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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Risking Reform

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Abstract

In the annual presidential address to the American Society of Church History (ASCH), Jonathan Ebel reflects on both the Depression-era meetings of the society and the efforts of agricultural economist Harry Drobish and his team of reformers in 1930s California. Ebel uses this framing of the ASCH meetings nine decades ago and Drobish's project to consider those who risk reform and he argues that a lesson the ASCH of today can take from the example of Drobish is that, even if things can go wrong, a tremendous amount of good can come from engaged action. Ebel asks the society's members to consider how hindsight can benefit them by encouraging them to not be silent or disengaged as individuals, and to think creatively about when and how their work resonates in and is relevant to the current social–political moment.

Keywords: reform; dust bowl; new deal; California; crisis

Our theme for this meeting has been hindsight. Esther's foresight in choosing the theme and in naming its ambivalence in the call for papers is to be commended. It has made for a remarkable program. Hindsight is close to all of our hearts. It is, in its plain sense, what we do for a living. We look back. We narrate and re-narrate. We attempt to explain, to find meaning. In this talk I want to practice some hindsight while also suggesting that we might benefit from trying to loosen hindsight's grip on us, not so much as historians but as civic actors. This seems an especially important goal in a technological realm where the horizons of hindsight have been drawn impossibly close, where, as Anthea Butler underscored so powerfully in her presidential address last year, first drafts of history are tweeted and re-tweeted instantaneously, and where momentary wit so often passes as wisdom. In loosening hindsight's grip we can perhaps make room for the necessary practice of foresight and for a bit more grace toward those who risk it.

The twenty-eighth annual meeting of the American Society of Church History (ASCH) took place at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. on December 27–28, 1934. The meeting consisted of three sessions of scholarship and, God be praised, a business meeting. The first session was held jointly with both the American Historical Association (AHA) and the American Catholic Historical

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Association, and centered on the topic of "The Development of Religious Liberty in Colonial America." It featured papers from Judge J. Moss Ives of Danbury, Connecticut, Perry Miller of Harvard University, and William Warren Sweet of the University of Chicago. The next session, attended by fifty-two members and guests, bore the title, "A Century of Progress in Historical Method," and included papers titled "The Legacy of Schleiermacher," "The Great Trio of 1835," and "At the End of the Century." The minutes of the meeting note that the session concluded with "lively discussion."

Roughly half of the audience that gathered to take in the papers stayed on for dinner and the business meeting, at which society president Frederick William Loetscher gave a talk on "St. Augustine's Conception of the State," and the society voted, among other things, to meet with the AHA in New York City the following year.

It seems to have been a successful meeting at the Mayflower Hotel in December of 1934. Some of the brightest minds in the field presented papers. Discussion was lively. The finances of the society looked solid. Subscriptions to the journal were on the rise. And, for better and for worse, the focus of the society was on the work of the society. There is no indication anywhere in the minutes that participants took note of, much less attempted to think through, the poverty, the unemployment, the dispossession, and the starvation then affecting large swaths of the country's population.

Two thousand-six hundred miles away from the Mayflower Hotel, here in California, the harsh realities of the Great Depression were determining the work and shaping the world of a man named Harry Drobish. Drobish was an Illinois-born agricultural economist and was then serving as the head of rural rehabilitation for California's emergency relief administration. He had lived in California since 1905, studied at Occidental College and the University of California, Berkeley, and eventually owned and managed olive groves with his wife Faith. Early in his career, Drobish traveled the state extensively as an employee of the University of California's agricultural extension program.

Harry Drobish knew agriculture as a subject of study and as a practice. He knew about California's factories in the field(s). He was aware of the influx of mostly-white migrants from the Great Plains and the desperate circumstances that shaped their daily realities. He had seen first-hand not only the exploitative and dehumanizing labor practices of California growers, but also the abject state of housing and sanitation for workers. Drobish's pictures from Kern County, California show the makeshift shelters that migrants built and that appalled settled locals, the rudimentary and decrepit structures that some growers provided, and the filth that characterized much of migrant life. Most residents of California's agricultural interior resented the dirt and the bodies on which it accumulated. Until those bodies were white, few did anything to alleviate it.

