Destiny and Amnesia: The Vision of Modernity in Robert Wiebe’s The Search for Order

Kenneth Cmiel


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0048-7511%28199306%2921%3A2%3C352%3ADAATVO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-5

Reviews in American History is currently published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

__________________________________________________________

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/jhup.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

__________________________________________________________

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
IN RETROSPECT

DESTINY AND AMNESIA: THE VISION OF MODERNITY
IN ROBERT WIEBE'S THE SEARCH FOR ORDER

Kenneth Cmiel

Which of us has a book in print twenty-five years after publication? The life span of academic opinion is so short, and the churning mass of publication so great, that most of our books get lost in just a few years. "Never try to use a book more than ten years old in any class," a bookseller once told me after a futile search for a fourteen-year-old text. Good advice, on the whole, and advice that makes the longevity of Robert Wiebe's The Search for Order even more impressive. Published in 1967, in the past couple of months I have spotted it in bookstores in Chicago, Iowa City, the San Francisco Bay area, and even Budapest, Hungary.

The genius of The Search for Order is its synthesis. Wiebe took a number of themes that historians and social scientists had been working on for some years and brought them together into a very readable story. Neither political history nor social history, The Search for Order is the history of a civilization. Like Jacob Burkhardt's Civilization of the Renaissance, it weaves together politics, culture, and society—in extraordinarily graceful prose. Just a few years before, historians had been debating whether Theodore Roosevelt was a "conservative" or not. After Wiebe's book such a discussion seemed beside the point.

Such success creates its own problems: everyone "knows" what the book is about; its contents become a few catch-phrases. By taking a close look at The Search for Order twenty-five years after publication I hope to help save the book from that fate. For if you listen carefully to the words themselves, I will argue, you will find The Search for Order a much sadder book than is normally thought, one that paints a rather grim, even bleak, picture of life in the twentieth century.
The Search

Almost every American historian still knows the thesis of The Search for Order, at least in broad outline. By the 1870s, the United States was a distended society. The eruption of modern social and economic forces brutally undermined the autonomy of small-town America. International markets, a national credit system, the railroads, the mass movement of peoples from all over the globe to urban areas—these were some of the forces trampling what Wiebe called “island communities,” those small self-contained towns and neighborhoods that had organized the life experience of most Americans until the years after the Civil War. The story of the book is how the United States eventually shed its nostalgia for the island community and began constructing the bureaucratic nexus needed to order a modern society (The Search for Order, p. xiv). Central to the change, according to Wiebe, was “the new middle class,” those professionals and modernizing businessmen intent on curbing the unruly disorder but at the same time not fogged by any romantic ennui for the older ways of life.

Although not mentioned in the text, the intellectual background to The Search for Order was modernization theory. In the 1950s and 1960s, liberal social scientists argued that the whole world was moving from static, traditional societies toward modern, dynamic ones. The social theory of Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils provided critical background for this thinking, but literally hundreds of articles and monographs spelled the theory out in concrete application. Daniel Lerner’s influential The Passing of Traditional Society (1958) was one such text; Seymour Martin Lipset’s The First New Nation (1963) another. In 1966, the year before Wiebe’s book was published, an array of synthetic books appeared trying to outline the modernization process.¹

How much Wiebe consciously used this theory versus how much he just picked up from what was in the air is of little matter. The bottom line is this: the characteristic assumptions of modernization theory color nearly every page and theme of The Search for Order. It is often remarkable how specific the parallels are. Like all modernization theory, Wiebe made the development of mass communication a central part of his story.² Just as the sociologist James Coleman did, Wiebe argued that the pragmatic, rational attitudes toward social problems so important to modernization meant that bureaucracies would have to perpetually respond to new issues. There would be no final resolution.³ Like Edward Shils, Wiebe spoke of the shifting relationship between periphery and center of society.⁴ As a number of social scientists had claimed, Wiebe thought that successful modernization generated some order in society, an order built on interest-group politics.⁵

Robert Wiebe is an excellent historian. The Search for Order was more nuanced to the individualizing details of U.S. history than some of the more
procrustean social science of the day. In fact, one of the dangers of having this book become a classic is that it can be reduced to the “modernization thesis,” an interpretation ignoring the richness of the actual text. Unlike what some current glosses of The Search for Order claim, Wiebe was well aware that society was not perfectly “rationalized” by 1920, the endpoint of his book. The closing pages indicate the tentativeness with which the new order was grasped, the inability of elites to understand fully what they were doing, the huge demographic pockets that bureaucratic rationality did not reach. “The large majority of wage earners lived beyond its influence,” Wiebe commented, “untouched by its values and largely free from its discipline.” Similarly, a “great many in the countryside had also escaped the bureaucratic web.” The “enduring rural localism,” fueled by “old village values,” underwrote the fury of the Eighteenth Amendment (p. 301, also see p. xiv).

