

IDEAS IN CONTEXT

*Edited by Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner,
and Wolf Lepenies*

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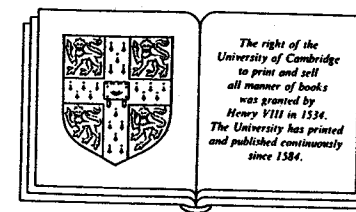
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That Noble Dream

The "Objectivity Question"
and the American Historical Profession

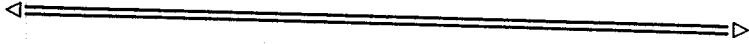
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The collapse of comity

The mood of affirmation and consensus which dominated American society from the early 1940s to the early 1960s had been, on the whole, congenial to an objectivist posture. Scholars celebrated the end of seriously divisive conflicts in the era of the "end of ideology." With agreement not only on ends, but to a considerable extent on means as well, residual problems were largely technical, objectively soluble through expertise. Historians' objectivism was usually qualified and tolerant. For various reasons, including the strictures of the interwar relativists, there had been, in these years, somewhat diminished confidence that historians' interpretations would converge on a single Truth, but every reason to believe that the boundaries of disagreement would continually narrow. For practical purposes, so long as historical accounts remained within these limits a certain amount of perspectival relativism could be tolerated without abandoning a larger commitment to objectivity. This was a philosophically makeshift, but psychologically and sociologically appealing, stance: why should one jeopardize professional comity by loudly insisting that one's own version was the objective truth and that one's colleague's version, which differed only in emphasis and nuance, was biased or partisan?

During the decade of the sixties the ideological consensus which provided the foundation for this posture collapsed, and it was not to be reconstructed in subsequent decades. The political culture lurched sharply left, then right; consensus was replaced first by polarization, then by fragmentation; affirmation, by negativity, confusion, apathy, and uncertainty. The consequences of all this turmoil for the idea of historical objectivity were various, and often contradictory.

The sixties were years of distrust, both of the leading institutions in

society and of those who were their spokesmen. Brazen mendacity by the federal government increased in the course of the decade, and produced a concomitant increase in skepticism about "official truth," and for some, about truth of any kind—not least the academic. Not all official lying was delegated to those with impeccable scholarly credentials like Professors Schlesinger, Bundy, Rostow, or Kissinger, but enough of it was to destroy the presumption that in judging veracity the pronouncements of highly regarded academics should be automatically accepted, or even get the benefit of the doubt.

When journalists came under attack by Vice-President Spiro Agnew and Chicago Mayor Richard Daley for not reporting "objectively," what was most often at issue was their failure to accept official versions of the actions and fortunes of American troops in Vietnam; of the police in front of the Conrad Hilton. Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* saw many of the demands for journalistic objectivity as "serv[ing] the interests of those official sources with which the fetish of objectivity is primarily concerned." His colleague David Halberstam seconded his observations on what he called "the basic rule of journalistic theology."

Objectivity was prized and if objectivity in no way conformed to reality, then all the worse for reality. . . . In truth, despite all the fine talk of objectivity, the only thing that mildly approached objectivity was the form in which the reporter wrote the news, a technical style which required the journalist to appear to be much dumber and more innocent than in fact he was. So he wrote in a bland, uncritical way which gave greater credence to the utterances of public officials, no matter how mindless these utterances.

Still another former *Times* correspondent, J. Anthony Lukas, reported feeling while working for the *Times* that "what my editors were telling me was that objectivity meant that I should write within *their* definition of, within their unquestioned assumptions about, reality." Meanwhile, academic students of the media wrote of objectivity as an empty and formalistic "strategic ritual." For analysts of press coverage of the Vietnam War, "objectivity" was simply not a category of thought, as they devoted themselves to the exploration and explication of the mechanisms by which presentations were slanted this way and that.¹

Responses to the climate of mendacity and mistrust varied. For many it

¹Wicker, "The Tradition of Objectivity in the American Press—What's Wrong with It," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 83 (1971): 84; Halberstam, quoted in Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media* (New York, 1986) 52–53; Lukas, comment in "Ragtime Revisited: A Seminar with E. L. Doctorow and Joseph Papaleo," *Nieman Reports* 31 (Summer/Autumn 1977): 48–49.

produced cynicism about the very idea of truth and objectivity. If everyone was lying, if there was no one who could be trusted, why not simply believe whatever one found congenial and convenient? For others, and in general this was true of the most militant and activist critics of the government, the urgent task was to substitute their Truth for the lies and distortions of the state and its allies. Noam Chomsky's book-length essay "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship" was dedicated to demonstrating liberals' deplorable failure to be objective. In this and subsequent writings he never wavered in his confidence that his own analyses met the highest standards of objectivity.²

With the heating up of the political atmosphere there were strong opposite pulls on scholars: toward leaping into the arena, "exposing lies," "speaking truth to power"; or toward leaving the stadium altogether, turning one's back on increasingly raucous and ill-tempered debate. Calls for a "relevant" scholarship—mostly from students, occasionally from younger faculty—were met by an academic backlash which made a virtue of irrelevance. In the classroom, in various forms of campus turmoil, and in miscellaneous ructions in professional associations, all the terms and concepts associated with "the objectivity question" were repeatedly at the top of the agenda.

Above all, historical objectivity became problematic because historians could not agree on what philosophers call the "explanandum"—that which is to be explained. At the extremes it was the "America" of the *Love It or Leave It* bumper sticker versus "Amerika" spray-painted by student militants on a campus wall. Historical writing which could explain the triumphs of the former was not much good at explaining the iniquities of the latter, and vice versa. Most historians, to be sure, were not found at the extremes, but the center had lost its vitality. The broad agreement on fundamentals which had endured, even during periods of strain and dissidence like the years between the wars, broke apart. And there appeared for the first time something hitherto unknown in the American historical profession: substantial and systematically "oppositional" historiographical tendencies.

I

The new, left-oriented historians who became visible within the profession during the 1960s came to be capitalized, reified, and often tacitly

²Chomsky's essay in his *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York, 1969), 23–158.

homogenized as "New Left historians." This was a largely empty and misleading designation, lumping together individuals of the most diverse orientation, and often, innocently or maliciously, associating them with the most extreme wing of the student movement. In a comprehensive review of the work of a range of "New Left" historians stretching from Stephan Thernstrom to Eugene Genovese, Irwin Unger informed the readers of the *American Historical Review* that the group was united by their "conviction of America's total depravity." In fact, although there were some dissident historians who had ties to the student and youth insurgency which was labeled "New Left," at least as many either had no connection with the movement, or viewed it with a jaundiced eye. In any case, the rapid fragmentation and disintegration of the student movement made clear what a heterogeneous phenomenon it was, and the uselessness of the phrase "New Left" for describing any definable ideological tendency.³

To be sure, the new, left historiography and the student New Left had some important common roots. Both arose around 1960 in a climate characterized by the decline of McCarthyism, frustration with the mindlessness of politics in the Eisenhower years, admiration for the emerging civil rights movement in the South, the first stirrings of opposition to the nuclear arms race, and the turmoil in the Communist movement occasioned by Khrushchev's Twentieth Party Congress speech and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. It was a time when H. Stuart Hughes ran as a "peace candidate" for the U.S. Senate; when the future high priest of neoconservatism, Norman Podhoretz, published Staughton Lynd's revisionist account of cold war origins in *Commentary* and considered himself Lynd's ally in working to create a "new radicalism" freed of illusions about the USSR.⁴

There was an important generational difference between those (un-capitalized) new, left historians who received their doctorates in the late 1950s or early 1960s, and those who came along thereafter. Members of the former group often had firsthand experience in the "old" left, several having been what might be called "red romper toddlers," with youthful involvement, sometimes starting in their teens, in the Communist Party or its periphery. At age thirteen James Weinstein had been a delegate to the last meeting of the American Youth Congress in 1941, and spent several years in a factory doing political work for the CP, as had David Montgomery, among others. Staughton Lynd recalled "arguing as a ripe

³"The 'New Left' and American History: Some Recent Trends in United States Historiography," *AHR* 72 (1967): 1246.

⁴Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks* (New York, 1979), 189.

Marxist of 14 against the 'Browder line' which . . . [advocated] dissolving the CP [and] declaring the class struggle at an end." Howard Zinn joined the party in his late teens and remained an active member for almost ten years. Eugene Genovese was expelled from the party while an undergraduate "for having zigged when I was supposed to zag." Herbert Gutman reported that he had "flirted briefly but intensely with the Communist movement"—which may have been an understatement. Aileen Kraditor described herself in 1969 as "a graduate of the Old Stalinist Left [whose] heart is with the young people, especially the saner hippie-anarchistic types."⁵

Others in this first cohort had youthful ties to the social democratic wing of the Old Left: Gabriel Kolko and Jesse Lemisch had been members of the barely socialist Student League for Industrial Democracy. A number of historians who went to Harvard, like Stephan Thernstrom and N. Gordon Levin, were influenced by the social democratic Marxism of Barrington Moore. Some—George Rawick and Richard N. Hunt, along with the present writer and a few other future historians—had been, during the mid-1950s, in the "Shachtmanite" Young Socialist League, then in the process of evolving from dissident Trotskyism to the left wing of social democracy. And there were those in this first cohort who are best described as "left liberals," young historians like Barton Bernstein and Christopher Lasch, critical of American liberals' accommodation to the cold war and to McCarthyism, but without, at this stage, anything that could be called a socialist commitment.

There is no hard-and-fast line to be drawn between this cohort of left historians and those who came along a few years later, but there were, overall, some distinctions worth noting. The sensibility of the former group had been shaped in the fifties and they were, for the most part, culturally very "straight," whereas those who came along later, attending college or graduate school during the tumultuous late sixties, were more

⁵Weinstein to Paul Buhle, 8 February 1968 and 20 March 1969, Radical America Papers, 1-16; Lynd, "Prospects for the New Left," *Liberation* 15 (January 1971): 18; for Zinn, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession: 1915-1980* (Urbana, Ill., 1986), 165; Genovese, quoted in Arnold Beichman, "Study in Academic Freedom," *New York Times Magazine*, 19 December 1965, 14; Gutman, interview in Henry Abelove et al., eds., *Visions of History* (New York, 1984), 188; Kraditor to Paul Buhle, 9 July 1969, Radical America Papers, 2-3. In 1955 a witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities reported that when he had attended a Communist summer camp in the late 1940s, Gutman, a counselor, had attempted to recruit him into CP activity and had confided in 1950 that he was a party member. (Testimony of Stanley Wechkin, U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Communist Activities, New York Area—Part 5 [Summer Camps]*, 84th Congress, 1st sess. [1955], 1327-44.)

likely to display a countercultural sensibility, and were more likely than those in the previous group to have an activist orientation. Prominent in the second wave were a number of "red diaper babies" like Eric Foner and Robert Starobin—children of that substantial group who had entered the Communist Party milieu during its heyday, between 1936 and 1948. Unlike those in the former cohort, who entered a sellers' market, and had usually attained tenure before the academic depression set in during the seventies, many of this second group eventually left the profession.

