

1969

## Henry Adams' The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma Study Guide

Steven Alan Samson  
*Liberty University*, [ssamson@liberty.edu](mailto:ssamson@liberty.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov\\_fac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs)



Part of the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Samson, Steven Alan, "Henry Adams' The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma Study Guide" (1969). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 289.  
[https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov\\_fac\\_pubs/289](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs/289)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Helms School of Government at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu).

Steve Samson  
American Political Thought

"The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma"  
by Henry Adams

This book is built around an unfinished manuscript which Henry Adams left at his death. Most relevant to this course is Brooks Adams' essay showing the place of the two brothers in this distinguished American family, and its essential unity of thought. In it he tries to parallel the development of Henry's thought with that of his grandfather, John Quincy Adams. It is an attempt to show the effect that a decaying democratic ideology had on an uncommon family progressively victimized by it. The brothers wrote as "displaced intellectuals of patrician descent who sought desperately to fathom the meaning of the changes that displaced them---" It is my purpose to touch on some aspects of Henry's thought and on Brooks' understanding of his grandfather.

The major theme of his book is the degradation of vital energy in society. Henry wrote in the period of scientific history, and should be judged in this light. He posited that decline and fall, rather than progress, was the law of evolution, however. This he saw demonstrated in Kelvin's second law of Thermodynamics, or law of entropy-- "that mechanical energy was constantly being expended without possibility of restoration". In "The Rule of Phase", Henry tried to show that man is governed by laws of physics, and that society was in the process of decline toward motionless equilibrium. Like Marx, Hegel and others, he was an historical determinist--with him it was a surrogate Calvinism. But he doubted the utility of science as a means of rationally ordering the universe. On the contrary: advances in technology also generated forces of greed and mediocrity, symbolized in the figure of Andrew Jackson. Brooks tries to show his grandfather as a democratic idealist and one of the great scientific minds of his age who failed in his

effort to see his plan for internal development put into effect because of these popular forces.

The Presidency was the great tragedy of John Quincy's life. He accomplished more as a diplomat and a legislator--in the first by making a place for America among the nations of the world, and later, by fighting to advance human rights and the cause of science. His major purpose was to carry out Washington's vision of a powerful American society, linked by a series of highways converging on the site of the future capital. Prominent in this plan was a canal to link the Potomac with the Ohio and strengthen the bonds with the west. Even at that time sharp cleavages were evident north and south of that line, and along the Alleghenies. Washington feared that the western territory would gravitate toward the Gulf along the grade of the watershed; at that time Louisiana was in French hands. Industrial development in the area of the converging highways would enable federal leaders to consolidate a vast American community from which slavery could also be eliminated. If Virginia could only be industrialized, slavery would cease to pay and it could be abolished. It was a curse that degraded the population and condemned the community to agriculture and relative poverty.

Washington wanted to develop a national university at the heart of the capital, for this was to be the fountainhead from which to develop the American Dream. But as President, he had to set aside his plans, as he was interdicted from private speculations. He could not arouse Congress to construct the all-important canal which more than anything one thing was needed to unify the economy. These plans were subsequently put off for another generation while John Quincy Adams was in the diplomatic service. In the meantime, the invention of the cotton gin had made slave breeding a profitable enterprise for Virginia. He came to see that not all that science produced was socially progressive. After an unproductive presidency he resolutely opposed Jackson's abandonment

of internal improvements and giving away of the bountiful public lands, which helped to perpetuate slavery. Speculators and land-jobbers grew wealthy with the spread of railways. Such was the direction science was leading. According to Brooks,

"Education stimulated the desire for wealth, and the desire for wealth reacted on applied science. And it was precisely here that Mr. Adams fell a victim to that fallacy which underlies the whole theory of modern democracy—that it is possible by education to stimulate the selfish instinct of competition, which demands that each man should strive to better himself at the cost of his neighbor, so as to coincide with the moral principle that all should labor for the common good." (78-9)

Adams was a witness to the levelling effect of the Democratic Law of Averages which, it seems to me, works toward the same result as the Law of Diminishing Dictators does in the Soviet Union, though for different reasons. My major criticism of this conception is that the Adams brothers see it as a steady process. If it were, we would have already entered the final phase: that of motionless equilibrium, which ~~he~~ <sup>Henry</sup> predicted would occur around 1921. Neither took cognizance of the galvanizing effect of crises such as world wars and economic upheavals.— But how amazingly <sup>these</sup> ~~his~~ predictions were in fact borne out by the Great Depression!

Henry Adams may have been correct in ascribing great importance to the role of economic forces in international politics. Around 1900, he predicted a great world war would occur if the center of exchanges should migrate from London to either New York or Berlin. He viewed history in terms of the shifts of the economic centers of activity, which is the essence of the Hegelian "synthesis": the Spirit being passed to another people after the decline and fall of their predecessors in history. Henry was, at once, pleased with America's emergence as a world power and horrified at the moral decay that technology brought. America was sinking into unrelieved mediocrity and vulgarity--welfare-state collectivism, lowbrow mass culture, labor-union domination, corporate liberalism, faith in a democratic millenium. He longed for the

restoration of the community, but the only social unity he found was "in the mediocre conformity of mass culture--and it set his teeth on edge". (xxv) The chaos he saw suggested complexity as a motive force. He was left isolated: a Calvinist without a God. History (at least in the Hegelian sense) was moving meaninglessly toward extinction. The Age of Faith before the Reformation was close to his heart, but he couldn't realistically recommend a medieval synthesis like romantic conservatives. Two products of the Reformation period particularly disgusted him. One was the freeing of the spirit of competition, the law of flesh, which would ultimately prevail over spirit in any contest. The other was the dethroning of the Virgin and the subsequent degradation of woman. He was dismayed at the trend toward equalization of the sexes--the spirit of competition was affecting woman, and she was forfeiting what influence she had as a unifying agent. By renouncing the passionate instinct, which is the cause and effect of maternity, the modern feminist turns her into "a degraded boy" "She has become a wandering, isolated unit... The family principle has decayed until, as a legal conception, it has ceased to exist." Such was the view of social atomization from Henry Adams' time.

He mathematically <sup>established</sup> ~~set~~ 1921 as the date for the ethereal phase to begin. <sup>It</sup> ~~He~~ was to be characterized by such specialization of knowledge that "only a few highly trained and gifted men will then be able to understand each other." (115) Never the complete pessimist (Henry was more interested in the consistency of his thought and the lessons it might bring into focus than in its accuracy as a prognosis), Brooks further cautioned the victors of the great war that the vanquished should be allowed to operate on equal terms with them or the old conditions would be automatically revived, and "there must be a still more bitter struggle within a generation--at furthest". (117)