Yet there is good reason why a myth has arisen that The Search for Order ended with bureaucratic rationality imposed. Wiebe relentlessly organized his whole book around the search for order (not the establishment of order) but there was no doubt that the search would succeed. Wiebe took for granted the eventual arrival of modern, integrated, administrative and bureaucratic systems that would bring peace to the body politic. And plotting the book in terms of the direction of history was not accidental: it was a central tactic of modernization theory that hinted at even deeper intellectual debts. The Search for Order, like all modernization theory, was a direct descendant of nineteenth-century philosophies of history.

First, like nineteenth-century theory, say in Hegel or Marx, modernization theorists claimed that nothing less than the whole of world history could be understood by grasping the essential drift toward modernity. The theory was the most recent stab at a universal history of mankind. And modernization theorists, like Hegelians of the nineteenth century, often intimated that there was something necessary, inevitable, about this process. On one thing, at least, both Hegel and Talcott Parsons would agree—there were evolutionary stages to history.

But such connections, noted in passing by numerous scholars, have remained murky and unexplored. There were a number of reasons why modernization theorists were unable to recognize their own similarities to earlier philosophies of history. One critical problem was that of will, of the role of human agency in history. By the 1950s, it seemed that earlier philosophies of history denied the role of human praxis in the making of history. A thinker like Hegel saw history unfolding in a particular direction regardless of where historical actors thought they were going. The “chaotic interplay of particular self-interests and passions” wound up creating a history that was both rational and progressive. The real was the rational, as Hegel put it. Human
actors were the "tools of history," so to speak. This was what Hegel called
the "cunning of reason."9

Scholars of the 1950s and early 1960s often portrayed history as having a
direction and logic that sucked in all participants. As one leading social sci-
etist put it: "Modernization and aspirations to modernity are probably the
most overwhelming and most permeating features of the contemporary
scene. Most nations are now caught in its web." For another scholar it was a
"universal tendency" for modernized societies to "penetrate" traditional ones
regardless of whether the latter willed it or not. As Daniel Lerner put it in his
1958 study of the Middle East, against the "rationalist and positivist spirit.
. . . Islam is absolutely defenseless."10

Nevertheless, modernization theorists usually denied any connections
with earlier philosophies of history and were far more ambiguous about the
question of agency.11 Their faith in historical progress included less Geist than
Hegel, more bureaucracy than Spencer, and, most important, less class con-
flict than Marx. Modernization theorists saw themselves as modern and sci-
entific, implicitly exemplifying the best of the rationalization process. By the
1950s, the older philosophies of history smacked of a period where the di-
vision of labor had not yet touched intellectual life. It seemed either too old-
fashioned or too Marxist to speak so openly of the unfolding of history, of
the necessary stages that the whole world went through, although, that was,
in fact, what modernization theory was presenting.

The Search for Order is implicated in all of this. Like so many of his contem-
poraries, Wiebe tried to distance himself from evolutionary philosophies of
history. To Wiebe, people like Edward Bellamy, Lester Ward, and Walter Rau-
schenbusch were romantics trying to reconstruct community on a national
level. They owed much to Hegel, Wiebe said at one point (p. 140); their pre-
ordained stages of history represented a "cast of mind" that was actually a
"prison" (p. 144). Teleological theory "never reconciled human control with
a predetermined progress" (p. 144). It was only when more functional think-
ing surfaced, thinking well-suited for bureaucratic management, that mod-
ernization would proceed.

Yet if Wiebe would not say so directly, and perhaps did not even think it
consciously, his prose nevertheless kept referring back to an autonomous and
inevitable flow to history. At critical moments—summaries of the argument,
titles of chapters, keywords employed—Wiebe's own language intimated
that modernization has a logic all its own, that against the rationalist and
positivist spirit the island community was defenseless. The title of the chapter
on the 1890s, "The Fate of the Nation," implied inevitability. Elsewhere Wiebe
wrote that during World War I the "pieces for a pattern seemed to appear by
magic," that they "fell into place with a neatness almost no one could have
predicted,” indicating some preexisting place for the pieces to fall to (pp. 293, 296). Wartime rationalization “seemed to be following a prearranged sched-
ule,” Wiebe wrote, again hinting that some “order” existed independent of
the people who made it (p. 296).