The only previous occasion when a new historiographical tendency had burst so suddenly upon the scene was just before World War I, when the much less radical New and Progressive historians appeared. The same schools, Columbia and Wisconsin, were the nurseries of both developments; the overwhelming majority of the first two generations of radical historians received their degrees from those two institutions. Columbia's role was probably mainly due to its location in the capital of American left politics. No members of its history department seem to have played an important role in inspiring or supporting a left consciousness. As a primarily commuter institution, Columbia provided a poor framework of community.

It was quite otherwise with Wisconsin, which throughout the 1950s had been something of a "Progressive" holdout against more conservative historiographical currents. Its faculty contained a number of historians who in various ways served as models to graduate students, a significant portion of whom were New York Jews of leftist background, for whom Wisconsin served an "Americanizing" function. George Rawick, a student at Wisconsin in the mid-1950s, recalled in a letter to Merle Curti that Curti had served as an inspiration to him in becoming an *American* radical, "not just someone in the 'internal emigration' which has been the home of so many New York radicals." Paul Breines, a graduate student at Madison a few years later, thought that "leftist Jews who identified with [William Appleman] Williams were trying to submerge their Jewishness in his very American socialism or even his socialist Americanism."⁶

In the light of all this it is not surprising that Madison was the site of the first, and in many ways the most important, organized vehicle for the new historiographical left—the graduate student journal *Studies on the Left*, which began publication in 1959. Young leftist historians, like Stephen Ambrose, the future biographer of Eisenhower, expressed a desire

⁶Rawick to Curti, 24 November 1961, Curti Papers, 34–24; Breines, "With George Mosse in the 1960s," in Seymour Drescher et al., eds., *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1982), 295.

to publish in the journal, even though it would probably hurt his academic career in the South. To appear in *Studies*, he wrote one of its editors, would be "visible proof I'm helping the cause, whatever that is." And the journal was received enthusiastically by more senior scholars, not themselves on the left, who were discontented with what John Higham had called the "cult of consensus." Higham himself contributed an appreciative review of William A. Williams's work to *Studies*. In *Commentary*, Andrew Hacker, who had voted for Nixon in 1960, hailed its appearance as "a revolt against . . . prevailing orthodoxies[:] conservative professor-scholars [who] have been mere celebrators, the liberals [who] have hidden behind methodological barricades."⁷

Insofar as the young leftist historians regarded themselves as Marxists, they were the inheritors of an ambiguous legacy. The classic Marxist texts provided an overall model of society and of historical change—the centrality of modes of production, and of class struggle—but little in the way of concrete exemplars of their application. There had been some important Marxist historical studies of European history, particularly of various aspects of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. But there had been very little significant work on the United States—and the great majority of new, left historians were Americanists. This was not necessarily a disadvantage. In France, for example, Marxist scholarship on the French Revolution had degenerated into what François Furet mocked as *le catéchisme révolutionnaire*. No such procrustean bed governed the work of the new generation of American leftists. Their work, though frequently employing Marxist categories, was notable for its heterodoxy. Descriptions of "open door imperialism" had little in common with traditional Leninist theory; the concept of corporate liberalism had no precedent in classic texts; studies of the working-class movement were on the whole "culturalist" rather than "economistic"; the work of Genovese and his associates on the slave South stressed the errors and inadequacies of treatments by Marx and Engels.

There were some important aspects of the Marxist historiographical legacy which were not merely unuseful, but in fact served as an antimodel for the new generation. In the era of the Second International, Marxist historical theory and practice had been mechanistically determinist. Then, under Stalinist influence, it veered off into a voluntarism that was put at the disposal of current Soviet requirements. In the United States, historians associated with the Communist Party were sometimes dogmat-

⁷Ambrose to James Weinstein, 12 November 1963, *Studies on the Left* Papers, 1–4; Hacker, "The Rebellious Young Scholars," *Commentary* 30 (1960): 406.

ic and sectarian. More often their work had hardly any Marxist theoretical content at all, and shaded off into celebratory accounts of struggle and resistance—"the people" versus "the interests." (The failure of historians associated with the Communist Party to make their theoretical orientation explicit was one of the principal complaints of the young historians who had recently broken from the party's embrace, and was a practice they were determined to abandon.) Although, especially before the late 1950s, all Western Communist historians subordinated themselves to their parties' demands, American Communist historians, like the CPUSA as a whole, were the most servile of any in the West. Following the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 a number of leading British historians, notably Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson, left the Communist Party. But even those who stayed, like Eric Hobsbawm and V. G. Kiernan, joined in publicly condemning their party's refusal to disassociate itself from the Soviet intervention in Hungary. In the United States, the leading Communist historian, Herbert Aptheker, produced the party's official defense of Soviet tanks assaulting Hungarian workers.⁸

In their innovative use of the Marxian legacy, and in their break with some of the more discreditable aspects of that legacy, the young leftist historians were certainly "new." But there was very little that was new or unorthodox about the epistemological posture of the radical historians; it was, as Marxism had traditionally been, overwhelmingly objectivist. Marx and Engels, particularly the latter, and even more their subsequent interpreters, emphasized the objective and scientific character of Marxism. Trotsky was at one with his enemy Stalin when he declared history to be "a science no less objective than physiology." Aptheker denounced "bourgeois academicians" for denying the existence of "real objectivity." This was to remain the orthodox view. Some years later, when a writer close to the American CP had favorable things to say about Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* he was rebuked in the official party organ *Political Affairs*:

The reactionary aspect of Kuhnianism stems from his rejection of the objective content of the truth of scientific knowledge. For if physical science itself can be shown to be nothing more than a succession of subjective models, then . . . social science also would have no objective content. . . . Those who say capitalist oppression is a reality are just as right (or wrong) as those who deny it. . . .

⁸Letter from British historians in *New Statesman and Nation* n.s. 52 (1 December 1956): 701; Aptheker, *The Truth About Hungary* (New York, 1957).

[Kuhn] is encouraging an ideological trend which has a paralyzing effect upon millions.⁹

In the main, young radical historians were firmly committed to the realist, objectivist, and antirealist tradition of the left. William A. Williams, something of a godfather to *Studies on the Left*, wrote Curti of his disagreement with Beard's and Becker's relativist theses. He insisted that with sufficient effort historians could wrench themselves free of background and values to "see things as they really were." Staughton Lynd, writing to one of the editors of *Studies*, underlined his commitment to "objective truth," his rejection of the idea that "there is one truth for radicals and another truth for other people." Jesse Lemisch wrote of the radical historian's obligation to "pursue truth, adhere to the most rigorous standards of evidence and proof, and try to make history a science." When his contract at the University of Chicago was not renewed, he invited readers of the student newspaper to "ponder the irony in the judging of a scholar who believes very firmly in the pursuit of truth by men of more relativistic bent."¹⁰

Leftist historians were convinced that what they were offering was not just objectively true, but that it was *the* truth. An editorial in the inaugural issue of *Studies on the Left* argued that the objective, unvarnished truth was radical, that no act was more radical than disclosing it.

Arnold Hauser has observed that the French bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century rejected naturalism in art from its "perfectly correct feeling that every art that describes life without bias and without restraint is in itself a revolutionary art." In 1912, Woodrow Wilson shrewdly expressed a similar feeling current within the American bourgeoisie. "The radicalism of our time . . .," he observed, "does not consist in the things that are proposed, but in the things that are disclosed." The relentless disclosure of the nature and causes of social institutions and developments is, in our own time, also radical.

⁹Trotsky, "What Is Historical Objectivity?" (1933), quoted in Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford, 1978), 497; Aptheker, review of William Z. Foster, *Outline Political History of the Americas, Masses & Mainstream 4* (March 1951): 88; John Pappademos and Beatrice Lumpkin, "The Scientific Outlook Under Attack," *Political Affairs* 53 (November 1974): 31, 34.

¹⁰Williams to Curti, undated, Curti Papers, 45-11; Williams review of J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past*, *Nation* 210 (9 March 1970): 280; Lynd to Eleanor Hakim, 13 March 1961, *Studies on the Left Papers*, 6-8; Lemisch, "Radical Scholarship as Scientific Method and Anti-Authoritarianism, Not 'Relevance,'" *New University Conference Papers 2* (1970) (unpaginated pamphlet); "A Word on the Lemisch Case," *Chicago Maroon*, 19 May 1967. (The printed text of the first quotation from Lemisch reads "peruse" rather than "pursue" truth, but I have assumed that this is a typographical error.)

The theme of "the radicalism of disclosure" recurred in the writing of the new generation of leftists. "The naked truth really is revolutionary in its implications," wrote Lynd. Gabriel Kolko spoke of this kind of radicalism, "a primary commitment to truth . . . and myth destruction," as "simply too embarrassing for perpetual toleration." The Latin Americanist John Womack wrote that

the most radical thing there is, is the truth about something. In a world of many kinds of lies, coerced, compulsive, and deliberate . . . it's not only a communist but a revolutionary act just to tell the truth. And the most important truth about Latin American history, so far as I know, is the history of classes there, which means the struggles between them. And so I teach the most important thing I can think of in my field.¹¹

But without intending to, the new radical historians, by the very fact of their sudden emergence, challenging fundamental assumptions of existing mainstream historiography on a variety of fronts, inevitably raised the issue of historical objectivity. If the previous framework for interpreting American history was objectively true, the radicals' perspective could not be; or, more threateningly, vice versa.

