

TOP OF THE ISSUE

A Conversation with Jacques Barzun

Carol Iannone

Jacques Barzun, distinguished historian of culture and defender of traditional scholarship, taught history and Great Books, and also served as dean, provost, and University Professor at Columbia College in New York until he retired in 1975. He is the author of many books, most recently *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present—500 Years of Western Cultural Life*, published in 2000, which was a bestseller and a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist for that year. In 2002, Professor Barzun was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Since 1993, he has resided in San Antonio, TX, where he responded to questions put to him by *Academic Questions* editor-at-large, Carol Iannone.

History Past and Present

***Iannone:* Might we start with your thoughts on the discipline of history and then move into the worlds beyond that? Why did you choose history as your own subject?**

Barzun: In my attachment to history and history writing I can trace several influences. I had a great-grandmother, who lived on the same block as my family and whom I would stop to see every day on my way home from the lycée at four o'clock. She gave me the traditional bun and square of chocolate and we would talk for half an hour or so. She was born in 1830 and her reminiscences gave me a sense of the past. The figures in it were real. That made school history real too, and at about the age of seven I wrote, not as a class assignment but on my own, a history of France in eight double pages. It stopped at Joan of Arc, because—as I had to explain to my obtuse elders—that was as far as we had gone in class. I knew enough not to tack on *Mère Grand's* characters, who lived in the 1850s. The First World War in 1914 added to the reality of nations in conflict.

When I came to this country for my college education, I began to think about the career I would pursue; family tradition was for Public Law and Diplomacy. But after deciding to stay and become a citizen here, I discovered that the Foreign Service trained chiefly for the civil servant staffs; the ambassadors were political appointees from business, politics, or the law, depending often on some fitness for a current situation—or contribution to the party.

Finally, in Columbia College and graduate school, I had for sponsor Carlton J.H. Hayes, outstanding historian of modern Europe, who, seeing my fondness for the arts and my facility on the typewriter, urged upon me the merits of the academic life

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and suggested as my specialty the history of ideas. I followed his advice and made it the gateway to cultural history. When Hayes came to revise his two-volume *Social and Political History of Modern Europe*, changing *Social* to *Cultural*, he asked me to go over the proofs. The subject was thus established as a major at Columbia and elsewhere. This is a long answer to your question, but I could not find in my case the one influence or incident that determines some careers.

Iannone: Who are your favorite historians, past and present? Are there particular works you found formative and would recommend?

Barzun: Burckhardt's *History of the Renaissance* was the formative work. Then Macaulay; Michelet (in parts); Carlyle; Hegel and Nietzsche, for their theories on the subject; Henry Adams; Prescott; Webb; and the unjustly maligned James Anthony Froude.

Iannone: You have remarked that history is story, narrative, continuous linking. Please elaborate.

Barzun: By making narrative the defining mark of history, I mean to sharpen its difference from biography, where character portrayal is central and the continuity of events repeatedly broken or ignored. At the same time, my criterion serves to disqualify that quite recent rash of works calling themselves History of Childhood, Friendship, Sleep, Envy, and other human traits or activities. They lack narrative, that is to say, a series of events linked by cause and effect or parallelism or contemporaneousness. They are anecdotes in loose sequence. Nor do they present persistent movers and shakers, victims and oppressors, aims and results, great words and rank folly—all interacting in one grand rush of facts, the stream of things that will never recur and that give an age its special coloring for later comers.

Iannone: This question might overlap with the previous one. What is the historian's craft, how does it differ from what philosophers, political scientists, or sociologists do? What do historians have to teach these other disciplines and what do they have to teach historians?

Barzun: The other disciplines—philosophy, theology, sociology, political theory—deal with their subject matter analytically; they tell us what we are to notice or conclude about Being or God, government or society. These subjects can, of course, be treated historically by describing the continuous chain of their practitioners' contributions. The professionals who attempt such works learn from historians the technique to ensure accuracy and clear exposition. On their side, historians borrow from the specialized histories what is needed for their own purposes—for instance, an historian of the Far West will use a history of firearms to discuss the influence of the Colt revolver and a history of agriculture to find when and how the barbed-wire fence was developed.

Iannone: How about literature? Do you see any interconnection between literature and history?

Barzun: When a history is well-proportioned, its figures sharply characterized, its language clear and enticing to read, it is indeed literature. As history was the model of the novel as a literary form, so the criteria applied to the novel also serve the critic of its parent, history.