In late 1934 and early 1935, Harry Drobish was in the process of imagining a better way of housing and acting toward migrants. He envisioned and then proposed a series of migratory farm labor camps to house the working men, women, and children scratching out a living as they followed the harvests and begged for work. An internal document from his office described the program, "the camps will provide for minimum facilities necessary to health and decency; healthful camp sites, pure water in pipes, hot and cold showers and laundry facilities, garbage disposal, and emergency hospitalization." He secured funding from the Resettlement Administration and from the California State Emergency Relief Administration to build the first two camps, at Marysville and Arvin, and then to expand the camp network along the most heavily trafficked migrant routes.

The construction of these camps was a significant achievement. The idea of housing migrants faced intense local opposition. Once built, the camps were the focus of

persistent hostility from growers and aroused a degree of suspicion from the migrants themselves. Drobish, too, had doubts. He had loftier goals for the reform of California agriculture and knew that some of his colleagues did as well. He wrote about the situation in some personal notes from 1935 or early 1936.

> Under circumstances, the man who has definite convictions about what constitutes a successful [program] has one of two alternatives. Agree with the superiors and say yes yes and sacrifice your own soul and the respect of your friends in agriculture // or try to modify the program and eventually lose one's goal to meet the needs as you see them. The latter course was decided upon. The result – the migrant camp program . . . was started . . . meeting a recognized need of the farms needing labor and of the homeless laborers needing a place to live.

The effort, Drobish was saying, was not what he had envisioned. He had faced a choice: either give up entirely on the program and its possible benefits for migrants, or scale it back such that it would help some, not all migrants, and also be useful to growers. One can almost hear him asking how hindsight would judge him, explaining his choices to some future historian.

Doubts aside, the program thrived. In part due to the expert management of a man named Tom Collins, and in part because Drobish had seen correctly that the need was great and enduring. Two camps became four, became nine, became fifteen. They were not all full all of the time – that's how it often works with migrating labor forces – but migrants came through the gates ahead of local harvests, established temporary homes, experienced community, and often stayed on after the harvest to look for work. One camp resident reflected, "We have found the conditions here a godsend to poor migrating needful travelers for which we are grateful to the federal government as well as the as the citizens of California."

Roughly five years after the migratory farm labor camp program was established in California, the ASCH gathered again at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., this time for its thirty-third annual meeting. There were, again, three sessions of scholarship and a business meeting. President Charles Lyttle delivered his address on the "Historical Bases of Rome's Conflict with Freemasonry." Roland Bainton of Yale took over as president of the society. The meeting hit a snag on Friday morning when the Jefferson Room, in which the day's sessions were supposed to take place, was found to be double-booked. But all was resolved by 10 am, and in the meeting's final session, a scholar by the name of John C. Wenger of Goshen College presented a paper titled "Pilgram Marpeck: Tyrolese Engineer and Anabaptist Elder," which makes me wish I could have been there.

Although the nation was five years further along in the Depression and the situation had not improved for many of California's agricultural workers, and though John Steinbeck had drawn nationwide attention to the migrant crisis with *The Grapes of Wrath*, the official account of the meeting shows no evidence of concern for these realities, for the four-month-old war in Europe, or the ways that Axis powers were wielding power within and beyond their borders. The closest thing to a display of interest in current events was a paper titled "Social Gospel and the Rise of Social Work in America" presented to a lightly attended Thursday morning session by Raymond Hightower of Kalamazoo College.

Back across the country, the managers of California's migrant camps continued to provide displaced and impoverished workers with secure spaces, clean water, nursery school services, and a measure of stability. All the while the reformers were also

confronting camp residents with a program of catechesis about modern life, how to keep house properly, how to use modern bathrooms, the importance of community involvement, the value of a trained medical professional. However, inside the migrant camp in Indio, California in 1939, camp manager Ray Mork was growing weary of the struggle. He wrote a piece for the camp newspaper, *The Covered Wagon News*, addressing one family's persistent violations of domestic cleanliness standards. He titled it "Filthy Human Beings."