Virtually all the themes which emerged in professional indictments of the first generation of left historians for violating the canons of objectivity are to be found in Irwin Unger's *AHR* survey, written in 1965 though not published until 1967. There was the psychologizing of dissidence. Young leftists' "assault on the New Deal" was oedipal, "an adolescent blow for independence . . . in rejecting it they are rejecting their fathers and their fathers' faith." They had a contempt for "pure history" ("for its own sake"); their concerns were governed "not by the natural dialogue of the discipline but by the concerns of the outside cultural and political world." They failed to maintain a cool and detached rhetorical style: they were "often bad tempered" and "sometimes allow the tone and rhetoric of the picket line and the handbill to invade their professional work." Leftists' criticism of twentieth-century reform was ideologically predetermined, rather than being "the inevitable conclusion imposed by the facts." They suffered from "exaggerated present-mindedness" and partisanship, the enemies of objective historical truth. Above all, unlike most members of the previous generation of historians, they failed to maintain the "political neutrality" that was so important for scholarship.¹²

¹¹"The Radicalism of Disclosure," *Studies on the Left* 1 (Fall 1959): 3-4; Lynd to Eleanor Hakim, 13 March 1961, *Studies on the Left Papers*, 6-8; Kolko, "Government and University in America," in Conor Cruise O'Brien and William Dean Vanech, eds., *Power and Consciousness* (New York, 1969), 138; Womack interview in *Visions of History*, 259.

¹²Unger, "New Left," 1253, 1262-63, 1252, 1263.

While on a philosophical level the young leftist historians were conventionally objectivist, and while they seemed to have no more spontaneous desire to raise epistemological questions than most other members of the profession, they had recognized from the outset the issues that would be raised by their work, and in the first issue of *Studies* launched a preemptive strike.

In academic circles, the term "objectivity" is generally used to indicate the dispassion, the non-partisanship with which the "true scholar" approaches his work. It is also frequently used to indicate the prevalent, or "majority" view. . . . Many, perhaps most students . . . have made the subtle and all-important equation between quality on the one hand, and acceptability or market value on the other, and are well on their way to a bright academic future. The objectivity here assumed is reducible to the weight of authority, the viewpoint of those who are in a position to enforce standards, the value judgments of the not so metaphorical market-place of ideas. Similarly, the use of the term to indicate scholarly dispassion is, at bottom, a way of justifying acceptance . . . of the status quo. When a man is digging up facts to support traditional and accepted interpretations . . . he may, without too much difficulty, prevent himself from becoming impassioned. . . . On the other hand when a scholar arrives at a radical or unconventional interpretation, he may very well become excited by what he is doing. For the act of contradiction involves emotions more tumultuous than those aroused by the state of acceptance. Scholarly dispassion is the true medium of the scholar satisfied with (or browbeaten by) things as they are.

"Partisanship or commitment," it was argued, "no more eliminates the possibility of objectivity than 'neutrality' or the supposed lack of theory or of ideology guarantees it." Indeed, the *Studies* editors said, if the leftist was "a scholar as well as a malcontent, an honest researcher as well as a radical,"

his very partisanship, bias, call it what you will—gives him a kind of objectivity. Because he stands opposed to established institutions and conventional conceptions, the radical scholar possesses an unconcern for their safety or preservation which enables him to carry inquiry along paths where the so-called "objective" conservative or liberal scholar would not care to tread.¹³

There was some variation in how far this argument was pushed. Most leftist historians agreed with Barrington Moore's observation that "in any society the dominant groups are the ones with the most to hide about the way society works," and that to the extent that radicals took a jaundiced

¹³"Radicalism of Disclosure," 2; David Eakins, "Objectivity and Commitment," *Studies on the Left* 1 (Fall 1959): 53; "Radicalism of Disclosure," 3.

view of dominant ideology they were more likely to penetrate to the truth, to resemble Mannheim's "free floating intelligentsia." Another theme in Mannheim's strategy for avoiding relativism was adopted by Howard Zinn, when he argued that "the closest we can come to that elusive 'objectivity' is to report accurately *all* of the subjectivities in a situation." Accounts from the slaveowner's point of view should be complemented with a picture from a slave's-eye view, and in practice, since historiography was slanted toward the former, the historian would be restoring balance by emphasizing the latter. Others went farther than Zinn in hinting that there was something objectively truer about the viewpoint of the oppressed, but while, or because, this was the official American Communist view, none of the younger leftist historians explicitly adopted this position. All agreed that acknowledged identification with those on the bottom of society was at worst no more distorting, or inconsistent with objectivity, than unacknowledged identification with those on top.¹⁴

The long-standing association of "balance" with a nonpolitical objectivity was challenged as a meretricious centrist device to seize the epistemological high ground. The act of balancing, David Eakins argued in *Studies*, was intensely political, involving constant adjustment to remain equidistant from shifting criteria of what were extreme and impermissible positions.

The most serious criticism of this whole effort is that it is wholly independent of evidence—hence of objectivity. The decision to maintain balance or neutrality, in this sense, is an *a priori* decision that has nothing whatever to do with facts or the weighing of facts. The balancer is as committed as any ideologue, but without a real frame of reference of his own other than the prevailing mood of the moment.

Somewhat surprisingly, since there was no shortage of targets, leftists rarely attacked "partisanship" or "present-mindedness" in the work of mainstream scholarship. In part this was a consequence of their concern with empirical rather than *Weltanschauunglich* issues. More important was that they were too involved in producing their own work, which, in the new climate, they hoped would in due course displace that of the

¹⁴Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966), 522; Zinn, *The Politics of History* (Boston, 1970), 41. Reviewing Zinn's book, Aptheker maintained that "a 'slave-oriented' historiography of slavery does not merely 'fill out the picture' of that institution; it is the picture. That is, if one wants to know what the institution of slavery was he must go to the slave, to those who endured it; there is the *objective* picture of that institution." (*Political Affairs* 49 [October 1970]: 57.)

previous generation by the weight of its evidence and the cogency of its argument.¹⁵

The early and mid-1960s was a period of optimism and decreasing marginalization for the growing American left. In the United States in the twentieth century, liberal ascendancy has traditionally provided the climate in which left dissidence flourishes, from Progressivism, through the New Deal, to the Kennedy-Johnson years. In this period the most salient enemies of liberals and centrists were on the right: die-hard segregationists, the John Birch Society, the Goldwater movement. Lyndon Johnson, partially in response to a socialist-inspired catalyst, Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, declared "war on poverty," and won an overwhelming electoral victory running on the most left-leaning liberal platform of modern times. On foreign policy questions, large numbers of liberals joined with the growing left movement in opposition to the Kennedy-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion and Johnson's intervention in the Dominican Republic.

In this climate, and in an academic bull market, leftist historians had good grounds to see bright prospects for their eventual acceptance within the profession. Though their work was often sharply criticized, it was also honored. Walter LaFeber's first book, for example, won the AHA's Beveridge Prize in 1962. And leading radical historians had positions at universities of the first rank: Barton Bernstein at Stanford, Gabriel Kolko at Pennsylvania, LaFeber at Cornell, Jesse Lemisch at Chicago, Staughton Lynd at Yale. Lynd urged radicals to "enter the mainstream of scholarly discussion . . . and whenever possible publish in conventional scholarly journals." His own experience, he said, was that "good work, however iconoclastic, can get published." Compared to most periods in the past it was an era of good feeling, both within the left, and between left and center. In this atmosphere, leftist historians, though by no means unaware of the difficulties in their path, seemed confident that they were starting on a steady march to historiographical triumph: "truth is great, and shall prevail."¹⁶

Although the national controversy over the Vietnam War was the principal catalyst of the unprecedented tumult and acrimony which racked the historical profession in the late 1960s, the war itself was seldom a cause of major divisiveness. Like most academics, the great majority of historians deplored it. But antiwar protest in the late 1960s raised questions which not only produced acrimonious debates between leftist and

¹⁵Eakins, "Objectivity and Commitment," 52.

¹⁶Lynd to Eleanor Hakim, 13 March 1961, *Studies on the Left Papers*, 6-8.

liberal historians, but polarized the left itself, producing battle scars which even twenty years later had not entirely faded. At issue were the relationship between the demands of citizenship and scholarship; the "neutrality" of not just this or that work of scholarship, but of the institutions of scholarship themselves; and, related to both of these, the attitude to adopt toward often disorderly and occasionally violent attacks on these institutions, and challenges to their hierarchical organization.

It would be an exaggeration to speak of the polarization of left historians into two distinct and mutually hostile camps. The groups which emerged were both heterogeneous; both shared fundamental values which distinguished them from the liberal center; and a number of radical historians were not clearly affiliated with either. But, with all this said, it is convenient to speak of one group, younger on the whole, including many graduate students, rather more countercultural and with a more activist orientation, in which the leading figures were Staughton Lynd, Howard Zinn, and Jesse Lemisch; a second group, including more members with a Communist background, somewhat better established, and with a more traditionalist scholarly orientation, which included Eugene Genovese, Christopher Lasch, and James Weinstein.

The leaders of the first group, along with a great part of their following, had devoted much of their time in the sixties to active political engagement. Both Lynd and Zinn had extended involvement in the civil rights struggle in the South, where both had taught at black colleges; both traveled to Hanoi in connection with their antiwar work; both, along with Lemisch, had personally participated in disruptive campus protest. Almost all the members of this camp were enthusiastic supporters of "the Movement," and were usually at best ambivalent about the university and the historical profession. Jeffrey Kaplow wrote one of the editors of *Studies on the Left* that his view of "Ivory tower universities" was such that "the mere thought of making a career in one of them sometimes prompts suicidal tendencies"; James Gilbert wrote a friend that he had "an open mind" on the question of destroying the university. In the case of younger militants, ambivalence could give way to "schizophrenia," as in this account by Mark Naison of taking his Ph.D. orals during the 1968 Columbia strike, an account which also contains some interesting observations on faculty response to the events.

Fayerweather Hall [was] occupied at the precise moment my exams began. . . . My orals board, composed of Richard Hofstadter and some equally uptight, but less renowned professors, began their questioning amidst the sounds of breaking furniture, shouts of rage and pride, fragments of falling plaster and chants of "shut it down." . . . The behavior of the faculty members was curious. They were

not, as I expected, unusually hostile to me, but absolutely tickled pink at the prospect of keeping the institutional ritual alive amidst the surrounding chaos. They regarded themselves as the carriers of the light of civilization among the depredations of the strange new barbarians who had somehow exploded into their lives. Every time plaster fell on their heads they felt a strange thrill; they alone stood between America and Totalitarianism. . . .