***Iannone:* What areas of historical study do you think have been most fruitful?**

Barzun: Histories most fruitful for what? Some national ones in Europe have instilled prejudices that have played a part in making aggressive wars seem to both sides repeatedly justified as self-defense. Other texts have made figures into national heroes and heroines—for example, Queen Elizabeth, Nelson, the Founding Fathers, Lincoln, Florence Nightingale—that sustain patriotic unity or group pride—because these characters are reduced to lifeless formulas. They do little to further historical knowledge properly so called.

***Iannone:* What do you think of the Marxist historians, their contributions, their effect on the discipline? How about the psychohistorians?**

Barzun: The Marxist historians, like the Freudians later, were flawed by the fallacy of the Single Cause; economic organization in the one case, psychological quirks in the other. You can also call this error Reductionism. History is the very opposite of reduction—it tries to show the scene in full, regrets that that is not humanly possible, and tries to make the chosen portion adequately represent the whole.

***Iannone:* If you were a graduate student in history today, in what kind of history or in what field of history would you want to work? In what field or genre of history do you think the most interesting work is being done today?**

Barzun: I would stick to cultural history as most congenial to my tastes and talents—and most likely I would not find a sponsor for my work. Graduate schools at the big universities have given up subjects and gone in for “studies”—of women, race, sexual types, and the like. What comes out is hardly history, it’s pamphleteering and it tends to be repetitious. Today, some excellent historians who are non-academics are, more than ever, likely to deal in their works with elements of the past that have links with present worries—war, nation-making and -breaking, the mental burden of techniques and gadgets, the decay of society and government, the “clash of cultures.”

The difference between cultural and intellectual history is that the cultural is all-inclusive, the other not. Intellectual refers to the sequence of ideas and systems put forth by the great thinkers and their critics. The relations among their views are *clear*—indeed proclaimed—by the participants, so that retracing them yields a history. By contrast, nobody can predict what will be in a cultural history, neither the writer ahead of time nor the reader in his turn. An example that occurs to me is that a cultural historian of the past half century would find he had to give a paragraph to the world championship in chess, because it caused an international incident, with the public taking sides. That doesn’t happen every 50 years, but once is enough to qualify it for inclusion in that period.

***Iannone:* Do you see any changes in the way historians are trained today from when you were in graduate school?**

Barzun: While I was still an academic, as far back as 1975, the training of historians had already begun to lose rigor. One might prefer to say that earlier, in my day, the demands were excessive—here is the comparison: I had to master a major and two minor subjects, the major covering (in my case) the modern history of all Europe

including Russia from 1500 to the present. The two minors were the Middle Ages entire (same area) and the whole of American history. The difference between major and minor was that the major required a knowledge of the published sources on all topics. A three-hour written and a three-hour oral examination by seven professors tested that preparation.

In 1950 or thereabouts this was cut down to a single period within the major—say 1500 to the French Revolution, with only “modern” sources, for example, those published in the previous 20 years. The minor was also reduced to one period. The written examinations and orals came down to two hours each.

The change was in part due to the G.I. Bill, which gave tuition to veterans of the Second World War for college and graduate work. They were sympathized with and the way made easy for them—“facilitation.” Not a few demanded extra favors because of their status. It was the beginning of the student-as-customer.

The student revolt of 1968, which was justified on other grounds than those alleged, furthered the drift. Then the colossal rise in tuition, together with the new “credentials society,” completed the transformation. Now, for the independent colleges to maintain the volume of applicants and stay solvent, they must turn into a diploma mill, while the professor acts as an entertainer, pledged to *B-stow* a good grade on all students. He complies because he is worried about his annual ranking at their hands, on which salary and promotion depend.

***Iannone:* Regarding the theme or topic approach to history that you mentioned earlier (history of childhood, sleep, etc.), you have located its origin in the French *Annales* school. Have they exerted a great influence on academic history and on the writing of history? Can they be credited with advancing the idea of cultural history in the good sense?**

Barzun: The *Annales* movement, so called after a French periodical that promoted the idea, was bent on changing the subject of history writing from politics and economics to the life of the common people. That life was deemed more fundamental, more influential, more real. In practice, it turned out that the condition of the people was static over quite long stretches of time—its description amounted to sociology, not history—nothing to narrate. But under various names the summons to “bring history down to its roots in the people” continues to be heard. It has produced one or two interesting works—not histories—but has not fulfilled the contract it implies.