> I can't understand a family that don't have self-respect enough to keep a small platform clean. There is no mincing words with people so darn lazy. In the navy, if one of the sailors wouldn't keep clean, we would put him under the shower and scrub him with sand and a scrub brush. Rather harsh treatment, but it was effective. Only thing I can do here is speak to them, which I really hate to do in such a personal thing, but we really cannot tolerate filth with all the hot water there is available.

Not an especially understanding approach to the problem, but Ray Mork felt it important to set a standard for cleanliness within the camp and to use social pressure to encourage residents to conform. If they chose not to clean up and stay clean, the camp council – consisting of migrants elected by other migrants – could and would ask them to leave. A secure place in the camp community required both a small monthly fee, which could be worked off in the camp, and the embodiment of the camp's teachings about domesticity, cleanliness, and social relations.

The ASCH proceedings at the Mayflower Hotel in 1934 and 1939 and the work going on in California's migratory farm labor camps in those same years were very different enterprises. At the former, members of our professional society were engaged in the study and discussion of church history, from Augustine to the Social Gospel. They were presenting research, creating knowledge, learning from each other, and engaging critically with new scholarship in pursuit of the truth. Official accounts of the meetings emphasize that discussion was "lively" and "spirited," and that participation levels were high. The ASCH of these Depression-era meetings is a society clear in its purpose and firm in its footing.

Out in California, reformers in the camps were concerned with what Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange termed "human erosion," the disintegration of communities, the wearing down of people. Writing in *American Exodus: An Account of Human Erosion* in 1939, Taylor described what happened when forces too strong to *withstand* forced people to migrate, "Cut from the land by illness, driven to the road by poverty, they walk from county to county in search of the meager security of relief."[1] The searching, the movement, and the myriad destinations added up to human erosion because volition was largely irrelevant. *Toward Farm Security*, a 1942 handbook for Farm Security Administration employees, used the phrase "human erosion" in a more personal, diagnostic sense. "These are the common symptoms of human erosion: Poor housing, inadequate and insufficient food; poor health; lack of educational opportunities; and a loss of hope and faith bred of despair." The teleology here is worth noting. Erosion is a condition that manifests in this litany of losses, it is not the losses that bring on erosion. The camps both served as retaining walls against the currents pulling people into

[1]Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange, *American Exodus: An Account of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939), 64.

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unwanted situations and as mission sites for addressing interior erosion, whatever its sources. It was humanitarian work; it was anthropological work, and it was catechetical work aimed at cultural and religious change.

My point in juxtaposing these starkly different scenes from the 1930s is not to shame Perry Miller and William Warren Sweet, much less the ASCH, for not using the annual meeting as a platform to consider either structural reforms or direct interventions into crumbling lives. The society's members were *not* social reformers by profession. And, much like us, their *lives* and *interests* and *sympathies* extended well beyond the program of the annual meeting. Does our program this year reflect Melissa Borja's work for immigration justice and against Asian American and Pacific Islander hate, the fullness of Lloyd Barba's engagements with the sanctuary movement, Lerone Martin's involvement with community organizers in Ferguson, Missouri, Lynne Gerber's research and activism in LGBTQ-affirming congregations in this city, Kristy Nabhan-Warren's work to converse across political divides in Iowa? Two days in December or four days in January do not do justice to the fullness of their (or our) commitments.

I am, rather, interested in considering these moments and the stories within them together for the hope that they might help us cultivate in these anxious, unsettled times; what they might teach us about the promise and the limits of trying to improve this professional society and of trying to improve society more broadly. In these moments we see two types of engagement, two modes of encountering and understanding the world that the world desperately needed then and that we desperately need now. Hindsight and foresight. Consideration and reform. Reflection and action. To be clear, I locate hindsight, consideration, and reflection within *our* professional realm; foresight, reform, and action among those *reformers* for whom Drobish serves as an example. These are, of course, not rigid separations, but they seem both real and useful.