One way the text did this work was by abstracting social concepts from the
people who made them up. Terms like “community” and “nation” occasion-
ally take on a life of their own, something Wiebe himself negatively associated
with nineteenth-century evolutionary theory. “The health of the nineteenth-
century community rested on two things,” Wiebe wrote, “its ability to man-
age the lives of its members, and the belief among its members that the com-
munity had such powers” (p. xiii). In this passage the term “community”
becomes an “it” that performs action. But who, in actual fact, could have been
doing the managing except members of the community? Wiebe’s words im-
pute some sort of personality to the community itself, above and beyond its
constituents. One could alternatively think of the community as made up of
people who interact in various ways, some with duly constituted authority,
some without. In this view the community is not ordering its members, but
people have arranged lives in such a way as to constitute a community. In-
stead of the abstraction ruling its citizens, the actions of people define the
abstraction.

The same sort of reification appears elsewhere. For instance, although
World War I had brought the outlines of a new order to America, that order
remained “indefinable.” But if people did not yet understand the new system,
Wiebe claimed that in “a general sense, the nation had found its direction”
(p. 301). It is not that people don’t understand the implications of their actions
(nothing unusual there), but that Wiebe can in the same breath claim that
“the nation” (at this point apparently disconnected from any real people) has
“found” its way. Here is the sense that the nation is an independent per-
sonality, doing things regardless of whether people want it or not. Here too is
the notion of a direction to history. This is Hegel’s cunning of reason.12

At times Wiebe’s language can be deeply ambiguous, quickly shifting back
and forth, first seeming to grant autonomy and agency and then pulling it
away. Such an ambiguity surfaces in one of the most famous sentences of the
book. “The heart of progressivism,” Wiebe wrote “was the ambition of the
new middle class to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means” (p. 166).
Ambition here conjures up free will and action. The new middle class is taking
charge. But just as quickly the term destiny tugs the other way. The new mid-
dle class is only fulfilling some plan, doing what it had to do to find its place
in a grander historical scheme. Hegel, it might be added, spoke very similarly
about “world-historical figures,” those Napoleons and Alexanders who man-
aged to take humanity to the next stage of civilization.13
That Wiebe’s analysis leads in this direction is lent more support by his argument that the new middle class did not yet see what it was creating. As late as 1920 the new order was still “undefinable,” the new middle class still laboring in “confusion” (pp. 301–02). Woodrow Wilson, his advisers, and Congress did a remarkable job managing the nation during World War I, Wiebe thought, but no one “could pretend . . . they followed a master plan” (p. 221). The new thinking was “exceptionally vague” about the nature of leadership, Wiebe thought. “In fact, fuzziness in crucial matters constituted its gravest weakness” (p. 162). This was not a class fully aware of its own purpose, both the subject and object of history. To the contrary, the class succeeded because it rode the crest of modernity. “Often confused,” Wiebe wrote, the new middle class nevertheless “did represent a new society” (p. 132). Praxis here disappears; and modernity begins to look more like a destiny than a creation.

The vision of history behind The Search for Order also helps explain Wiebe’s rendering of violence and conflict. One common misperception about The Search for Order is that violence is missing. This is just empirically wrong. Wiebe saw conflict and did not mince words about it. Western mine operators “shot and beat, trampled the strikers’ rights as citizens” (p. 38). Southern whites attacked African Americans with “viciousness” (p. 110). The suppression of strikes before 1917 was “ferocious”; the violations of civil liberties during the war, acts of “inhumanity” (pp. 290, 301). And what was the establishment’s response to Haymarket? “Sanctity of human life had certainly not been the issue; within a few hours after the event police had indiscriminately killed at least as many as the bomb” (p. 79). By the 1890s, Wiebe argued, the United States was a nation riven by its “pathological” divisions (pp. 95–96).

Wiebe did not ignore conflict: brutality, chaos, and venality appear and reappear. But just as with the assertion that The Search for Order ended with rationality imposed, there is a reasonable basis for the mistaken claim that Wiebe did not include conflict. And similarly, this is unpacked through Wiebe’s implied philosophy of history. For conflict appeared not in its own right in terms of its historic mission. The discord and violence were structured in ways that appear to soften their blows.

First, Wiebe denied that class conflict could explain much (pp. 13–14). Instead, discord was understood as part of the strain of modernization. Conflict in The Search for Order is multidimensional, racial at one point, class-driven at another, antimodern and rural at still a third. But in The Search for Order, there are no constant enemies, no sustained sets of opponents. Wiebe associates discord with disorder rather than warfare, chaos rather than the ongoing struggle of well-defined social enemies.
There is also a purely textual dimension to the softening of conflict’s force. Since Wiebe folds brutality and suppression into the larger story of modernization, he does not linger on the details. There are no descriptive pictures of any act of inhumanity; no incidents discussed in any depth. Instead, some brutality is announced, assimilated into a larger story, and then is gone. The result for any reader is that oppression appears fleetingly, only in passing.