***Iannone:* “No man is a hero to his valet,” said Montaigne, I believe. Contrary to the tell-all, expose-everything practice among biographers and historians today, you have written that scholars should exercise judgment over what they publish about the historical figures (and perhaps also the events?) that they study. Some things are better left untold or unsaid? What criteria should scholars follow about what to include or exclude from publication?**

Barzun: Montaigne did express the idea, but not in the form of a neat epigram. The “no man is a hero to his valet” is due to Hegel. The valet is now the patron saint of the biographer, whose tell-all doctrine seems to me reprehensible not just because it claims one’s attention to trivial and unsightly matters, but because it defeats what seems to be

the plain purpose of biography. I want to ask, Are you writing to show your subject's accomplishments or not? If so, why bury them in a mass of details that belong to bed, bath, and beyond? They reduce him or her to the common measure of the mass, who haven't done anything deserving the world's attention. Besides, they make the book bulky—it's far from impossible to put down, but it's impossible to pick it up.

***Iannone:* A new professional association of historians, the Historical Society, has been formed to counter the increasing left-wing politicization of the discipline, as manifest in the Organization of American Historians and the Association of American Historians. Did you notice increased politicization of the discipline in the course of your career? Some say the field of history has not done that badly, compared to the worst cases, such as literature. Did you find politics having a negative effect on the things you care about?**

Barzun: The charge of politicizing history requires that a distinction be drawn. It has been said by judicious minds that all writing is a political act, everybody being biased on all the issues and institutions of life. This generality would be hard to disprove, and it could be argued besides that total impartiality would achieve total dullness. But there is a wide gulf between self-expression that is unconsciously colored by political and religious beliefs and the tenor of deliberate partisanship.

Latterly, political bias has been deliberate; indeed, it has been represented as a duty, namely, to carry on the propaganda against a corrupt and oppressive capitalist society. This platform is a hangover from the Marxism long pervasive in academia and that ceased to be overt at the fall of the Soviet regime. In both its phases the animus is quite unlike the inactive bias that one may detect in traditional academic writing, liberal or conservative, religious or freethinking.

Regarding the idea of "Relativism," many presumably educated people use it continually as a way to say good and bad. Relativism means bad. Anybody who points to the relative aspect of things is guilty of making the ground shake under our feet. Before that, it was solid, fixed, eternal. This bugbear of relativism is worse than naïve. Consider: the opposite of relative is absolute, and I ask, what in the world is absolute? Everything one sees, handles, or talks about is *related* to something else, that is, dependent upon it, and can be understood or dealt with only by attending to that relation—parent to child, government to citizen, business to customer; and all these in reverse, also, naturally. The same is true of customs, traditions, and the works of the mind. In reading a classic, we explain parts of it relatively to its own time. Whatever we may think complete in itself and independent—because we turn to it as a standard, say, a yardstick—is arbitrary, made up to act *as if* absolute—and each people's God is conceived likewise. Here below, Relativism is inescapable (I take that back: there is one Absolut, a brand of vodka.)

***Iannone:* Do you agree that popular history, the work of David McCullough, for example, now supplies some of that narrative or story that readers crave and that academic historians have abandoned? Is there any downside to this?**

Barzun: I greatly admire David McCullough's work both in biography and in history and I do not consider him "popular" because his latest hooks have turned out to

be widely read. That has been the public's good sense and good luck. History writing, we must not forget, is for the educated part of the population, not just for fellow historians to haggle over. Macaulay hoped that his great work would find a place on the young lady's dressing table, presumably to be read, not to show off.

***Iannone:* This is a digression, but something of the same has been said of literature, that as Modernism and then Postmodernism dried out the narrative or storytelling aspects of fiction (and altered the nature of poetry and drama as well), readers had to find substitutes. Do you have any thoughts on Modernism and Postmodernism and their effects on the creation and consumption of art and literature in our time?**

Barzun: Modernism and Postmodernism cease to be clear-cut tendencies in literature when the encompassing idea of decadence is seen to apply to the original work of the last two generations—fiction, poetry, plays, and criticism. Not all the specimens are affected to the same degree, because authors vary in feeling about what decadence springs from, the sense that everything in their genre has already been done, and done supremely well. And, for the gifted, the challenge is the same: what to do with one's talents and ambition? One obvious answer is do the opposite, turn the thing upside down. This ploy accounts for the atmosphere of joking one notes throughout modern work—one mustn't be caught acting altogether serious.