I sensed, during the whole awful comedy, that they were more interested in their own performance than in mine. There was no question that I would pass; the issue was: could they retain the composure to ask good questions. They did. I gave the expected-unexpected answers. . . . I played the game by all the rules. Man, they knew that I was for everything happening in that bldg, from the breaking of the furniture to the slugging of professors, but I would express my values in measured tones, over a glass of sherry, and make a final chivalric gesture. I would escort them out of the building. And so the final act featured mark naison, in a suit & tie. . . . leading rh, dwight miner, equally attired, out of the window of an occupied bldg in front of 2000 people, raising my fist dramatically when friends asked whether I passed, & feeling at once overjoyed at having the whole fucking mess over with, and guilty at deserting my brothers inside. . . . SCHIZOPHRENIA! You better believe it.¹⁷

Much of student protest activity was directed at the university simply because it was there, ready to hand. But it was also true that the university was connected in countless ways to the hated "military-industrial complex," from the calculation of class rank which determined which young men would be drafted for the war to Pentagon-sponsored secret research. Young leftists beginning to make careers in the university feared its corrupting influence—the moral consequences of a full-time choice for the academy over political activism. Lynd wrote:

Whatever our social origins, the university is a marvelously effective instrument for making us middle-class men. First it sets us in competition with one another. . . . We become emotionally engaged in the upward scramble, and whatever our rhetoric, in fact let the university become the emotional center of our lives. . . . It is a very peculiar sort of radicalism which permits one only to be arrested in summertime, or obliges one to hurry home from Hanoi to be on time for a seminar. But that is the kind of radical one has to be so long as one's first commitment is to university life. . . . We ourselves must have a foot solidly off the campus . . . alternate years of full-time intellectual work with years of full-time work for the Movement. . . . Nothing in the Communist Manifesto, or for that matter the New Testament, assures us that at age thirty-five or forty we should expect to achieve economic security for the rest of our lives. Disgorge the bait of tenure, and the problem of making a living can solve itself year-by-year.

¹⁷Kaplow to Eleanor Hakim, undated, *Studies on the Left Papers*, 5-6; Gilbert to Paul Buhle, 24 October 1968, *Radical America Papers*, 1-16; Naison to Paul Buhle, undated (Spring 1968), *Radical America Papers*, 2-14.

Rejection of the idea of a full-time academic career was connected to the New Left theme of "wholeness." "In resistance to a dehumanizing social system," Arthur Waskow wrote, "radical historians . . . are questioning the whole bureaucratic-'rational' assumption of the split in roles between citizen and scholar."¹⁸

Opposition to bureaucratic rationality and to hierarchy inevitably also influenced some young leftists' attitude to the community of historians. The introduction to a special issue of *Radical America* devoted to left historiography spoke of its editors' ambivalence on that score. On the one hand, they had had, at Wisconsin, cordial and intellectually rewarding experiences with members of the faculty, and they endorsed the profession's rigorous standards of proof.

On the negative side, the profession seems to us a bad combination of a gentlemen's clubhouse and a bureaucracy. . . . Even today faculty members at the most prestigious universities, who largely set the tone for the profession as a whole, enjoy an income level and social status that sets them well apart from the lower classes in society. . . . It is . . . a bureaucracy in which younger men progress by producing tangible evidence of their merit (publications). In this constant struggle to advance, the history profession itself becomes the source of all values for those who depend on its approbation for their employment. It is an unhealthy atmosphere.

Jesse Lemisch, in addition to joining the denunciation of hierarchy and competitiveness per se, argued that professional hierarchy impeded the growth of knowledge; that "what we know of scientific revolutions and of the sociology of knowledge clearly indicates that meritocracy wars with truth."

The system which gives greater power to those with allegedly better ideas is inevitably a system for impeding innovation in ideas. . . . Those with power will define ideas which resemble their own as "excellent" and will encourage those ideas; it is not so much a matter of weeding out nonsense as of defining as nonsense what is to be weeded out. . . . While holding . . . to the *most rigorous of standards* the radical scholar should oppose the joining together of power and alleged merit, the institutionalization of standards. . . . Because he has a stake in rigor and in truth, the radical scholar will oppose authority, deference, hierarchy: in the classroom, in the university, in the professional association. Combining the

¹⁸Lynd, "Intellectuals, the University, and the Movement," speech delivered to founding meeting of New University Conference (Spring 1968), published as pamphlet (Boston, n.d.); Waskow, "Radicals, Conservatives, and History: 1969," *AHA Newsletter* 8 (February 1970): 27-28. Lynd later acknowledged that "while I was very much discontented at Yale, maybe I wasn't discontented enough to have turned my back on it and looked in new directions unless they pushed me out." (1977 interview in *Visions of History*, 151.)

anti-authoritarianism of the New Left with the anti-authoritarianism of scientific method, the radical defers to no authority but that of evidence and proof.¹⁹

There was a strong moralistic tone to much of the substantive and programmatic writing of members of this camp, joined to an emphasis on history which would be immediately useful. The activist scholar, Howard Zinn wrote, would "decid[e] from a particular ethical base what is the action-need of the moment, and . . . concentrate on that aspect of the truth-complex which fulfills that need."

If we start from the ethical assumption that it is fundamentally wrong to hold in bondage . . . another human being, and that the freeing of such persons requires penetrating the moral sensibilities of a nation, then it is justifiable to focus on those aspects of the complexity which support this goal. . . . You are not telling the whole truth . . . but you are emphasizing that portion of the truth which supports a morally desirable action.

He urged an historiography which would "recapture those few moments in the past which show the possibility of a better way of life than that which has dominated the earth thus far." Most members of this group heartily endorsed student cries for relevance in the classroom. Lynd rejected the argument that it was the proper task of radical scholars to analyze systems of oppression with greater precision and sophistication. "Is this not quibbling while Rome burns?" he asked. "Can it satisfactorily define the scholar's task to be able to say 'I told you so' amid the ruins? Should we be content with measuring the dimensions of our prison instead of chipping, however inadequately, against the bars?"²⁰

No doubt many factors, including the temperamental, inclined the activist faction to this historiographical orientation. But in Lynd's case, and in that of at least some sizable number of those associated with him, it

¹⁹*Radical America* 4 (November 1970): 1-2; Lemisch, "Radical Scholarship as Scientific Method and Anti-Authoritarianism, Not 'Relevance,'" *New University Conference Papers* 2 (1970) (unpaginated pamphlet). Lemisch's remark on scientific revolutions probably derived from one of the many common misreadings of the work of Thomas Kuhn.

²⁰Zinn, "Abolitionists, Freedom-Riders, and the Tactics of Agitation," in Martin Duberman, ed., *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton, 1965), 430-31; *Politics of History*, 47; Lynd, "Historical Past and Existential Present," in Theodore Roszak, ed., *The Dissenting Academy* (New York, 1968), 107. Zinn also urged historical study for left self-criticism: to "show how good social movements can go wrong, how leaders can betray their followers, how rebels can become bureaucrats, how ideals can become frozen and reified." (*Politics of History*, 51.) And Lemisch engaged in a running battle with Lynd and others of his comrades in defense of "irrelevant" scholarship. (See his "Who Will Write a Left History of Art While We Are All Putting Our Balls on the Line?"—appended as rejoinder to Lynd's "Intellectuals . . . and the Movement" (note 18, above).)

was rooted in a political and strategic evaluation of the contemporary scene. Impressed by the surge of leftist energy, and exhilarated by the temporary victories of students from Columbia to Nanterre, many believed that on what might be the eve of the American October, analytical scholarship was beside the point. There was a hint of Third World romanticism in this perspective, as when Lynd termed oral history of working-class communities "guerrilla history." In any event, his apocalyptic perspective was clear. "It seems to me," he wrote a friend, "that American society is 'objectively overripe' and that the thing to do is to change it. . . . In the last analysis revolution will happen if there are revolutionaries who *want* enough to make it. . . . I think that America will pass from New Leftism to more-or-less underground resistance against an American fascism without an intervening stage of electoral politics."²¹

As the historiographical posture of the group around Staughton Lynd was rooted in a political and strategic evaluation, so was that of the group whose central figures were Genovese, Lasch, and Weinstein, and the evaluations were diametrically opposed. Indeed, the second was deliberately formulated in opposition to that of the first. Genovese spoke of a struggle that "might take a century to mature," and foresaw a period of "political retreat but intellectual advance." He mocked "fantasies of revolutionary apocalypse—of a grand denouement that features the overthrow of the American state by an invincible army of acid-heads and suburbanites." Lasch attacked Lynd's argument that repression served the left. The position was "ill-informed and irresponsible," stemming both from a misreading of history and the New Left delusion that a minority of committed activists could make a revolution in the United States.²²

Members of this group saw in the most militant wing of the student movement what E. P. Thompson in a retrospective evaluation called "the revolting bourgeoisie doing its own revolting thing . . . the expressive and irrationalist, self-exalting gestures of style that do not belong to a serious and deeply rooted, rational revolutionary tradition." Though the tone in which campus activists were criticized might vary, all agreed that targeting the university as the enemy was a totally misconceived and suicidal

²¹Lynd, "Guerrilla History in Gary," *Liberation* 14 (October 1969): 17; Lynd to "Norm" [Fruchter?], undated but probably 1966, *Studies on the Left Papers*, 6–8.