At bottom, then, Wiebe’s treatment of violence contains the following paradox: because he understood modernization in a particular way, discord was central to his story—it revealed the strains of transition. At the same time, because he saw the process as heading toward resolution, violence and oppression take on a passing character in the text—produced by historical situations instead of evil people, they exemplify the cunning of reason.¹⁴

This too rings similar to nineteenth-century philosophies of history. Wiebe’s folding of violence into the logic of change sounds very much like Hegel’s sense of history as a slaughter bench. “Every philosophy of the cunning of reason,” Luc Ferry has noted, “cannot help justifying war.” Such theories are “necessarily dialectical in the sense that peace must always be realized through its opposite,” and “sociability through unsociability.” To understand history dialectically is to see how violence contributes to the progress of humanity.¹⁵

By the time Wiebe’s book appeared in 1967, attacks on modernization theory were already appearing.¹⁶ One important complaint was that the theory misunderstood conflict in several specific ways. Conflict, it was claimed, was more than a transitional disorder, it was the catalyst of change itself. Thus Barrington Moore, in The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (1966), argued that a violent break with the traditional past was a necessary precondition for the emergence of stable democratic regimes. A related charge was that modernization theory made tradition and modernity far too neatly packaged, with none of the messiness that was the reality of actual history. In response to this attack, writers sympathetic to modernization theory, scholars like Reinhard Bendix, Samuel Huntington, Clifford Geertz, and S. N. Eisenstadt, were by the mid-1960s trying to recast the theory to include a more complex sense of conflict and tension. Dislocation and disorganization were being understood as part of modernity proper as much as the modernizing process.¹⁷

Both of these changes—that violence is a catalyst of change and that discord continues after modernity triumphs—came from those committed to some theory of modernization. Neither appear in The Search for Order. In this respect the book is one of the last major statements of the earlier form of modernization theory that sees discord as transitional and assumes bureaucratic rationality will bring some stability to the social system.
For Order

Nineteenth-century philosophy of history understood the ideal to be bound up in the real. For Hegel, only immature minds thought of a total transformation of society; the “adult’s way of looking” understood the rough “harmony between ‘is’ and the ‘ought to be.’”18 This same effort of reconciliation to reality is operative in The Search for Order. “Idealism” and “realism” were terms that Wiebe himself used constantly, and idealism, he claimed, had to adjust to mass, industrial society. Wiebe argued that all sorts of groups committed to small-town mores were out of touch, unable to grasp the emerging urban-industrial order. Only by breaking through such “idealistic” thinking could a more “realistic” approach surface. And realism was bureaucracy.

A writer like Hegel had great faith in history because he saw it as the unfolding of God’s will. “The state,” Hegel wrote, “is only the march of God through the world.”19 When Hegel claimed that the ideal must capitulate to the real, then, this was something more complicated than twentieth-century realism. The “ideal” that must bend was the human ideal, the longings of a people at any given time. And these human longings could not stray too far from what “was” because God directed the course of history. He watched over it and gave it shape. The wicked as well as the good were a part of God’s handiwork, all designed for the best. For Hegel, above the human ideal that had to bend to reality was the Absolute Ideal that gave shape to reality.

One hundred years later, however, God was dead. And this changed the meaning and consequences of Wiebe’s capitulation to the “forces” of modernity. For Hegel, history marched toward freedom. This was, to be sure, not freedom understood in terms of simply doing what you want, but freedom as the reconciliation of rational desire with the course of history. Nevertheless, the goal was something called “freedom.” For Wiebe, however, nothing so inspiring remained. Without a God, all that was left was “order.” Wiebe’s modernity is far grimmer than that pictured in nineteenth-century philosophies of history.