Carried to its natural end, this attitude brings on the deliberate negation of art: we are offered a painting of the Campbell soup can and then the can itself; as a sculpture some "installation" that apes the commonplace—say, a ladder leaning against a wall. Another escape from the pressure of former greatness is to make a whole dish of the inhuman—horror, grossness, madness, incoherence—anything revolting and never dared before. The visual arts have spawned some purposely shocking extremes—the painter exhibiting himself naked, painted green, and lying in a coffin. As Andy Warhol said, "Art is what you can get away with."

Still more remarkable (as I think) has been the solemn faces of the critics as they review these productions and appear to find them entrancing, lavishing explanations and compliments to make them congenial to the public. To take a mild example, in one exhibition a large sheet of paper offered to the gaze a series of parallel horizontal bands alternating between lightly penciled and painted a darker gray. It was called "Untitled No. 21." What does the art critic find to say in twenty paragraphs? This "sparse and lucid composition" and others by the same hand "lead to a realm of joy."

***Iannone:* This may seem a little far afield, but Leo Strauss and his students are in the news a lot these days. Could Strauss be regarded as an historian? What do you think of his work?**

Barzun: To my regret and possibly my shame, I have never been able to make headway in the work of Leo Strauss. I may be wrong but I don't think he wrote history. In any case, his mode of exposition makes me feel I go forward two steps and have to take three backward, which is hardly the best way to make progress and I give up.

The World Beyond

***Iannone:* Your recent book on Western civilization was monumental, a landmark of cultural history. How is Western civilization faring? Do you see problems in its capacity to survive and thrive and surmount the challenges of today?**

Barzun: I believe that I have dealt with this question earlier by referring to decadence. Today's "challenges" are not being met, some are not even seen, and opinion in talk and print about the contemporary world seems to me split into two layers. The great majority are unaware of any trouble except the familiar ones they learn about in the news. The more observant are persuaded that decay is general and are depressed and resigned. And when they say so they are taken note of—"interesting"—but their emotions, weakened by their very perceptions, are not equal to making converts.

***Iannone:* You have written an essay, "Is Democratic Theory for Export?" We are in the midst of an effort to do just that in the Mideast. Do you have any thoughts on the American mission in Iraq? What is your general take on the exportability of democracy? Do you think Islam is compatible with democratic values? (Here is where the followers of Strauss have evidently been especially influential—in the idea that our values are universal and therefore portable to the rest of mankind.)**

Barzun: The Middle East situation also ought to be studied and judged on two levels. As a field of action to establish democracies, its resistance manifestly cannot be overcome. All effort to that end is wasted, because the United States cannot muster a force greater than the opposing forces, irresistible when joined, of history and religion—and would not if it could. But as a means of keeping at a distance the struggle with our enemy, Islam, our interference in that region may be justified. The huge immigration from the east into the west makes it plausible that if this enemy assaulted us at home, it would trigger not a united defense, but a quasi-civil war.

***Iannone:* You say also in that essay that the push for equality gradually impinges on the other great foundation of democracy, namely, freedom. What do you think of the current emphasis on group equality, that all groups (including women as a group) must have equal outcomes or else the society must be judged to have failed in fulfilling its vaunted ideals?**

Barzun: Equality is a slippery notion, its claims never cease. For how can it be measured and shown to have been reached? As your question implies, the game of testing equality by numbers leads to absurdity. When all groups are expected to be equally represented in all desirable things, but nobody bothers to inquire whether everybody in the group wanted to be, the comparisons are fallacious. Not everybody wants to go to college, become a physician, run a corporation, be on the Supreme Court, and so there can never be in those places the exact same number of women, blacks, Latinos, or American Indians. Nor, for that matter, southerners, PhDs, Alaskans, the red-headed, and the color-blind.

***Iannone:* The concept of diversity has been advanced recently as the very essence of American identity, that is, that we are a collection of disparate groups with no common cultural basis whatsoever, supposedly united only by our ideals.**

President Clinton once remarked that America needs a third great revolution, following the war of independence and the civil rights revolution. This third great revolution would be to “prove that we literally can live without having a dominant European culture.” Do you think this is possible and desirable? Or are we basically a Judeo-Christian, European-based society, open to newcomers of whatever background who may bring some different cultural aspects with them, but who basically wish to assimilate into the particular cultural forms that underpin our ideals? In this regard, do you have any thoughts on the mass immigration of recent decades and its effects on our society? If present immigration trends continue, America’s European-stock majority will be a minority by the middle of the century. Similar trends are afoot in Western Europe. Do you think this is good, bad, or indifferent? Why?

