NOTES FOR AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A young (40-ish) acquaintance of mine spends a good deal of his time offending people, most of whom are colleagues of one sort or another. He is particularly susceptible to offending colleagues who have in various ways befriended him or who have extended themselves to help him in his thus-far-frustrated career. Over the past year or two he has variously antagonized, alienated, or hurt most of the people he has worked with in the field.

To borrow a barnyard phrase from my childhood, he has a way of pissing on his shoes.

To continue in that earthy vein: The rap on him personally is that he is a pain in the ass.

Professionally, however, some of us have believed that the field needs ambitious young historians and other scholars. In this young man's case we have been more tolerant than we should have been of his annoying idiosyncrasies and ideological biases. The serious rap on him, however, is not that he is immature and frequently inept in his personal relations -- he often pisses on other people's shoes, too -- but that he isn't a very good historian.

He believes, I gather, that whatever may be said critically about him has neither to do with his personal
behavior nor his professional competence. By his lights, apparently, the cause of his failure to emerge as an historian -- that is, the reason for his failure to find employment as a faculty member at a major or even minor university -- is that he is brave enough to speak out against the prejudice that corrupts his field.

My young acquaintance fancies himself a critic of the whole spectrum of philanthropic studies and practice. He writes confidently as a self-styled and qualified "evaluator" of the organizations and people who are most visible in the field. He is especially fond of interpreting the motivations of others. As far as I know, my young acquaintance has had limited professional experience and responsibility. As far as I know, he has little hands-on experience in grantmaking and in administration generally, academic or philanthropic. That may come, of course; he's quite young. Lacking such experience, however, it means that he skates on thin professional ice when he infers important conclusions from slender evidence.

Whatever his lack of experience in the practice of philanthropy, my acquaintance touches upon a serious and quite legitimate issue when he raises the question of bias against scholars who want to study the history of foundations. The charge seems to follow these lines: that scholars who do serious historical work in the history of philanthropy cannot find funding because foundations are
afraid of them. Scholars worth their salt speak the truth as they see it and when they have access to the right information they can document their conclusions. Foundations would be embarrassed if the truth were known about them. When scholars don't have access to the information they need, and when they lack experience against which to test their insights, they must proceed as best they can. It is only just if uncooperative foundations are victims of their own lack of cooperation.

It is true, from my own observation, that some foundation executives are indeed overly sensitive to criticism. Some lack confidence in their work, but more often their timidity is based on an understandable fear of offending their trustees. Some believe that it is illogical to provide support for people whose objective it is to second-guess your judgments.

There is reason to believe, I would agree, that some bias of patronage exists among philanthropic foundations. This is a particularly difficult issue for scholars in the history of philanthropy. The bias of patronage is hardly unique to our field, however. I borrow the term from the economist Theodore Schultz who used it in connection with the bias given to research by the origin of the funds for research. His example was funding from the federal government for research in science. In order to get government funds, scientists might pursue a different
research agenda than they would otherwise ("otherwise" meaning, presumably, if they were independently wealthy). A former colleague of mine is a political scientist whose special field of interest is recent and contemporary west African politics. Every article he publishes puts him at risk of losing access to the very countries in which he wants to work. Published criticism of political figures will cut him off from the access he needs to be credible in interpreting people and events. Having spent some time in that part of the world, I can readily understand the challenges he faces. Despite the problems he has developed a solid reputation as a balanced and well-informed scholar.

What do allegations of foundation bias say about distinguished scholars in this field who have won foundation support? Another long-time colleague is unfailingly serious and tough-minded in his historical work. As far as I know, he has never been faulted for kowtowing to foundation executives. The bias of patronage in all its diverse forms is a serious and important issue. That there is often a bias of patronage, I have no doubt. That there is often a bias of scholarship, I have also no doubt.

The young historian who is the subject of these reflections provides an example. In his case, the bias has other overtones. The intellectual fashions of two decades ago produced a number of scholars of very mixed reputation. One characteristic -- which my young acquaintance
exemplifies -- is a fatal attraction for "conspiracy theory." There is an almost McCarthy-like (Joe, not Gene) passion to root out and expose the conspiracy of the Establishment to suppress and exclude and punish those who don't belong or who won't play the game by Establishment rules.

The bias of patronage that most fascinates such scholars whose field is philanthropic studies is one that reinforces other prejudices -- against wealthy individuals, for example, and against their agents who manage foundations. Attacks on the wealthy enrich a long and honored academic tradition. Thorstein Veblen is the best spokesman for the tradition (especially in The Higher Learning in America), but he finds good company in Harold Laski (The Dangers of Obedience) and Jacques Barzun (The House of Intellect). The tradition persists because of the high quality of the rhetoric. The tradition has not been very helpful, of course, because it offers no clue to the practical requirements of providing financial support for scholars and scholarship.

There seem to be at least two reasons to justify unfairness to the wealthy: the first is that all money is tainted and so if you have very much you must become tainted in getting it; the second is that if you are wealthy you can afford to protect yourself from gratuitous attack.

Those who can test the claims of scholarship against
personal experience may share my view that badness is not a
class trait of the wealthy any more than goodness is a class
trait of the poor. Roughly speaking, in my experience,
goodness and badness are randomly distributed throughout the
population.

Conspiracy theory as a habit of mind fits well the bias
of those of the Vietnam generation who believe that American
society is the hapless foil of the rich and powerful. It is
the same habit of mind often found in those whose principal
guide to human history is the Great Depression. There is
something to be said for their doubts; their selective
cynicism is another matter.

When such habits of mind afflict historians and other
scholars who decorate their claims with footnotes that give
a suggestion of impartiality, the consequences can be
serious. One unexpected consequence is that young
historians who suffer from ideological bias -- that is, the
bias they don't even realize they have -- often find it
impossible to gain appointment in academic departments of
high professional standards.

The rap on my young acquaintance as a professional
appears to be that one: while much of his work is
conceptually interesting it is also empirically slipshod.
His opinions color his sentences and he doesn't check his
facts. He seems to believe that he can rescue a gratuitous
insult by adding an unsought compliment. An appointment
committee reading his work would detect such signs of persistent immaturity. A foundation executive, attempting to check his professional standing before awarding him a grant, would hear what I have heard: that he is not a rigorous scholar.

Despite his continuing failure to win appointments and grants, my acquaintance seems not to have been led to the conclusion that there is anything deficient in the case he makes for himself. Instead, his bias seems to convince him even further that his failures are attributable to the bias of others.

When my young acquaintance recently pissed on my shoes I was tempted to write an angry reply. One egregious misstatement of fact, which he could have easily checked, called my character into question. The essay in which he made that statement (it is an essay rather than an article, despite the footnotes) contained a number of other misrepresentations (along with an equal number of typographical errors and awkward neologisms).

I decided not to reply. Correcting the written record in such matters is a doomed effort. One has one's reputation and one must hope that it protects one from canards of various kinds. Whenever I read those long, angry exchanges of letters in The New York Review of Books I wonder how many people other than the letter-writers themselves ever make an effort to go back to read the review
or essay that triggered the exchange in the first place.

As my young research assistants know, I greatly enjoy editing and evaluating -- and, I hope, helping to improve--their written work. Were the subject of this essay a student likely to listen to my advice about checking facts and sources, I would go to considerable trouble to help him uncover errors of fact and prejudice so that he could eliminate them from his work before rushing into print. But, after watching him work for about ten years, I am finally convinced that, young though he is, he is too caught up in himself to listen and he is too old to change.

He will continue to stain his shoes -- and the shoes of those who have been unfortunate enough to stand close to him.

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