Again and again, Wiebe stated explicitly that the goal was order, control, discipline. The author’s own language was as bleak as any used by Foucault in the 1970s. The “fevers of war constituted just one chapter,” Wiebe wrote, “in the developing campaign to discipline American society” (p. 287). Taft, in 1912, “thought of reform in terms of control” (p. 217). All three candidates, in fact, thought of national “guidance” in “bureaucratic terms” (p. 217). Bureaucratic thinking “obliterated the inner man,” Wiebe wrote elsewhere. Education became “the guidance of behavior with social processes,” or “social engineering” (pp. 148-49, also p. 209). Still elsewhere: “The old problems of establishing and maintaining order, then, continued without pause,” producing a sense of “chaos” in the late nineteenth century, “a more conscious
sense of individual helplessness” in the twentieth (p. 187). At one point Wiebe did mention that bureaucratic management might lead to “social release” as well as “social control” (p. 223), but this wasn’t followed up anywhere in the book. Instead, readers were treated to continuing allusions to order, discipline, restraint. On the book’s last page was still one more reference to men “imposing order upon the nation” (p. 302).

That Wiebe was writing about a search for order should be confronted squarely and its implications explored. In The Search for Order there is not a sustained passage on the quality of life. Poverty is addressed in passing but Wiebe does not say that the end result of order is a better standard of living. Nor is it freedom or democracy. There is no discussion of a new kind of fraternity or of a refigured, national community. Wiebe, it should be emphatically emphasized, was not rewriting the story of reform invented by such people as Herbert Croly, Jane Addams, or John Dewey. The story for Wiebe is bureaucratic rationality pure and simple.

The Search for Order owed a lot to the modernization theory of the 1950s, but it owed just as much to early-twentieth-century writers skeptical of democratic pieties. The spirit of Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and especially Walter Lippmann runs through Wiebe’s book. Through bureaucratic rule, accomplished via constant negotiation among elites, some social consensus would be preserved. But even “consensus” should be understood more as the absence of a negative than a strong positive, one way that The Search for Order looked like Lippmann’s Public Opinion. Wiebe used the terms “cooperation” or “coordination” to describe successful rule, terms putting the emphasis on the bureaucratic process instead of common values. When Wiebe spoke about “social consensus,” on the other hand, he viewed it as one of the fuzzy “idealistic” notions that persisted in a futile effort to bring “cohesion” to American society. As with Lippmann, chaos would be eliminated by expertise and elite negotiation, not by some shared sense of purpose in the populace at large.20

It would be very wrong to assume that Wiebe thought there was anything noble about these changes. Words with positive valence appear throughout the text, but associated with the fading order, all things which had to pass. Typically, the term community is used in this way.21 So too is democracy and its cognates.22 Moreover, the word democracy was conspicuously absent whenever Wiebe described the new urban-industrial order. The implication was clear. It was not that democracy was being refigured to the new ways of the world; it was that democracy was in decline. At times Wiebe made the contrast directly, setting the two systems against each other. As he put it in one such passage, socialists elected to union offices acted just like their non-socialist opponents, shelving “plans for democratic unionism in favor of a centralized command” (p. 174).23

Wiebe’s realism seemingly undermined all ideals. Woodrow Wilson spoke
“platitudes about equality and individualism” (p. 218); the objective of the new civil service reform was “efficiency rather than moral purity” (p. 171); T. R. ruled with “the magician’s skill” (p. 192). The very notion of a people ruling itself was suspect, the point where Wiebe’s links to Lippmann seemed the strongest. Notions like “the people” or the “rational public” existed only as a “mystic coherence,” an “article of faith,” while the real politics took place at the bureaucratic level (pp. 162–63, 222, 283). The use of vague civic symbols to manipulate mass attitudes was a major theme of Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*.

The contrast between democracy understood as local control and modernity understood as elite management was something else Wiebe shared with Lippmann. 24 The vacuous and manipulative blather of modern civic rhetoric, the negotiation (manipulation?) behind the scenes, the connection of this to modern mass communication—this was Lippmann’s analysis as much as Wiebe’s. *The Search for Order* was 1960s modernization theory, but with a dark edge found in only a small part of that era’s scholarship.

Wiebe’s tortured pages on progressive theories of leadership highlight his hesitations about the new system. These theories, which posited bureaucrats as directly fulfilling the will of the people, were “immediately and persistently attacked as undemocratic.” Wiebe was gentle on the reformers’ motives but chilling about the reforms’ effects. Although the new middle class “trod so close to elitist rule,” Wiebe wrote, they thought they were “modernizing, not destroying democracy.” And if he could say that the “theory was not as boldly authoritarian as it sometimes appeared” (what a compliment!), he also made clear that it left the question of leadership very confused. What did the new bureaucratic thinking create: leaders with “an ominous freedom of action,” where “communion with the masses suggested the lockstep of totalitarianism,” or elites who were “highly intelligent coordinators,” responding “to all manner of rational public demands” (pp. 161–62)? Wiebe biting noted that some progressives thought Mussolini “a somewhat peremptory democrat” (p. 155).