Barzun: Diversity, like relativism, is another thought-less word for futile argument. It is the counterpart of equality: diverse in what? how measured? The college campuses have given the report on contrived diversity: the students specially chosen to provide it huddle together; they’re shy of mingling to “diversify” the rest. This is a natural response of any small group plunged into a much larger one. It could have been predicted if the minds of those in charge were not warped by the modern illusion that everything desirable can be engineered.

President Clinton was no doubt right that “we can live without a dominant European culture,” but because in the name of fair play that culture has given up demanding assimilation to its ways, we now have a society of groups. The ideal and the fact of the nation-one-and-indivisible have eroded. Indeed, the nation-state is virtually a thing of the past in Britain and Western Europe. A striking example: there is a small region in France so densely populated by Africans who cultivate their primitive rites and are so hostile to interference that the French police refuse to go there and be killed. You ask, “Do I think this is good or bad?” If I said, “Why, it’s going back to our roots,” would you believe me or think I was joking? Both, perhaps.

***Iannone:* You have said, I am told, that to understand America we need to understand baseball. Please explain. And would therefore the changes we have seen both in baseball and in the sports world at large (so many sports coming onto the scene, including European soccer) carry any implications for the state of the national character?**

Barzun: Ah, the great baseball question! I thought the game specially American and admirable, because it is the most complex sport and the least physical. It doesn’t depend on butting and bashing. It calls for lightning judgment and response at every moment of play, together with accuracy of eye and power of arm and leg for hitting, running, and throwing. And it is a wonderfully cooperative game in which the continually changing conditions bring on a variety of rules and opportunities.

Those features seemed to me, when I made the statement in 1954, to mirror the character of our individual behavior, our social and business relations, and our sense of organization generally. We have fallen away from this standard to an appalling degree—we blunder repeatedly, “the honest mistake” regularly accounts for the predict-

able error. We utter stupidly offensive words, followed by apologies. Our legislatures dither and act too late. Industry and corporations are outsourcing because it's more fun for CEOs to buy and sell companies than run them. It's only a matter of time till baseball bats are stamped "Made in China." Anyhow, allegiance to a team is no longer possible; the free-player system scrambles the lot, and the salaries paid introduce an element of disgust in what used to be the joy of being a fan.

The World Beyond That

***Iannone:* This may be more than a little personal but the subject of your spiritual beliefs came up in a short piece Fr. Richard John Neuhaus wrote in *First Things*. What it seems to boil down to is, do you believe in the transcendent, something higher than man to which man is responsive? Would you care to comment further?**

Barzun: With this set of questions you have presented me with a copy of a comment on my book *From Dawn to Decadence*, in which Neuhaus complains that, although it satisfies many of his expectations, it gives no clue to what I believe. That remark is a shocking sign of the times. Everyone, it seems, must be tagged, must belong to some gang. And the personal note must be struck to command attention: subject matter is not enough. It used to be that *only* the famous put forward their ego; now not an article or a review fails to start with "I." What follows may have nothing to do with the owner of the pronoun. "I was under my car greasing the differential, when it struck me that Article V of the Constitution...."

It is an even worse misconception to expect that a work of history shall give a clue to the writer's belief. It is to require partisanship in his treatment, it is to ask that he violate the historian's obligation to treat all figures and parties with an even hand. I take it as a compliment that I failed in that duty.

But I venture to offer the opinion that the writing of history, by its very nature, rules out one type of belief, materialism. The materialist refers event, action, and character back to some physical element in man or the external world. It's a faith, not a testable theory. According to it, human beings have no will of their own, only the illusion of it. Now, when such a believer undertakes to write history, he faces a stern necessity: he is bound to relate to their supposed material cause all the picturesque things that he presents, for example the range and wildness of individuality, the pivotal force of trifles, the manifestations of greatness, the failures of unquestioned talent. But he cannot point to the pattern of matter that underlies these appearances and determines them and that fools the human agents into thinking that *they* are carrying out purposes of their own.

Some will answer: Wait! Science, wonderful science, is making great progress in locating functions in the brain, and when complete will explain it all. This is an old fallacy. The jump from brain to mind is not bridged by such discoveries. No matter what portion of it is agitated by—let's say—solving a crossword puzzle, that motion of molecules does not account for the creation of the pastime. It was not locked up in that group of neurons and one day released to the *New York Times*. In short, mind exists as a part in the material universe, in it but not of it.