

## BOOK REVIEW

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**The New American History**, ed. Eric Foner. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, 304 pp., \$33.95 hardbound, \$16.95 paperback.

*Alan H. Luxenberg*

If one measure of a civilization's greatness is its capacity for self-criticism, then let it be said that *The New American History* is proof positive of America's greatness. Essays by thirteen esteemed historians have been collected in this volume, at the express request of the American Historical Association no less, for the purpose of introducing the latest historical scholarship to high school history teachers (for whom the essays are separately available as individual pamphlets) and to a broad audience of nonspecialists.

Seven of the essays focus on particular periods in American history from the colonial era to the present; the other six focus on such themes as social history, labor history, and women's history. Some essays are substantive, others are historiographical, still others combine the two approaches. Some have a point, others do not, but simply meander from topic to topic in a manner likely to disappoint the reader.

The volume focuses on groups neglected by former generations of historians—blacks, American Indians, women, workers, and the poor. Undoubtedly there is value in all this. But, after all is said and done, very little of America remains in this new American history, for if these historians are to be believed, there is nothing of consequence that all Americans share. American subcultures are real, America is not. It is of course true in one sense that we Americans share very little: we have no common ancestry, no common religion, no common color. All we share, beyond our lan-

guage, is the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, a belief in democracy, and a toleration for diversity—all barely worth a mention in this anthology. Indeed, to call the book “un-American” is not to make a normative judgment but an empirical one.

The principal audience for these essays is high school history teachers—the people charged by society with teaching citizenship to our children. What kind of citizenship does the new history, represented by this volume, promise to form? As one whose grandparents came to this country from Eastern Europe in the early 1900s, I am no descendant of Thomas Jefferson; yet it is not the Tsars but the Founding Fathers whom I think of as my forebears. This book would deny me my own heartfelt sense of being an American.

In fact, there is no room in this volume for Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln or, for that matter, Martin Luther King, Jr.; for the new American history is a history of ordinary rather than extraordinary Americans. Fair enough, but isn't history more nearly shaped by the extraordinary rather than the ordinary? Nor is there any recognition of the fact that American history is a story of an ever expanding franchise: once only white male property owners were eligible to vote; now none of those attributes is a prerequisite. And, despite its pretense at a multicultural orientation, the book lacks any sense of history beyond American history. For instance, in the context of world history, the subordination of women in society would hardly be seen as an American invention. America should be noted not for its subordination of women, which is characteristic of most societies, but for the liberation of women, which is not. In all, this book is more notable for what it leaves out than for what it includes.

Despite its serious flaws, the book is not without value. For it does illuminate how historians have begun to fill in gaps in American history. This is nowhere more true than in the case of blacks, who, even as slaves, helped shape their world in ways that historians have tended to ignore. Eric Foner's essay on slavery and Reconstruction underscores the critical role of the black church as an incubator of black leadership. Three other essays emphasize the contribution of black participation in World War II to the rise of the civil rights movement.

In an overview of the new social history, Alice Kessler-Harris rightly worries that the emphasis on ethnographic detail has tended to result in "our knowing more and more about less and less," but somewhere down the line, she hopes, a new synthesis will emerge that "rests on neither conflict nor consensus"—a third way, as it were, of historical interpretation. To Alan Brinkley, the third way has already risen in the form of "the organizational synthesis." Drawing on social science theories of modernization, it emphasizes the development of large-scale national institutions impelled by "the search for order" (in the words of Robert Wiebe, the theory's greatest proponent).

The best essay in the volume, to which none of my negative comments apply, is James Shenton's fair and full bibliographic essay on immigration. Shenton characterizes America's encounter with ethnic diversity as a "successful balance between assimilation and pluralism," that is, between integration and separatism. For good reason, he is uncertain whether that success will continue.

There is but one essay on American diplomacy and that is by Walter Lafeber, dean of the cold war revisionists—a school of thought that the cold war's end would seem to have entirely discredited. No matter, for Lafeber's essay is conver-

iently limited to the period 1776 to 1945. It is puzzling that an essay intended to review the latest historical scholarship barely mentions the cold war, a subject that for a generation has thoroughly dominated the field of United States diplomatic history. The few sentences Lafeber does offer on the cold war's origins suggest a moral equivalence between the former Soviet Union and the United States. In an age that has witnessed the former East Germans giving Ronald Reagan a standing ovation, the assertion of equivalence between East and West must now strike the honest observer as rather quaint.

Lafeber's thesis, not all that controversial, is that America's rise to global power has been accompanied by a diminution of the constitutional freedoms at home that that power was designed to protect. It is surely true that Americans have given up a measure of freedom to ensure their defense, thus preserving a far greater measure of their freedom. Lafeber fails to compare this loss with the freedoms that might have been lost had America not risen to global power status nor helped defeat the Nazi and the Soviet menaces. Where is his sense of proportion?

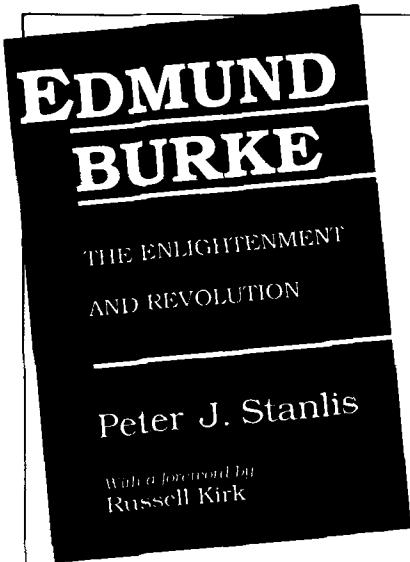
Indeed, a sense of proportion is nowhere to be found in this volume. What does the latest scholarship reveal? That the European settlement of the Americas was "the greatest known demographic catastrophe in the history of the world," that "most American colonies were founded by terrorists," and that American national policy after the revolution possessed "virtually genocidal aspects" with respect to American Indians. The essays all too well reflect the current state of American history. If the old American history depicted America without warts, the new American history goes too far in the other direction and portrays America's

warts as the whole story. Not to worry: the majority of the essays are too pedantic to be of any interest to the nonspecialist, though educators will too easily find grist for their multicultural mills.

Of practical use are the bibliographies at the end of each essay, but the lack of an index in a book designed to serve as a resource more than anything else is a major drawback. Nonetheless, it is must reading for graduate students preparing for their doctoral exams. The book performs invaluable service in summarizing the latest literature in history, with which familiarity—if not obeisance—is essential. In the end, it's hard to imagine that anyone but a graduate student would even want to read this book.

It is of course one of the great ironies of history that at a moment when the ideals on which this nation was founded ring triumphant around the world here at home we find ourselves very nearly engulfed by the tribalism that those ideals were meant to restrain and from which the rest of the world seeks refuge. If the triumph of liberalism is the end of history, then sadly it is scholars like those whose work fills this volume who are championing the return of history and the end of liberalism.

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