But if there was darkness in *The Search for Order*, it was the author himself who kept it at the edges. The dismissal of idealism, disdain for civic rhetoric, and the preoccupation with order might have sounded like Lippmann, but Wiebe’s great faith in interest-group negotiation sounded very much like the social science of the 1950s and early 1960s. Woodrow Wilson’s legislative program, the “Wilsonian compromise,” Wiebe called it, “covered an impressive range.” Among other things, “no well-organized group was denied” (p. 221). At moments like this, Wiebe seemed confident about “the assumptions of a bureaucratic order: a society of unceasingly interacting voluntary groups assisted in their course by a powerful, responsive government” (p. 222).

Depending on where one looked, you could find either optimism or pes-
simism, either 1960s modernization theory or early-twentieth-century “realist” criticism of progressive democratic theory. The blend gives The Search for Order much of its distinctive flavor.

Wiebe’s hesitation to condemn reflected, I think, his own generous spirit. He didn’t like to moralize. But just as much it reflected his sense of modernity’s inevitability. To rail against the new was beside the point, and it got in the way of securing order as well. Just as much as Max Weber, Wiebe saw us trapped in the “iron cage” and, if his words weren’t as brutal or as frank as Weber’s, they still hinted at an “icy darkness” laying ahead of us all. After 1907, Wiebe wrote, the “movements for control remained much cooler—more calculated—for a much longer period. The greater emphasis on enticements and compromises, showed a much defter hand, as if Machiavelli had taken the helm from Savonarola” (p. 209).

At the same time, however, Wiebe’s hesitancy about judging blocked an even icier interpretation of his own material. I find The Search for Order a darker, more nihilistic portrait of modernity than Wiebe was willing to claim. In fact, I think it reads even darker today than when it was first published. It is a picture of modernity closed in on itself, incapable of reflecting on its mission. Wiebe’s portrait very logically leads to the conclusion that the “end of history” had arrived, but unlike Hegel’s, an end that could promise only order instead of freedom.

For Wiebe, bureaucratic thinking was critical to modernization. This orientation, as Wiebe portrayed it, broke all thinking into pieces, compartmentalizing social problems the better to treat each in a manageable fashion. Every issue became part of a “complex social technology,” Wiebe wrote. Change was no longer seen as evolutionary but as the perpetual “interaction and adjustment” of the different pieces of the puzzle (p. 146). The continuous management of problems replaced thinking about the next stage of history. In The Search for Order, bureaucratic thinking replaces evolutionary thought (pp. 145–63).

Reinhart Koselleck has suggested that the notion of a modern age first appeared when expectations drifted beyond experience. Modernity, in other words, began when people wanted more than they could get. For Koselleck, the decline of eschatological history between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries was matched by the rise of various philosophies of history. The latter were critical to the emergence of modernity. Their talk of the “goal of history,” of human “progress,” of the material and spiritual “improvement” of the world—all created horizons of expectation reaching past lived experience.26

But Koselleck also pointed out a second type of posteschatological thinking about the future. This he calls “rational prognosis,” tracing its origins back to Machiavelli and Guicciardini. It refers to the effort to manage problems as
they arise. It is the "delicate art of political calculation." Unlike philosophies of history with their long-term projections, political calculation does not look beyond the most immediate future. Its job is to neutralize the unexpected. Rational prognosis, in other words, tries to contain the future instead of opening up its possibilities.²⁷

Rational prognosis, bound so close to actual experience, can potentially black out any distant expectations opened up by the philosophy of history. This is exactly what happens in The Search for Order: Wiebe presents a picture of evolutionary theory being replaced by bureaucratic thinking that is a pure form of political calculus, the constant adjustment to new forces, an effort to negotiate some check on the potential "chaos" of indeterminacy.

The result, however, if pursued to its logical conclusion, was to bind all thinking to the present. There was no room for dreaming in Wiebe’s modernity; all residual idealism was treated with Lippmannian cynicism.²⁸ For Wiebe, modernization meant the perpetual work of control. By arguing that idealism had to disappear, replaced by constant political calculation, Wiebe’s modernization reunited lived experience with human expectations. By assuming that this would succeed, Wiebe in effect suggested an end to history.²⁹

For Wiebe, bureaucratic thinking was the mechanism for order, the way to reconcile the ideal to the real. But if Wiebe’s analysis was right, bureaucratic thinking would serve another purpose, one he did not explore. It would generate an institutionalized amnesia. There would be no way to orient oneself in time, something that Koselleck has shown to be central to modernity’s sense of progress. One would be precluded, in other words, from seeing other ways of being.