Looking back on the ASCH annual meetings of 1934 and 1939, we see much that is familiar and legible to us. We see scholars whose work still matters in the discipline, even if it matters differently today than it did before. We see partnerships among associations that were valuable then and remain so now. We see a long tradition of light attendance at morning sessions and business meetings. We also can see that the work of our profession and of our society has progressed. Nine decades later, our meeting's program demonstrates that the way that we think about and practice our craft is broader and more capacious today than it was then. From what I have seen in the program and in the sessions through the first three days of this meeting, we are working toward a balance between the deep archival work that has long defined us (while privileging certain kinds of knowledge) and other equally important ways of doing history. We have also grown as a society. Our program stretches over parts of four days, not two. Instead of three sessions and a total of nine papers, we have sixty sessions and nearly 160. Thanks to the foresight of those who went before us and the balance of foresight and hindsight shown by leadership in recent years, we have excellent, creative, critical, generous scholars up and down our ranks. Although still and always a work in progress, we are demonstrably more diverse, and therefore stronger, at every level and in nearly every way than the ASCH of 1934 and 1939. Those ASCH meetings from the 1930s were likely led by middle-aged, balding, white men in suits and bow ties. I am not wearing a bow tie.

Okay. Bad example.

My point is that there is no reasonable measure by which someone can argue that this society is not thriving. And I guess that what thrills me most about this trajectory,

is that we have followed it to this place in spite of the general limitations of foresight, of hindsight, of all human sight. Our imperfect collective, led by and comprising imperfect but dedicated people, has grown, has become more diverse, and has created amazing scholarship year after year. I find great hope in this. Great hope and great inspiration.

The work of someone like Harry Drobish is less familiar to most, though not all of us. Although we are educators and struggle against erosion of many types in our classrooms and communities, most of us are not social reformers or activists. And unlike the deep history and clear legacies of the ASCH, the story of Harry Drobish and his team of reformers is more ambivalent. It would be hard to argue that their project took root and grew in ways similar to ours; that it adapted and flourished beyond the racial specificities of the Dust Bowl migration. Some of those who were involved in camp management went on to careers in labor organization and environmental history, but the long-term influence of their program on the problem of housing for California's poorest is arguable, at best.

But as someone who has made a career on the ASCH side of things and loves the work of the society, I want to put in a word today for those who risk reform. And I want to do this by circling back on Harry Drobish and Ray Mork and the lessons that emerge from their words about the project of reforming migrants. Harry Drobish hoped to stop the slide into premodern living that he saw going on around him among unhoused and inadequately housed mostly white migrants. He hoped to convert them to ways of living in and understanding the world that were more solid, more sound, less likely to erode. He believed that modern approaches to home management, sanitation and hygiene, community life, knowledge production, medical care, and understanding and interacting with the divine formed a firm foundation for migrants to build their lives on.

And so he breathed life into this camp program. He did so aware that the problem was bigger than the solution. He did so aware that the solution was imperfect and would likely grow more imperfect in the implementation. He was right about both of these things. But he and many of the people involved in the program from beginning to end went about the work passionately, aware both of the importance of the fundamentals of their task and the privilege of being able to do it. The most famous and effective of the camp managers, Tom Collins, wrote the following in a weekly report filed in the summer of 1936. "To those of us fortunate enough to be working with these people, we know our Administration as 'Resettlement.' To those with whom we work, it is not 'Resettlement,' it is re-birth, re-living, the re-building of hope . . . it is also the rehumanizing of neglected children so long cast adrift on the ditch banks of prairies to wallow around in in *human* and *inhumane* conditions."

Did exploitation of the poor and the migrant end because of their work? Were all of those who came into a government camp in California restored according to the program's goals, or restored at all? No. Did the women and men carrying out the New Deal program of reform have their flaws and indelicacies? Were they often blinded by differences in race, ethnicity, and religious commitment? Were they fairly consistently condescending toward the forms of Protestantism that the migrants favored? Yes, they were. It is important to note these limitations, to think about the injustices that lasted well beyond the camp program, and to think about the ways that race shaped the beginnings and the goals of the program.

