

Revisionism: A New, Angry Look at the

EVERY epoch recreates its own concept of the past. As the climate of opinion shifts over the course of a generation, so do historians' views of history. A series of events as related by one historian may be altered beyond recognition by a later one. Such is the case with American history today. Traditional notions of the past are being brusquely challenged from the left by a group known as revisionists who emphasize not the homogeneity and accomplishments of the American heritage but its massive dislocations and conflicts. Though forming a diffuse movement rather than a well-defined school, they have a growing influence on the study of history; at last December's meeting of the American Historical Association, their candidate for president, Staughton Lynd, the ex-Yale professor who now works with Radical Organizer Saul Alinsky, received nearly one-third of the vote.

The revisionists have a particular quarrel with the dominant scholarly voice of the recent past: what they call "consensus history," as exemplified by such diverse writers as Richard Hofstadter of Columbia, Daniel Boorstin of the Smithsonian Institution, Henry Nash Smith of the University of California at Berkeley, and George Kennan of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. The consensus historians, who came to maturity during World War II and the early years of the cold war, exhibit an understandable hostility to totalitarianism in their writings. By contrast, they emphasize the spirit of compromise and accommodation in American history. Compared with the violence that racked the Old World, the New seems to them refreshingly free of sustained class and sectional strife. They feel that the pluralism of American life has blurred ideological divisions between rich and poor, between agrarians and urbanites. They are friendly to the realistic practicing politician and denigrate the self-righteous crusading reformer.

In place of this relatively benign view of America, the revisionists have portrayed a land of teeming passions and deep-seated, almost irreconcilable disagreements. Some revisionists accept the class-warfare theories of Karl Marx; most of them owe a considerable debt to Progressive Historian Charles Beard, who interpreted the American past as an economic struggle between haves and have-nots. Since most revisionists took part in the civil rights or antiwar movements of the past decade, they make an easy transition to a study of previous periods of intense struggle: the Revolution, the Civil War, the Populist revolt, the efforts of labor to gain recognition. Compared with the America summarized in contemporary textbooks, theirs is indeed another country.

Viewpoint of the Masses

The weakness of consensus history, argue many revisionists, is that it is elitist. It reflects the viewpoint of the political and economic establishments that left the most voluminous records. Revisionists concentrate instead on writing history, in the words of Roosevelt University's Jesse Lemisch, "from the bottom up." This presents problems of its own: the masses do not leave much in the way of records. Nonetheless, Revisionist Stephan Thernstrom of Brandeis University was able to overcome this obstacle in his *Poverty and Progress*, by making an imaginative use of U.S. census reports. Generalizing from shifts in population, occupation and income in a typical Massachusetts industrial town, he concludes that there was much less social mobility in 19th century America than is commonly assumed. Few laborers repeated the Horatio Alger story and moved out of

their class, although in the course of a generation some rose within it. Only a high rate of movement between towns, says Thernstrom, prevented the development of a permanent proletariat in the European fashion. Similarly, Revisionist Leon Litwak of San Francisco State College combed newspapers, letters and legislative records of pre-Civil War days for his *North of Slavery*, which contends that anti-black prejudice existed on a much wider scale than has been suspected. Litwak found less racism in the South than in the North and West, where many localities enacted laws to keep Negroes out. Americans outside the South objected to the spread of slavery not so much because they thought it was evil as because they were terrified that the despised black man would move to their part of the country.

Doctrinaire of the Center

Many historians have viewed the Civil War as a tragic, unnecessary accident; Revisionist Eugene Genovese of the University of Rochester regards it as the inevitable clash of two highly developed and mutually exclusive class structures. In *The Political Economy of Slavery* and *The World the Slaveholders Made*, Genovese characterizes the "slavocracy" as a self-contained culture with an authentic life-style and ideology of its own.

He berates even his mentor, Karl Marx, for failing to understand that the Southern "way of life" served as more than a veneer for the exploitation of the black man. It seems anomalous for a Marxist to offer a defense of the old South, but the strength of Genovese is that he believes in respecting the enemy. He feels that the admirable qualities of Southern statesmen, from Thomas Jefferson to Robert E. Lee, were inseparable from the tradition that produced them. "If we blind ourselves to everything noble, virtuous, honest, decent and selfless in a ruling class," Genovese asks, "how do we account for its hegemony?"

Consensus historians have generally given high marks to the "Progressive Era" of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson,

and to F.D.R.'s New Deal, for accomplishing significant reform within a democratic framework. The revisionists are not willing to concede so much. To Gabriel Kolko of the State University of New York at Buffalo, the Progressive Era represented not the bridling of predatory big business by the Federal Government but rather the capture of Government by business. In *The Triumph of Conservatism*, Kolko argues that most Government regulation was enacted at the behest of leading corporations, which wanted railroad legislation, meat inspection or fair-trade laws to save them from increasingly anarchic competition. They lost no time gaining control of regulatory commissions like the ICC that were intended to supervise their activities.

In one of the revisionist attacks on the New Deal, *The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform*, Bernard Bernstein of Stanford criticizes F.D.R. for inviting big business to take part in such governmental enterprises as the NRA, which gave capitalists a power over federal policy that they had never enjoyed before. It was only when threatened politically by Huey Long that Roosevelt moved to the left, and urged higher taxes, Social Security and a system of unemployment compensation. The scourge of big business, concludes Bernstein, was nothing more than a "doctrinaire of the center."