Moreover, with serious thinking broken up into the scattered pieces of the specialists, even a coherent snapshot of the current state of things would be gone. If Wiebe was right, and instrumental thinking so thoroughly dominated, there would be no thought that tried to bore into the essence of modernity. We would be reduced to thinking about how things might be used instead of looking at what they were. Not only would other ways of being be concealed, but we would not even know it.³⁰

This would be modernity triumphant, but without any guiding faith. Here the Lippmann-like cynicism with which Wiebe treated public references to "the people" or "rational public" was especially chilling, suggesting that the civic language expressing "faith" in the regime was not to be taken seriously. Instead of a faith in democracy that oriented us to the future, "faith" for Wiebe had become a form of false consciousness, a way of evading any confrontation with what we actually had become (see esp. pp. 162–63). Bureaucratic thinking, the success of modernity, the end of history—all prove to be a form of nihilism.
Here too contrasts with Hegel are illuminating. Like Wiebe, Hegel saw what is now called “state-building” as critical to the “solution” to history. Like Wiebe, Hegel was skeptical of easy references to “the people.” And just as Wiebe found the new middle class the catalyst for order, Hegel argued that the civil servant was the key to modernity. For both Wiebe and Hegel, the civil servant marked the end of history.

Yet there were differences. To Hegel, the civil servant was important because he was a member of the universal class. Free from any position in the social struggle, the civil servant would tirelessly work toward the good of the whole. Such heady and naive optimism was gone from Wiebe. Indeed, a precondition for Wiebe’s modernity is to disconnect thinking from any notion of totality, to accept interest-group negotiation as standard practice, and to treat discrete social problems in functional terms. Wiebe’s civil servants do not tirelessly work to realize the freedom of citizens, do not reconcile the subjective and the objective. Their historical mission is to maintain order and sever any need for this reconciliation. They manage the world. And by turning thought into “techniques of constant watchfulness and mechanisms of continuous management” (p. 145), they closed off the possibility of even raising “the present age” as a category to be explored.

It is then not surprising that none of the protagonists in The Search for Order can grasp the new system emerging, that neither leaders nor followers can see what is going on. Their very mode of thinking would preclude it. The end of history owes its emergence not to a higher stage of consciousness, as Hegel thought, where the whole can be surveyed, but to an institutionalized amnesia, where a whole can’t even be imagined.

Yet if nihilism runs through The Search for Order, it also suggests how Wiebe overstated his case. Wiebe’s own account of the triumph of bureaucratic thinking is contradicted by The Search for Order itself. Wiebe argued that modern social thought would be content with subdividing social analysis into discrete parts. But The Search for Order, rooted in an evolutionary philosophy of history, does not do this at all. It is a broad sweep of a whole civilization. Management is never enough, the need to understand, to place oneself in a frame, is just as important. And it is just this enframing that The Search for Order was meant to provide. Readers turn to the book not to find aid in managing any discrete part of the “social technology,” but to get a broad sense of how the world they live in was put together. They turn to it, in other words, to help make sense of their lives.

Considering how people make sense of their lives might have led Wiebe in directions he did not take. The histories of friendship, love, family, neighborhood, work—indeed, of all those face-to-face practices by which people orient themselves in the daily world—were not addressed in The Search for
Order. Wiebe might have explored how bureaucratic systems corrupted these lifeworlds. He might have looked at the ways that people manipulated the system to their own ends. Or he might have seen bureaucratic systems as imperfectly correcting the brutalities of daily life. But Wiebe turned down none of these avenues. So preoccupied was he with the system-building itself that he ignored the ways that the system interacted with human beings.

Nor did Wiebe explore alternatives to order. Entrepreneurial thinking, still a potent force in American culture, celebrates a modernization valuing risk over routine. Christopher Lasch has uncovered a whole tradition of thinking condemning the modern concept of progress and substituting a religious sense of "hope" or "redemption" to look to the future. And postmodern writers champion "play," the transgression of established borders, hoping to articulate a means of raising possibilities in a manner different from the philosophy of history.

But we need not turn to formal social thought to find alternatives to order. Every time someone compulsively drops a couple of hundred into the slots at Reno, or two people in a fit of lust have sex in the back seat of a car (sans protection), or a man or woman gets drunk and burns a tattoo into their skin—there the stochastic, the passionate, and the impulsive are in revolt against comfortable routine. Every Sal and Dean and Thelma and Louise on the road is engaged in what might be called a search for disorder. This too has a history, although most historians, so close to the genteel end of the middle class, do not generally think about such things. But they are there. There are more things in the world than order. And perhaps we can thank God for it.