But right now, I'm less interested in the flaws that our hindsight makes all the more glaring, than in the fact of action through which those flaws became knowable to us. Harry Drobish and Tom Collins, Millie Delp and Opal Butts, Fred Ross and Ray

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Mork, saw human erosion happening, believed that it would lead to major consequences if left unchecked, and decided to do what they could to help people and to help society in a direct and physical way. The system that they worked for and worked in was, as Drobish himself noted, a compromise. It did not attempt a complete reimagining of California agriculture. It did not alleviate the exploitative practices at its core. Plenty of voices, including Drobish's own, found fault with this compromise. Wasn't he selling out to industrial agriculture, conceding that their model worked? Wasn't he, in fact, providing a subsidy to growers by housing their workers and giving them modern systems of sanitation, clean spaces to live in, and a sense of community, all on the government's dime? However one chooses to answer these questions, the fact is that – according to Drobish – the compromise enabled the reform, that adapting to the possible allowed this program to live and to benefit migrants throughout California's agricultural interior. (As far as I have been able to determine, though the camps were technically open to people of all races, very few people of color came through the gates.)

This was an imperfect intervention. And I am interested in how it might provoke us, from its imperfections and from its compromises, to think about engaging the crises that surround us today. After all, erosion is everywhere. Human erosion. Political erosion. Discursive erosion. Empathic erosion.

The legacy of Drobish and his reformers is evident in this city and, I think, gives us a glimpse both of what it looks like to be a reformer today and how we might be of use, if we choose. Two recent articles by Nathan Heller about the city of San Francisco are, I think, illuminating and maybe even inspiring in this regard. Both were published in the *New Yorker*. One is a look at the lives of unhoused people in the city. The other, published just a few months ago, looks at San Francisco's civic culture, particularly when it comes to confronting and solving problems. The first piece seeks at once to humanize and contextualize the women, men, and children living on San Francisco's streets and to describe the efforts – some successful, some not – to assist them and to place them in permanent housing. As Heller weaves together stories of those living unhoused and those committed to providing them with assistance, he also makes clear that the situation in San Francisco arises both from national-level forces and from some very local circumstances, among them a dramatic shortage of shelter beds.

And, you know, it turns out that Harry Drobish and his people had more than a few things right. It really can make a difference to place someone in housing that is stable and allows them to get their bearings; it really can help someone to be able to clean themselves regularly; it really can help someone to feel themselves part of a community. It is also important, it turns out, to examine our own assumptions about domesticity and, to borrow Tom Tweed's term "dwelling." Heller's article emphasizes, as Drobish did, "that every structural problem is a problem of *human* structures. In terms of survival, there is nothing mortifying about camping on a sunny street corner, just as there's nothing mortifying about camping in Big Sur. Within the architecture of a culture, though, one represents a lack of access and provision. When society speaks of people 'on the streets,' then, it's trying to locate its borders of belonging: whom as a community, small or large, we carry as our own, and who remains beyond the boundaries of our care."

The second of Heller's articles emerged from and engages with national media depictions of San Francisco as the dystopian hell hole to which progressivism inevitably leads, exhibit A for those making money and political hay off of nightly sham prosecutions of liberal governance. Heller's story is clear-eyed when it comes to the problems in the city, to frustrations and tensions among competing interests, and to the wrong turns

and misjudgments that have happened in the working out of city policy. But the story that he tells is not one of civic or human erosion, but of diverse constituencies working to improve the city and of the many ways that narratives of San Francisco's brokenness miss (a) the truth, and (b) the stories of innovation and collaboration and compromise that are San Francisco-specific, but could also serve as models and as inspiration for other cities trying to balance economic vitality with compassion, growth with justice. Quoting Heller again, "If the struggle of San Francisco's downtown is the struggle of the American urban dream – how to be a global city and a small, authentic town at the same time – the solution rests with those who can build bridges between structures of power and grassroots enterprise." One of his subjects put it differently, "The only solution that's a real solution is a solution in which everyone is involved."