It is almost axiomatic with consensus historians that violent revolutions do more harm than good. But in the best revisionist work to date, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Barrington Moore Jr. of Harvard makes a strong case for the necessity of revolution. Without such a revolution in its past, he declares, a nation cannot achieve industrial democ-



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American Past

racy. Revolution is necessary to destroy the reactionary power of the agricultural interests that impede modernization: both large landholders and peasantry. Because Germany and Japan had no revolution, landowners were able to combine with industrialists in both countries to take power. Since democratic forces were too weak to challenge this union, it eventually culminated in fascism. In Russia and China, on the other hand, an untamed peasantry became the backbone of another successful authoritarian movement: Communism. But the Puritan revolution in England and the 1789 revolution in France effectively crippled the agricultural powers and opened the way for modernization along democratic lines.

The one social revolution in the U.S.—the Civil War—succeeded only partially, according to Moore. The radical reconstructionists failed to win the land redistribution in the South that would have assured the ex-slaves their freedom. Still, the power of the landowners was sufficiently reduced to prevent them from later joining with Northern capitalists to impose a form of totalitarianism on the U.S. Considering the horrors attendant upon revolution from below (Communism) and revolution from above (fascism), Moore prescribes revolution only as a last resort, and under certain specific conditions.

The most debatable revisionist reinterpretations have involved American foreign affairs. The U.S., revisionists say, has become the imperialistic aggressor of the cold war, while the Soviet Union, even under Stalin, is seen as essentially cautious and realistic. In *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* and more recently in *The Roots of the Modern American Empire*, William Appleman Williams—perhaps the longest-practicing revisionist—contends that the American pursuit of an open-door policy has brought it into conflict with nations around the world. Williams interprets every act of U.S. diplomacy in the light of his neo-Marxist conviction that capitalism must always expand in search of new markets. Thus the U.S., while claiming to be championing Chinese integrity against the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, was only interested in China as a source of trade. This economic compulsion eventually led to war with Japan, says Williams. In relentless application of this same principle, other revisionists find American capitalist cupidity behind the decisions to go to war in Korea and Viet Nam—a clear example of twisting the facts to fit the theory.

While minimizing the vices of the totalitarian leaders, Cold War revisionists invariably exaggerate the shortcomings of American statesmen. This requires something approaching a conspiracy theory of history. How else explain the fact that U.S. leaders are always doing what they say they are not doing? D. F. Fleming, professor emeritus of Vanderbilt University (*The Cold War and Its Origins*), and David Horowitz (*Empire and Revolution*), onetime director of research for the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, accuse the U.S. of having followed a deliberate policy of intimidating Russia. As evidence, they cite events from the Allied intervention in the Russian civil war of 1918-21 to America's rigorous opposition to the expansion of Russia into Eastern Europe at the end of World War II. According to the revisionists, Russia after the war was not being aggressive, but simply establishing security within its normal sphere of influence. The ruthless, bloody way in which the Soviets imposed their rule is blithely brushed over by the re-



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tend to disregard history that does not serve their needs, they are anti-historical. Thus, when Staughton Lynd, in *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism*, combs American history to establish a tradition of radicals who shared his vision of a noncapitalist, decentralized society, he plucks out Tom Paine, Lloyd Garrison and Henry David Thoreau as fellow ideologues. This is not history but polemics.

Many revisionists impose too strict a pattern on the chaos of history. By concentrating on inexorable social and economic forces, they do not make sufficient allowance for political, cultural and psychological factors. The accidental in history too often eludes them. The American Revolution, for example, was not necessarily the inevitable product of contending social forces. In his *Origins of American Politics*, Bernard Bailyn points out that the colonial leaders, misled by radical British publicists, developed an almost paranoid fear that the British Crown was adding to its power when in reality that power was waning. This misreading of the times contributed significantly to the movement for independence.

Limits of Economics

A rigid theory of economics is insufficient to explain the behavior of democratic statesmen like F.D.R. and Truman. No doubt these Presidents were interested in the preservation and expansion of American markets. But their foreign policies were determined by other, more significant factors—among them a legitimate and noneconomic desire to maintain a balance of power in the world, without which peace is not possible. They were also subject to a variety of domestic pressures, not all of which can be defined in economic terms. As Hofstadter argues in defense of F.D.R.'s prewar policies, "his undeniably devious leadership at certain moments reflected not his Caesaristic aspirations but the difficulties of a democratic politician confronting the force and unhampered initiative of Caesaristic powers"—meaning fascist Japan and Germany. The point equally well applies to later U.S. Presidents confronting Soviet Russia.



GENOVESE

visionists. Intimations of conspiracy are liberally sprinkled throughout *American Power and the New Mandarins* by M.I.T.'s linguist-turned-historian Noam Chomsky. He attributes the Viet Nam War to the machinations of amoral technocrats who slavishly serve the repressive U.S. social order.

Marx argued that the rightful goal of philosophy was not merely to study society but to change it. Similarly, the revisionists seek what they term a "usable past"—which means, in effect, a past that supports their present political convictions. The evidence suggests that they have overused the past. Their understandable anguish over the Viet Nam War has led them to condemn American participation in other wars; too readily, they find a link of culpability stretching from one conflict to the next. In so far as they

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It is in the nature of radicalism not to be able to live at peace with the past. History does not prove very comforting to those who yearn for utopian change. That is one reason, no doubt, why the revisionists—with the exception of Moore—have not written works equal to the best of the consensus school. It seems to be true that conservatives—men with a fondness for the past—write the better history; witness Gibbon, Spengler, Henry Adams. The revisionists have a valid point: If the past is not usable, then what is its value? In the deft hands of Moore or Genovese, Marxian class analysis exposes strata of human experience that were not apparent to previous historians. But history is too rich and varied to yield its secrets to one method alone. The revisionists who ultimately endure will be historians first, revisionists second.