The brilliance of The Search for Order was its synthesis. But for me the most engaging part of the book a generation after its publication is Wiebe's confrontation with modernity. Wiebe's modernization theory had a bitterness in it, verging on a film noir version. In the more optimistic modernization theory, Henry Fonda would have been cast as the Great Progressive Hero. Wiebe, I like to think, would have argued for Robert Mitchum.

I find much to commend in this picture. When reflecting on the cynicism that dominates our own politics, on the sense of futility that "the people" have about the system, on almost everyone's inability to take political rhetoric seriously, and on the role that contemporary mass communication plays in all this with its spin-doctors, network analysts, and correspondents, I still see Wiebe as definitely onto something.

And if The Search for Order's hints of an unavoidable modernity seem naive twenty-five years later, they strike me as no more or less naive than contemporary manifestoes for research evoking agency or everyday resistance. In The Search for Order there are details that were wrong, important questions not pursued. No doubt about it, the book would be written differently today.
Still, each time we confront some part of the “system” that seems to act stupidly or cruelly (as we all do), remember, Wiebe was talking about order, not happiness. And that, after twenty-five years, is exactly what continues to give the book its bite. Think of The Search for Order as a very gentle man confronting some very dark forces.


4. Edward Shils’s essays are collected in Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology (1975); Search for Order, p. 37.


6. See, for example, Black, Dynamics, p. 1.


11. For an example of skepticism toward nineteenth-century predecessors, see Parsons, Societies, p. 115. Parsons, of course, developed his theory as a “voluntaristic” alternative to Marx. At the same time, he thought “democracy” was an “evolutionary universal”—see Parsons, “Evolutionary Universals.” Jeffrey Alexander points out that criticism of Parsons often comes from two quite opposite directions. One group claims that Parsons holds an unrealistic form of voluntarism, the other that Parsons is a voluntarist in name only while a determinist in practice. Alexander argues that the roots of these criticisms lie in the am-

For another good example of this tension between agency and determinism, see H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness in Society (1958), pp. 330–35, where Hughes praises Max Weber's social theory for salvaging a modified place for will while noting a couple of pages away that Weber thought we were trapped in the "iron cage" of modernity. Hughes relied heavily on Parsons for his interpretation of Weber.

12. For another example, see p. 165, where society is personified in the same fashion: "Most of them [the new middle class] lived and worked in the midst of modern society and accepting its major thrust drew both their inspiration and their programs from its peculiar traits." Here again the use of "its" gives something called "society" the means to act; middle-class reformers do not shape change but succeed by adjusting themselves to the "thrust" of society.


14. For an exceptionally clear example of this, see the discussion of the "inhumanity and suppression" of labor during and after World War I (p. 301).


20. Lippmann argued that the modern "common will" was created not by democratic deliberation that generated agreement on a common aim, but by elites manipulating symbols that were so vague that people with very different aims would interpret them to suit their own "realities"—Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (1922), pp. 125–58; compare with The Search for Order, pp. 156–59, 162–63, 293–94, 296, 297.

21. For some examples, see The Search for Order, pp. 55, 287, 301.

22. I am excluding here, of course, references made to the Democratic party.

23. For democracy, democrat, or democratic used in association with earlier practices or ideas, see p. xii, 2, 36, 37, 91, 100, 113, 167; used in direct contrast to bureaucratic order, see pp. 60, 74, 152, 174; used to describe the phoniness of old ideals under the impact of modern forces, see pp. 38, 77, 227; used to describe the progressives' confusion of "democracy" with order, see pp. 155, 161.

The only place that Wiebe used the term democracy in connection with "modern" forces was when describing the attitudes of urban reformers like Frederic Howe or Tom Johnson. Even here, however, Wiebe saw a gap between attitude and action. Once in office, this group lost touch with the "people" they were supposed to represent—see pp. 132, 142, 167, 176, 196, 212–13. On p. 170 Wiebe used community in conjunction with these reformers.


27. Ibid., pp. 12–16.


29. I use the phrase "end of history" not to mean that nothing more will happen, but that there is no further "stage" of history, no new horizons that will appear. Future events then are the working out of the details of this final stage of history. This is Hegel's meaning of
the phrase. For a recent argument that no more advanced stages of history will appear, an argument made in the wake of communism’s collapse (and paying homage to modernization theory as a flawed precursor), see Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (1992).


33. This is a theme of some of the best feminist scholarship. For example, Linda Gordon, Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence (1988).

34. Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom (1962).

35. Lasch, The True and Only Heaven.