropriate suggestions. Appleby also embraces historiographical pluralism but only within the confines of liberalism, because historians become absolutists and accomplish nothing positive unless they share some common ground. However, this position precludes many non-liberal viewpoints. If, in Appleby's words, "Telling the truth takes a collective effort," because the sum of perspectives results in a clearer picture of

⁵¹ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 400.

⁵² Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 187, 402.

⁵³ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 189.

⁵⁴ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 188.

⁵⁵ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*, 394.

the past, then it is incumbent on radical historians to contribute to that picture.⁵⁶ Moreover, it is imperative that we embed policy recommendations in our work; if "no conspicuous alternative" to liberalism exists, it is not the fault of the liberals. Joyce Appleby is an excellent historian who is not afraid to let her politics shape her work, and we should all learn from her example.

⁵⁶ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 309.

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