Again, I would say in hindsight that Drobish had a lot right. As Heller explains things, the most dynamic and successful programs are those that serve the needs of multiple parties. One example of this is an effort, born of pandemic-era financial and food instability. Called SF New Deal, this effort used public and private funds to buy meals from struggling restaurants to feed the city's hungry. Some in the city who needed food were able to eat. Some of the city's restaurants were kept solvent. And unlike Drobish's corner of the New Deal, which was overwhelmingly male and white, SF New Deal reflects the diversity of this city and of this country. Of twenty-four directors and staff members, fourteen are people of color and seventeen are women. The shared virtue of those who worked with Drobish, and the virtue of those working in San Francisco today to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the vulnerable, and show compassion to those who are suffering, is the willingness to risk foresight, to risk reform.

We are meeting in a city built on the ancestral lands of the Ramaytush Ohlone and we pay our respects to their elders, past, present, and future. We are meeting in a city that has a long history of displacement and an equally long history of struggling to see the displaced and to address the causes and consequences of displacement. We are meeting in a city run by London Breed, an African American woman whose leadership, though controversial and soon-to-be contested, has guided San Francisco for six years and through unprecedented challenges.

We are meeting not far from Harry Drobish's Depression-era office and in the middle of an on-going crisis of unhoused people. I don't know what Drobish and his fellow travelers in the migratory farm labor camp program would think if they walked around San Francisco today. Would they, with the benefit of hindsight, concede that their efforts had been for naught? Would they regret the resources – intellectual, emotional, financial – that they invested in bringing hope to the downtrodden? I really, really hope not. Because while they did not bring about lasting systemic change, and often struggled to see past their own prejudices, they did help people. They spread empathy. They forged connections. They helped shape futures. And they were able to do these things because they acted.

We can. We should. I did look back on the work of Harry Drobish and his companions with a critical eye. But the lesson of my book and of Drobish's program is not that reform efforts are bad and that action on behalf of the impoverished and marginalized or oppressed is doomed to fail, or is so shot through with oppression that it can only ever do equal parts harm and good. The lesson, I believe, is that a tremendous amount of good can come from engaged action, that people can be uplifted, that lives can be saved. And that things will go wrong. That people will overreach, misunderstand each other, lose sight of the most basic principles in pursuit of a more rapid, dramatic outcome.

I do not think that it is the responsibility of the ASCH to propose solutions to the crisis of unhoused people or to develop an official position on it. But hindsight can benefit us by encouraging us to not be silent or disengaged as individuals, and to think creatively about when and how our work resonates in and is relevant to this social–political moment.

Also, while we think about efforts to shore up the eroding world, we do very well to continue to support ASCH and the retaining walls that our members are building every day. Then and now our society provides a model for acting against many types of political and social erosion: continuing to do our work, continuing to pursue and deepen knowledge of the history of Christianity globally and in North America, continuing to build and model "lively conversation," continuing to keep our society and our classrooms open to a wide range of voices. To the extent that erosion has come about through political hackery and willful misrepresentation of facts, of histories, of words, this thing that we are doing here this weekend is necessary to a forceful, effective counter-argument.

The darker forces of history feel especially close at our heels right now. The promise of progress seems especially faint. But the past and the present of this city, this state, and our professional association offer both ample encouragement and valuable cautionary notes. As we finish this meeting and look forward to the next two; as we open the book on a new year – an election year – and look into it with some degree of fear and trembling; as we look around us in our communities and on our campuses, I hope that more of us will take Lerone and Melissa, Lloyd, Lynn, and Kristy as our inspiration, that we will let our approach to the world be informed by modesty and humility, but governed by hope for positive change, that we will work to become as adept at practicing foresight as we are at practicing hindsight.

Thanks.

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