²²Report of Genovese's remarks at 1965 Socialist Scholars Conference, *Studies on the Left* 5 (Fall 1965): 5; Genovese to Paul Buhle, 24 September 1970, *Radical America Papers*, 1–14; Lasch, "The Revival of Political Controversy in the Sixties," in *The Agony of the American Left* (New York, 1969), 203–4.

strategy. None in this camp maintained that the existing university was in fact a neutral institution; all were critical of its bureaucratic and hierarchical structure. Campaigns directed against the university's subservience to militarism were regarded as right and proper. Lasch confessed that like other members of his generation, he found himself "uncomfortable in academic life and often at odds with the profession and the university." But the university as such had to be defended, not attacked—primarily, though not exclusively, on prudential grounds. Given a long-term strategy, and the conditions of American life, it was, Genovese argued, the only viable home for effective work by the great majority of left intellectuals. "This fact," he said, "must shape our attitude toward the university as an institution, and it must be understood to impose certain limits and restrictions (compromises, if you will) on those who seek its protection." On a realistic assessment of the balance of political forces, "politicization" of universities would tilt them to the right. Works of scholarship were not "neutral"; Genovese described his own work as consistently "political in intent." "I have never written a line," he said, "that has not been . . . a political intervention." But unless the university, as an "arena of ideological contention," remained formally neutral, socialists could find no base there.²³

But the argument for the defense of the university—more precisely, the ideal of the university—was not just prudential. Weinstein wrote one of the younger leftist historians that having to live for a long time in the existing social order entailed "building on whatever is good in this society . . . preserv[ing] the better of our institutions—those that embody something of the ideal of freedom and self-development. . . . The ideal of truth, which is at least rhetorically . . . a central part of university self-image, is an ideal to be carried over into socialism and transcending capitalism." Both Lasch and Genovese endorsed the strategic doctrine of the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, who had argued that in the West socialist transformation would be accomplished not by a swift "war of movement," as in Russia, but through a protracted "war of position," in which the cultural front was by no means the least important. The task of socialist intellectuals was, in Genovese's paraphrase of Gramsci, "fashioning a world view appropriate to the movement and society they wish

²³Thompson, 1976 interview in *Visions of History*, 10; Lasch, foreword to 1973 edition of Richard Hofstadter's *American Political Tradition* (New York, 1973), xxiii–xiv; Genovese, "On Being a Socialist and a Historian," in his *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York, 1972); Genovese, "A Reply to Criticism," *Radical History Review* 3 (September 1976): 106–7.

to see born." Often this would involve drawing on older values, embodied in the traditions of humanistic scholarship, which the present ruling class was in the process of discarding.²⁴

A corollary of the long-term Gramscian strategy was that demands for scholarship which was immediately relevant were rejected out of hand. If activist criteria of relevance were frequently narrow and anti-intellectual, Genovese leaned so far in the other direction that he virtually embraced a cult of irrelevance. "All good (true, valid, competent) history," he wrote, whether on Dante's religious views or the shipbuilding industry in Bordeaux, served the socialist cause; "all poor (false, invalid, incompetent) history serves the interest of our enemies." Few, even among his closest associates, went quite as far as Genovese along these lines, but the grounds of his rejection of demands for "useful" history had considerable resonance for those who had shared his experience with the Communist Party. "The demand for ideological history, for 'class truth,' for 'partisanship in science,'" he wrote, "has ended in the service of a new elite, a new oppressor."²⁵

Battles between the two camps of left historians were fought in various arenas, and produced a number of casualties. *Studies on the Left* ceased publication after a struggle between "scholars" and "activists" proved irreconcilable; the same conflict first polarized and then destroyed the annual Socialist Scholars Conference and other ventures in left ecumenism. "La lutte finale" came at the December 1969 meeting of the American Historical Association. A radical caucus drawn from the activist wing of the left launched a campaign to pass a resolution against the war, to run Lynd for president of the AHA against the official candidate, Robert R. Palmer, and in various ways to restructure the association. Jesse Lemisch, writing to his comrades before the meeting, noted the great discrepancy between the "pathetic" disorganization of the insurgents and the fear that they inspired in "the establishment." He proposed that they might take advantage of this.

"There is a specter haunting the professors." Maybe they watch too much television. Often, just as the lone ranger was about to be destroyed by Indians, the U.S. cavalry would show up, or so it seemed, but it was actually Tonto, the friendly Indian, setting off cartridges in a frying pan. Maybe we should do some of this, i.e., come on very tough, frighten them into thinking that there are literally millions of us.

²⁴Weinstein to Paul Buhle, 15 November 1967 and 6 June 1968, *Radical America Papers*, 3-16; Genovese, "Socialist and Historian," 12.

²⁵"Socialist and Historian," 4, 9-10.

Establishment anxiety was real enough, and there was a concerted mail campaign to get "counterrevolutionaries" to attend the business meeting. The AHA Council produced its own proposals for structural reform. Richard Hofstadter, commenting on the council's constitutional amendments expressed his pleasure at "the way in which the sober purpose of keeping control in the hands of the sane majority of the establishment's members is accounted for in fine populist rhetoric." Just as real was the "pathetic" ineptitude of the insurgents. Following New Left norms of openness, Xeroxed copies of correspondence among the rebels on how to proceed, including Lemisch's "Tonto strategy," were put on the reserve shelves of the library at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the edification of would-be recruits. The correspondence was promptly re-copied and sent to AHA headquarters by members of the Wisconsin history faculty.²⁶

At the 1969 business meeting the insurgents were defeated on every front. Palmer easily outpolled Lynd for the presidency; the constitutional amendments aiming at maintaining elite control passed just as easily; the antiwar resolution sponsored by the radical caucus was decisively rejected. Both wings of the left seemed to inhabit a realm of fantasy or, at a minimum, to be intoxicated with their own rhetoric. Lynd's fantasies were grandiose. Even after the AHA had, by constitutional change, armored itself against transient majorities at its business meetings, Lynd wrote of the radicals being in a position to "take power" in the association. Genovese's fantasies were paranoid. He predicted that if the antiwar resolution passed, there would be a purge of the AHA, since all members who dissented would be forced to leave the organization. (This phenomenon was not observed at universities like Harvard where the faculty had passed an antiwar resolution, or in other academic associations which had done likewise, nor, for that matter, in the AHA, when, a few years later, it quietly followed suit.) Genovese, in language so extreme that he alienated many of his closest supporters, labeled the Lynd group "totalitarians," and in an at-the-top-of-his-lungs conclusion to a speech at the business meeting, urged the association to "put them down, put them down hard, and put them down once and for all."²⁷

In all of this "the objectivity question" was often the vehicle through

²⁶Lemisch to Arthur Waskow, 13 September 1969, Lynd/Radical Caucus/AHA Papers, Box 2; Hofstadter circular letter, 1 December 1969, and copy of Hofstadter to AHA executive secretary Paul Ward, 25 August 1969, both in Cochran Papers, Boxes 5 and 7, respectively.

²⁷Lynd, "Prospects for the New Left," 26; Genovese's remarks quoted in the *Washington Post*, 29 December 1969.

which quite different agendas were pursued. Terms with positive valence ("disinterested," "evenhanded") were claimed for one's own camp; those with negative connotations ("present-minded," "partisan") were ascribed to one's enemies. To be sure, alignments were frequently confusing, and pronouncements were sometimes Delphic. Reviewers of Howard Zinn's *Politics of History* could not decide whether he was embracing or seeking to escape from relativism; Genovese repeatedly attacked ideological scholarship (bad) and simultaneously urged that universities be arenas of ideological contention (good). Even with a scorecard it was often difficult to tell the players and their positions.

But in the main, strategic conceptions, and concomitant choices of allies and opponents, dictated postures. For those in the Lynd camp, the allies were militants in the street, the principal enemy was mainstream historical scholarship. Jesse Lemisch, in a speech which concluded by invoking Ranke, attempted to seize the objectivist high ground for the left, and demonstrate, through a detailed examination of the work of the consensus historians, that it was they who were systematically present-minded.

The politics which mainstream historians have admired are unreal and unprincipled; their history has aimed further to insulate those politics from reality. But the Left will continue to present the real alternatives. . . . Fire us, expel us, jail us, we will not go away. We exist, and people like us have existed throughout history, and we will simply not allow you the luxury of continuing to call yourselves politically neutral while you exclude all of this from your history. You cannot lecture us on civility while you legitimize barbarity. You cannot fire us for activism without having your own activism exposed. You cannot call apologetics "excellence" without expecting the most rigorous and aggressive of scholarly replies. We were at the Democratic Convention, and at the steps of the Pentagon. . . . And we are in the libraries, writing history, trying to cure it of your partisan and self-congratulatory fictions, trying to come a little closer to finding out how things actually were.²⁸

Genovese and Lasch, as part of a strategy aimed at "convinc[ing] liberals and conservatives that the culture they value cannot be preserved without a fundamental reform of American society," and winning a place for leftist academic work in the university, directed their principal fire at the Lynd camp for "sneer[ing] at objectivity," for hostility to the values of scholarship: Genovese excoriated Lynd for his "distrust of the intel-

²⁸Lemisch, *On Active Service in War and Peace: Politics and Ideology in the American Historical Profession* (Toronto, 1975), 117. The original paper, delivered at the 1969 meeting of the AHA, was entitled "Present-Mindedness Revisited: Anti-Radicalism as a Goal of American Historical Writing."

ligentsia," his "antirationalism," his "subjectivity," above all for his "ahistorical" belief in absolute moral standards. Lasch heaped scorn on Howard Zinn's ethical and presentist criteria for choosing which truths to emphasize. With Genovese, he urged the academic world to repudiate "the cynical conclusion that all scholarship is subjective and 'ideological.'"²⁹

If the sleeping objectivity question was awakened by the emergence of an historiographical left it was not primarily because the left mounted any philosophical assault on norms of objectivity, which by and large it accepted. In part what raised the question anew was the strident tone of the new debates, and the tumultuous climate in which they took place. Historically, the posture of objectivity had always been closely associated with values of civility, moderation, and order. Formally, Lemisch's fiery oration at the 1969 AHA meeting was a Rankean attack on present-mindedness. But few traditionalists who venerated the father of modern historical scholarship, and believed in writing history "wie es eigentlich gewesen," could take much pleasure at Lemisch's invocation of Ranke's words, at the conclusion of a savage attack on the previous generation of historians, and to the accompaniment of raised fists and cries of "Right on!" A referee for the *Journal of American History*, to which Lemisch had submitted his AHA talk, wrote to the *Journal's* editor: "I don't know how you can tell him that he simply cannot do this, and that he certainly cannot do it in the pages of the *Journal*. He probably believes that he can, which says something about how far he and his ilk are estranged from civilization."³⁰

Beyond all this, the emergence of the historiographical left was but one dimension of a process of ideological polarization, disorientation, and fragmentation taking place throughout the academic world. At the beginning of the decade of the sixties one could find no better representatives of the liberal academic center than Walter Johnson, chairman of the University of Chicago History Department, and Oscar Handlin, Harvard's premier Americanist. By the end of the decade Johnson was drafting the radical caucus's resolution denouncing American imperialism and the murder of the Black Panthers; Handlin was signing advertisements for Richard Nixon. Disorientation was at least as common as polariza-

²⁹Lasch and Genovese, "The Education and the University We Need Now," *New York Review of Books* 13 (9 October 1969): 23-24; Genovese, "Socialist and Historian," 9-10; Genovese, "Staughton Lynd as Historian and Ideologue" (originally published in 1968), in *Essays in Red and Black*, 366, 359, 357; Lasch, foreword to 1973 edition of *American Political Tradition*, xx-xxi; Lasch and Genovese, 26.

³⁰Anonymous referee's report, quoted in Thomas Schofield's introduction to Lemisch, *On Active Service*, 5.

tion. Wayne Cole wrote a colleague that he had long considered himself "well to the 'left' . . . now it seems strange to be viewed as . . . conservative in the Department and profession." A vaguely liberal "consensus of the competent" had been the bedrock of postwar historians' confidence in objectivity; increasingly, that rock was reduced to rubble.³¹

II

Manifestly Genovese's assessment of the short-term prospects for the left was correct, and Lynd's egregiously wrong: nothing remotely resembling the revolutionary crisis Lynd anticipated appeared. If left-wing scholars were to make a contribution to socialist transformation, at best a far-distant prospect, it would be in the stacks, and not in the streets. But, a generation later, the across-the-board program and process of ideological contestation which Genovese and his associates had proposed had not materialized either. Lynd had not been entirely mistaken in emphasizing the co-optive power of the profession, though characteristically he had focused on the risk of moral corruption of the individual scholar, rather than the ways in which the organization and values of the profession worked to restrict and defuse conflict and confrontation. Ever increasing specialization, and the concentration of leftists in a handful of specialties, localized conflict; a deeply entrenched empiricist orientation worked to direct attention toward data rather than theory; the high value placed on moving toward scholarly convergence inclined members of the profession to incorporate bits and pieces of heterodox analyses, rather than confront them head-on. All of this, of course, took place within a larger context which saw the center of gravity of American political culture steadily move ever farther to the right.

This is not to say that left historiography was without impact, or that ideological conflicts did not take place. Marxist scholarship, both European and American, became more acceptable within the profession, though frequently somewhat grudgingly, as work was praised "despite" its Marxist orientation, or for not allowing that point of view to be "too obtrusive." Increasingly, major departments decided that the addition of Marxist historians to their permanent ranks would be a desirable complement to other orientations, and a bridge to a growing body of scholarship. But that body of scholarship as a whole was something less than the sum of its parts. Certainly it did not, in the aggregate, constitute anything

³¹Johnson draft resolution (for presentation to the 1970 meeting of the OAH) enclosed with Johnson to Lynd, 18 March 1970, Lynd/Radical Caucus/AHA Papers, Box 3; Cole to Norman Graebner, 9 August 1971, Graebner Papers.

like the historical component of that "alternative world view" which Genovese had hoped for. Most notably, there was no overall synthetic work which embodied the new perspective, as the Beards' *Rise of American Civilization* had between the wars; as, on a smaller scale, interpretive essays by Hartz, Boorstin, and Potter had in the era of consensus.³²

It was probably not a coincidence that the left historical scholarship which had the greatest influence on the profession was work which could as easily be used for conservative as for radical purposes. Books by Gabriel Kolko (*The Triumph of Conservatism*) and James Weinstein (*The Corporate Ideal and the Liberal State*), but also work by William A. Williams and his students, advanced the idea of "corporate liberalism." Extending the consensus historians' onslaught on the Progressive vision of "the people versus the interests," twentieth-century liberalism, from Theodore Roosevelt to Franklin Roosevelt and beyond, was reinterpreted as a strategy of stabilizing capitalism through a collaborative effort of big business, government, and organized labor. It was a strategy by which class collaboration was substituted for class conflict; in which all parties shared an interest in smoothing out business cycles through regulation, expanding overseas markets, and cooperating to increase the size of the economic pie while keeping the distribution of shares, and power, unaltered.

Work by Kolko and Weinstein meshed with "corporatist" theories being developed by nonleftists like Alfred Chandler, Samuel Hays, and Robert Wiebe, and Europeanists like Charles Maier—all of whom viewed the development with more equanimity. While there was dissent from some liberal historians whose icons were being attacked, by and large work in this tradition received a favorable reception. Some young leftists in the early 1970s, and Herbert Gutman in the early 1980s, criticized work on "corporate liberalism" for its pessimism: reading back into the past, they said, the mood of a later period of discouragement about possibilities of transformative action from below. There was, in any case, no denying that when pushed to its conclusion, work in this tradition, despite its quasi-left provenance, was redolent of some of those consensus themes which many on the left had found most offensive. According to one recent critic, "there is about their description of the modern world an unmistakable aura of inevitability." It was

a subtle version of the same normative view of protest, dissent, and alternative visions that characterizes consensus history. Agrarian radicals, fundamentalists,

³²One possible exception to this generalization is William A. Williams's *Contours of American History*, which was certainly influential, but too idiosyncratic and allusive to constitute a framework for synthesis.

militant minorities, and others who have opposed the centralizing tendencies of modern society may not be the "paranoid" sociopaths that consensus historians at times described. But they are, in the organizational view, essentially irrelevant, clinging to a vision of society doomed to obsolescence by the relentless march of history.³³

The great majority of young radical historians entered one or another subdivision of social history. Even before the left influx, that area of historical scholarship was *the* growth industry within the profession. As a percentage of all dissertations in history, studies in social history quadrupled between 1958 and 1978, overtaking intellectual history, previously the hot field for young scholars. While a great deal of new social-historical scholarship, beginning in the late 1950s, was informed by Parsonian sociology and by "modernization theory," social history remained, as it had always been, a field relatively hospitable to young radicals. As someone once remarked, thoroughgoingly conservative social historians were about as numerous as Republican folk singers. While the entry into social history of a great many young radicals pushed it somewhat farther to the left, for various reasons it never became the center of a left bid for intellectual hegemony within the profession, as some on the left had hoped and as many on the right feared.³⁴

The inspiration for a good deal of the new social history came from E. P. Thompson's 1964 *The Making of the English Working Class*. Surely no work in European history ever so profoundly and so rapidly influenced so many American historians. Thompson, of course, had a special appeal to those on the left. He was the prime—indeed, perhaps the sole—exemplar of Lynd's model radical historian who continued to produce scholarly work of high quality while keeping one foot outside the academy, and devoting much of his time to political activity. *The Making of the English Working Class* was avowedly partisan, suffused with moral passion. It was dedicated to creating a Marxist historiography which abandoned the "construction engineer's metaphor" of base and super-

³³Disparagement of "corporate liberalism" in "New Radical Historians in the Sixties: A Survey," *Radical America* 4 (November 1970): 104-6, and Gutman interview (1982) in *Visions of History*, 204; long quotation from Alan Brinkley in his "Writing the History of Contemporary America," *Daedalus* 113 (Summer 1984): 133-34.

³⁴Calculations by Robert Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History," in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), 334. Any such generalization depends on definitions, and whether one lumps or splits subcategories. Mine is a lumping definition, referring to studies of the everyday experience of popular classes, whether in cities, factories, or the home; regardless of the race or gender of those studied: it thus includes much (though not all) of what are sometimes separately designated as urban, labor, family, black, and women's history.

structure; which broke with "economistic" determinism, and focused rather on "lived experience" and the agency of those at the bottom of society. Thompson attacked the practice and motives of mainstream academics who denied the centrality of class and class struggle. But he was equally critical of the way the concept had frequently been employed by Marxists. He reconceptualized class in a fashion which one of his American admirers called "a quenching shower of spring rain across a parched landscape of arid, static definitions."

Sociologists who have stopped the time-machine and, with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine-room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status-hierarchies, and the rest. Of course, they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion—not this interest and that interest, but the *friction* of interests—the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise. Class is a social and cultural formation . . . which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes. . . . When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-systems, who have a *disposition* to *behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening.³⁵

In its focus on spontaneous forms of protest, and the ways in which subordinate classes forged their own oppositional postures, *The Making of the English Working Class* opened important new areas for exploration, and inspired important work. But whereas some who acknowledged their indebtedness to Thompson, like Genovese, retained Thompson's emphasis on class, others who expressed similar indebtedness, like Herbert Gutman, were relatively silent on the question. From a professional historical, or Marxist, point of view there were some serious weaknesses in *The Making*, some of which Thompson later acknowledged, and which were much less evident in his later work. There was a tendency to inflate the significance and exaggerate the element of spontaneity in sometimes ephemeral protest. The focus on the standpoint of the oppressed sometimes gave short shrift to the significance of structures of domination. Overall—and this tendency increased as Thompson was drawn more and more deeply into polemics with Marxist structuralists—there

³⁵Alan Dawley, "E. P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans," *Radical History Review* 19 (1978-79): 39; Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," *Socialist Register*, 1965, 357.

was an empiricism which sometimes almost shaded off into the position that "the facts spoke for themselves."

Many of those who sought to follow Thompson's example in writing history "from the bottom up" had much less discipline and sophistication than the master, and the weaknesses in Thompson's work were often exaggerated in that of epigones. On the one hand, there were inspirational accounts which contained overdrawn portrayals of lower-class militancy. On the other hand, there were studies which, in their absorption with the minutiae of everyday underclass existence, sometimes degenerated into sentimental antiquarianism or, at any rate, social history as G. M. Trevelyan had defined it: history "with the politics left out." This latter tendency was furthered by some leading social historians not of the left, for one of whom the field would have "arrived" when "the history of menarche is widely recognized as equal in importance to the history of monarchy."³⁶

As so often in the case of influential writings, the timing of their arrival is crucial. Thompson's work appeared on the American scene at a time when there was widespread enthusiasm for a deinstitutionalized understanding of politics joined to a variety of radical-democratic and libertarian currents. As that tide receded, the political thrust of Thompsonian social history was often lost; it had, wrote Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, "lost the discipline of its organizing insights and was left marooned on a sea of increasingly diffuse cultural analysis." *A fortiori*, this was seen by disgruntled leftists as characteristic of social history as a whole. Tony Judt, in a particularly ill-tempered attack on what he saw as dominant tendencies in the field in the seventies, wrote of its political marginalization, the encouragement which practitioners received to concentrate on the "avowedly insignificant."

Meanwhile the political history of the ruling class has survived unscathed the threat to its hegemony of interpretation in those things that matter, rather in the way that an international corporation will grant a degree of workers' control on the shop-floor, smiling the while, in the knowledge that this is not where the true power lies.

Eugene Genovese had urged the depoliticization of the universities so that a politicized scholarship would be free to flourish—a hope he now

³⁶Peter N. Stearns, "Coming of Age," *Journal of Social History* 10 (1976): 250. The phrase "history from the bottom up," popularized by Jesse Lemisch in the 1960s, and probably independently coined, dated back to at least 1923, when Frederick Jackson Turner used it in a letter. (Turner to Carl William Blegen, 16 March 1923, Turner Papers, Box 32.)

found disappointed. Writing with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese he insisted on the continuing centrality of the politics and economics of class relations. The Genoveses deplored "massive attempts by social historians to deflect attention to the bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens of each one's favorite victims." The shift, they said, "owes much to the reigning preference for private satisfaction over public purpose."

As admirable as much of the recent social history has been and as valuable as much of the description of the life of the lower classes may eventually prove, the subject as a whole is steadily sinking into a neoantiquarian swamp presided over by liberal ideologues, the burden of whose political argument—notwithstanding the usual pretense of not having a political argument—rests on an evasion of class confrontation. It should therefore come as no surprise that so many leading lights are ex-Marxists, ex-new Leftists, and ex-Communists who have fallen silent on political matters as well as on the class content of historical process but who desperately cling to the subject matter of the lower classes to shore up eroding credentials.

Responding in 1980 to the criticisms of Judt, and implicitly to that of Eley and Nield and the Genoveses, Edward Shorter told them that their concerns were out of date—no longer fashionable. "Listen, Tony. . . . What you don't realize is that in most university towns nowadays people aren't all that *interested* in the Worker's Struggle. They're concerned with women now, with lifestyles, and why everyone's so unhappy."³⁷

Changes in the political climate also had a powerful effect on unpoliticized social historians who continued to wrestle with that hardy perennial "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" For generations this question had occupied both those historians who were asking, "Why (Thank God) Is There No Socialism in the United States?" and those asking, "Why (Goddamit) Is There No Socialism in the United States?" From the sixties onward there were more historians asking the latter question, but the answers offered did little to advance the search for an answer beyond explanations offered by Louis Hartz in the fifties. New scholarship in European history, notably William Sewell's work on early French socialism, tended to sustain Hartz's argument that the absence of an organic, corporatist, feudal past in the United States deprived Ameri-

³⁷Eley and Nield, "Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?" *Social History* 5 (1980): 267; Judt, "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians," *History Workshop* 7 (1979): 87; Genovese and Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital* (Oxford, 1983), x; "The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective," *Journal of Social History* 10 (1976): 213–15; Shorter, "'Clowns in Regal Purple'—A Response," *Theory and Society* 9 (1980): 673.

can workers of a collective memory sustaining an anticapitalist world view. To be sure, scholars found traces of such an outlook in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artisans, whose anticapitalist rhetoric centered on the charge that the new productive system was transforming their labor into a commodity. But all of this simply underscored the fact that, in the United States as in Europe, the most militant working-class activity was associated with the transition to rather than from capitalism.

While labor historians succeeded in demonstrating that American working-class history was considerably more turbulent than had appeared to be the case in previous representations, the history of radical labor militancy was, at least in the long run, and usually in the short as well, a history of defeat—certainly of failure to sustain a successful socialist movement. Werner Sombart's 1906 *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?* directed itself to the striking contrast between the growth of mass socialist parties in Europe and the absence of such formations in the United States. It was American exceptionalism that subsequent generations of scholars had sought to explain. By the late 1980s, American leftist scholars had experienced two decades of disappointment and disillusionment at the fate of the left abroad. In 1968 there was the failure of both the Prague Spring and "les événements de mai" in Paris; there was the degeneration of Third World socialisms into bureaucracy and repression; the collapse of "Eurocommunism"; the dismal record of the Mitterand government in France. The list could be extended almost indefinitely. Where was the socialist "success" abroad with which American socialist "failure" had been contrasted?

American leftists had often turned to the European past for visions of the American future. Perhaps it was the other way round. Perhaps Gertrude Stein had been right when she said that the United States was not the youngest nation, but the oldest, since it was the first to enter the twentieth century. Younger leftist social historians, like Sean Wilentz and Eric Foner, urged an abandonment of the thesis of "American exceptionalism," an abandonment which implied a break with the most fundamental Marxist assumptions. Rather than continuing to wrestle with Sombart's question, Foner said, one might more fruitfully ask, "why has there been no socialist transformation in any advanced capitalist society?"

Perhaps because mass politics, mass culture, and mass consumption came to America before it did to Europe, American socialists were the first to face the dilemma of how to define socialist politics in a capitalist democracy. Perhaps, in the dissipation of class ideologies, Europe is now catching up with a historical process already experienced in the United States. . . . Only time will tell whether

the United States has been behind Europe in the development of socialism, or ahead of it, in socialism's decline.³⁸

If social history had traditionally been relatively hospitable to radicals, there had been no field more establishmentarian than diplomatic history. But it was in that realm that left dissidence had its greatest impact, largely because historiographical controversies were fueled by the great debate on American foreign policy in the sixties and early seventies—a debate which cut much deeper than such debates in the past. In 1940–41, when isolationists and interventionists confronted each other, the issue was what we should *do*. Both of the contending parties had agreed on two propositions: that it would be a great misfortune if American young men were sent off to fight in a European war; that it would be a great misfortune if Hitler established permanent dominion over Europe. The debate was not a confrontation of opposing values, but had to do with which of two shared values should have precedence; which misfortune one had to accept to avoid the other.

The foreign policy debate which began in the sixties—enormously exacerbated and dramatized by the Vietnam War, but not, particularly among historians, initiated by that conflict—was not just about what we should do, but about who we *were*. Was the United States, as most historians had said, a traditionally isolationist nation, dedicated to minding its own business; a nation which, despite an aberrant spasm at the turn of the century, had been overwhelmingly anti-imperialist; a nation which had only slowly, reluctantly, and in self-defense, come to accept "the responsibilities of world power?" Or had the traditional version gotten it all wrong? Were we, in fact, something very, very different?

Generational experience was central to the conflict which emerged in the interpretation of American foreign policy. For diplomatic historians whose shaping experience was either the "battle against isolationism" in 1940 and 1941 or, as the received version had it, America's grudging recognition of a renewed totalitarian menace after 1945, the great truth about the history of American foreign relations was its tradition of noninvolvement in the affairs of the outside world; the American people's reluctance to recognize the need to defend their vital interests abroad. For a good many of those who came of age after the mid-1950s the dominant

³⁸Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" *History Workshop Journal* 17 (1984): 74–76. Cf. Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920," *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall 1984): 1–24, with critical comments by Nick Salvatore and Michael Hanagan immediately following.

experience, and one whose historical roots seemed worth exploring, was American globalism and interventionism: a worldwide network of military bases, the increasingly routine American practice of attempting to overthrow or subvert regimes considered "unfriendly."

The single most important figure in the reconceptualization of the history of American foreign policy was in fact a member of the "Munich generation"—William Appleman Williams of the University of Wisconsin, an Annapolis graduate who, abandoning a career as a professional naval officer after his service in World War II, turned to the study of history. In *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), and in subsequent works, Williams, and others who came to be designated members of the "Wisconsin school," sought to show that turn-of-the-century American imperialism, rather than being a brief departure from traditional national policy, was in fact continuous with early-nineteenth-century frontier expansion and early-twentieth-century U.S. domination of Latin America, which had grown by the middle of the century to a drive for global hegemony. Williams's characterization of American "open door imperialism" was, by his own account, influenced by contemporary English scholarship on "the imperialism of free trade." But in a larger sense his central theme of overseas expansion as the psychic heritage of the frontier mentality, and as a strategy consistently preferred over redistributive domestic policies for solving the problem of underconsumption, harked back to hints dropped by Frederick Jackson Turner, and the theory of imperialism advanced by John A. Hobson at the turn of the century. The recurring ambiguity in Williams's treatment of American expansionism—was it the inevitable consequence of the structure of American capitalism or a "cruel convenience" which could be reversed by a political act of will—reflected the tension between Turner's pessimistic streak and Hobson's reforming zeal.

From the early sixties onward, historians identified with the Wisconsin school followed, elaborated, and modified the approaches laid down by Williams. Though their work varied considerably in the relative weight given to economic, ideological, and political influences on policy, their investigations converged in seeing American devotion to overseas expansion as the red, white, and blue thread running through the past century of the country's history. Before the 1960s the community of American diplomatic historians had traditionally closely identified with the goals of policymakers, with a concomitant agreement in principle on the grounds for judging policy. This consensus did not survive that decade. When, in the early 1970s, Norman Graebner distributed a questionnaire to several hundred of his colleagues, which asked them to evaluate the "success" of

American foreign policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the responses made him realize that the question was no longer answerable in the old way. Many of Graebner's respondents wrote him that they couldn't answer the question. From their perspective, policies which were "successful" in accomplishing the stated or unstated aims of those who promoted them were politically and morally disastrous.³⁹

Given the larger implications of their theses, it is not surprising that the work of Williams and those associated with him on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American expansion evoked a hostile response from a large section of the community of diplomatic historians. But controversies over events in the relatively distant past were mild compared to the ill-tempered and vituperative debate which broke out in the sixties over the origins of the cold war, a debate which frequently filled the pages of general-circulation periodicals. The explicit issues in debate were important enough, but what made the controversy so highly charged were the implicit questions it raised, which had to do with nothing less than the United States' moral standing in the world.

In American thinking about international relations no theorem was more influential than that which asserted there was a close moral affinity between a nation's foreign and domestic policies—benevolent democratic regimes which were pacific and defensive, brutal despotisms which were aggressive and expansionist. This proposition had been a staple of American thinking about diplomacy since the nineteenth century. The assertion that the domestic terror and messianic ideologies of "totalitarian" regimes found their inevitable counterpart in those regimes' limitless drive for conquest was simply an updating and systematization of what had long been the conventional wisdom.

It was the equivalence between aggression and depravity, between a defensive posture and virtue, which had led Andrew McLaughlin to interpret the thesis that Germany had not been responsible for World War I as tantamount to saying that his son had died fighting "on the wrong side." No one in the twenties had been saying precisely that. But by the sixties an increasing number of Americans, especially in the universities, were saying something very similar with respect to the ongoing Vietnam War. In 1965 the defense of Eugene Genovese's academic freedom at Rutgers became the leading issue in the New Jersey gubernatorial race, after he had said, at an early teach-in, "I do not fear or regret the impending Viet Cong victory in Vietnam. I welcome it." Within the next few

³⁹Graebner, "The State of Diplomatic History," *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter* 4 (March 1973): 5.

years such remarks became commonplace, as a substantial number of Americans regretfully concluded not just that the war was ill-advised, but that we were on the wrong side.⁴⁰

What "cold war revisionism" did was to extend questions being raised about American policy in Vietnam to the larger issue of the genesis of the global conflict between the West and the Communist world. Until the 1960s the all-but-unquestioned historical truth about the origins of the cold war held that it was, in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s words, "the brave and essential response of free men to communist aggression." The core of the revisionists' position was that at the end of World War II, Soviet policy was dominated by a concern with security and reconstruction rather than expansion and global subversion; that visceral anti-Sovietism decisively colored the perceptions of American officials; that a variety of American actions—particularly the failure to accept the inevitability of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe—had unnecessarily escalated international tensions and prevented the establishment of a postwar *modus vivendi*. To one degree or another most revisionists saw a commitment to postwar American hegemony via open door imperialism as an underlying theme of U.S. policy.⁴¹

If revisionists agreed on this much, they agreed on little else. There were crosscutting divisions between "liberal" and "radical," "hard" and "soft," revisionists. There were those who in their analyses stressed American economic motives and the extension of the open door, those who stressed American messianic ideology, and those who tried to synthesize the two. Perhaps the most important division was between those who focused on contingent events and the role of personalities, and those who emphasized the alleged structural determinants of American policy. Some revisionists maintained that the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was dictated by anti-Soviet motives, but many others rejected this view. There were those who saw a sharp break in American policy with Truman's accession to the presidency, while others saw a fundamental continuity between Roosevelt and his successor.

The sixties provided a congenial climate for a revised view of the origins of the cold war. If fewer and fewer at this time accepted that American "vital interests" were at stake in Southeast Asia, was it not reasonable to ask if the same was true of Eastern Europe in the 1940s? If more and

⁴⁰Genovese, quoted in Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York, 1973), 184.

⁴¹Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 46 (1967): 23. The phrase was Schlesinger's characterization of the "orthodox" view: by 1967 he was prepared to acknowledge that the cold war was not a "pure" case of Russian aggression and American response. (*Ibid.*, 52.)

more Americans in the sixties could concede that China had a legitimate interest in the regimes on her borders, might not this also have been the case with the USSR earlier on? If ill-considered American global interventionism had landed us in this bloodiest manifestation of the cold war, was it not at least worth considering whether the same hubris had been responsible for the larger conflict of which it was a part? Manifestly by the sixties the United States was overseeing an empire. Could scholars comfortably argue that it had been acquired, as had been said of the British Empire, "in a fit of absence of mind"?

Such "presentist" questions were reinforced by revelations from newly opened archives and newly published memoirs, together with the evolution of mainstream scholarship, all of which on the whole tended to sustain most of the core revisionist assumptions. That Russia's postwar posture had been defensive, and that acceptance of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe had offered the only possible basis of accommodation, were accepted by all but the most hawkish scholars. Herbert Feis, a staunch antirevisionist, admitted privately that "the intense quest for exports by the capitalist countries was inadvisable and always an impending source of conflict." He deplored "the fanaticism with which from the time of Secretary Hull, Will Clayton, and Dean Acheson the American Government has made itself the exponent of trade expansion." Particular interpretations which had been central to the orthodox version had to be abandoned. Stalin, whose alleged promotion of armed insurgency in Greece had been the justification for the Truman Doctrine, had, it was now acknowledged, opposed that initiative. The invitation to the Soviets to participate in the Marshall Plan had been presented as evidence of continuing American goodwill. Contemporary documents made it clear that the invitation was purely for show—that it had been carefully framed to insure Soviet rejection. George Kennan's *Memoirs*, intended to demonstrate his cool realism, revealed rather an anguished moralist in the grip of a visceral anti-Sovietism.⁴²

For those committed to the defense of postwar American foreign policy, while treating the Vietnam War as an aberration, fending off the revisionist challenge was more than an academic exercise. Given the broad and deep-seated commitment to the equation between aggressive behavior and depravity, the confirmation of primary Soviet responsibility for the conflict was a fundamental patriotic duty if American virtue was to be defended. (Additionally, one could not satisfactorily justify hundreds of billions of dollars in continuing defense budgets on the basis of a

⁴²Feis to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., 7 May 1971, Feis Papers, Box 32.

thesis of avoidable misunderstanding, let alone one which attributed greater bellicosity to America.) There was a personal element as well. To accept the revisionist theses was not just to challenge older historians' interpretations, but, in the case of many of them, to besmirch the crusade to which they had devoted much of their youth. As early as 1966, Schlesinger sounded the alarm: it was necessary to "blow the whistle before the current outburst of revisionism regarding the origins of the cold war goes much further."⁴³

Those dedicated to discrediting revisionist theses employed a variety of strategies. One was red-baiting. "The fact that in some aspects the revisionist thesis parallels the official Soviet argument," wrote Schlesinger, "must not, of course, prevent consideration of the case on its merits, nor raise questions about the motives of the writers, all of whom, so far as I know [*sic*], are independent-minded scholars."

For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men.

(Privately, Schlesinger had described William A. Williams to the executive secretary of the AHA as "a pro-Communist scholar.") John Lewis Gaddis asserted that the revisionists applied "the classical Leninist model of imperialism" to postwar American foreign policy, something which none of them had done. Herbert Feis protested to the editor of the *New York Times Book Review* that whereas the text of a letter he had submitted to the *Review* stated that revisionist historians' work closely followed the interpretation of Communist writers, the letter as published substituted "Marxian" for "Communist." "I meant Communist, not merely Marxian . . . most of the writings and analyses of the historians of the New Left seemed to me just poor imitations of Communist official doctrine. . . . Have you by any chance members of the New Left on your staff who are protecting their pals?"⁴⁴

The very term "New Left" as applied to revisionist historians was a far from innocent appellation, and it continued to be employed by antirevisionists like Gaddis well into the 1980s, long after its inappropriateness had become evident. By aggregating a carefully selected list of writers—

⁴³Schlesinger, letter to the editor, *New York Review of Books* 7 (20 October 1966): 37. Subsequently he characterized this remark as "somewhat intemperate." ("Origins of the Cold War," 23.)

⁴⁴Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," 24; Schlesinger to Boyd Shafer, 1 July 1954, AHA Papers, Box 367; Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 7 (1983): 172–73; Feis to John Leonard, 15 April 1971, Feis Papers, Box 32.

including the most vulnerable, and omitting the most circumspect—all cold war revisionists could be tarred with the New Left brush, and made collectively responsible for whatever errors or exaggerations were contained in the work of anyone so designated. And, of course, there were errors and exaggerations in revisionist work, along with other defects. Gar Alperowitz, in arguing that anti-Soviet motives were central in the decision to bomb Hiroshima, was pushing to the limit Richard Hofstadter's maxim that "if a new or heterodox idea is worth anything at all it is worth a forceful overstatement." Gabriel Kolko consistently overestimated calculation and continuity in American policy. The tone of all of his writings was dogmatic and arrogant, and he could reasonably be charged with giving Soviet versions of events a benefit of the doubt which they did not deserve. Others were corrigible on other scores.

The chef d'oeuvre of antirevisionism, the shrillest blast of the whistle which Schlesinger had sought, was Robert Maddox's *The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War*, which before its publication collected a formidable array of sponsors, including Feis, Schlesinger, and Oscar Handlin. Deliberately ignoring the theoretical framework offered by revisionists, and formally abstaining from any evaluation of their theses, the book examined "representative" examples of the use of evidence in seven well-known revisionist accounts. Maddox's conclusion was that "without exception" the books he subjected to scrutiny were farragoes of falsification and fabrication; that even "granting a generous allowance for mere carelessness," the authors' "pervasive misusages of the source materials" could only be explained as willful and deliberate; that their works had no claim to scholarly standing.⁴⁵

Maddox's conclusion, if accepted by the community of diplomatic historians, would have been fatal for cold war revisionism within the profession. Schlesinger and Handlin expressed satisfaction that Maddox

⁴⁵*The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War* (Princeton, 1973), 10–11. The authors treated were Gar Alperowitz, Diane Shaver Clemens, D. F. Fleming, Lloyd C. Gardner, David Horowitz, Gabriel Kolko, and William A. Williams. One of Maddox's "New Leftists" (Fleming) was an old Wilsonian who celebrated his eightieth birthday in the year Maddox's book was published; another (Horowitz) was a radical journalist without academic credentials, who subsequently became a Reaganite. (Neither Fleming nor Horowitz had any credibility within the historical community.) Of the five remaining authors treated, only Alperowitz, Gardner, and Kolko were central figures in the revisionist venture—and it was well known that Alperowitz's principal conclusions had been rejected by most revisionists. Maddox's attack on Williams's *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* was directed to the one out of seven chapters in that sweeping interpretive essay which dealt with the origins of the cold war. (Williams's empirical research all dealt with the nineteenth century.) In the case of Clemens, whose *Yalta* Maddox put under the microscope, his critique was limited to five pages in her concluding chapter.

had proven his case. The book was hailed in right-wing journals for "uncovering an academic Watergate" and disclosing the "intellectual sorcery" of the revisionists. But academic reviewers were on the whole unimpressed, which led Handlin to expatiate on "the ultimate betrayal of the profession," "preach[ing] the academic coverup." While almost all professional historians commented unfavorably on what Norman Graebner called Maddox's "unnecessary spirit of vindictiveness," their more important conclusion was that even in his own hyperempiricist terms, Maddox had not made his case. Where real errors had been disclosed they were adjudged for the most part inconsequential. More often, the items in Maddox's catalogue of horrors seemed to the reviewers matters of interpretation on which honest scholars might differ.⁴⁶

After a brief flurry of attention, Maddox and his bombshell-turned-firecracker disappeared from view. While sharp criticism continued to be directed at revisionist works, they were not to be thus blown out of the water. Other lines of attack were employed. Historians of the older generation sometimes invoked the authority of their gray hairs. Lawrence S. Kaplan asked how any of the revisionists could "truly understand the origins of the Cold War unless they were of an age to experience World War II and its immediate aftermath." H. Stuart Hughes found revisionist accounts by younger historians who did not experience the events firsthand "out of focus"—they lacked the "feel and taste" of the 1940s. Schlesinger thought that those with "no vivid memories of Stalinism" might fail to appreciate the perceptions, and language, of his own generation. Younger historians, he wrote, erred in failing to realize that when in the 1940s those like himself voiced their opposition to Communism they were not responding to a polycentric phenomenon: "Communism had a clear and specific meaning . . . it didn't mean Titoism, or Trotskyism, or Maoism . . . but purely and simply Stalinism." (This explanation was received skeptically by those who recalled that in 1945, Schlesinger had described a nineteenth-century journalist who had supported the Paris Commune as "one of the first American Communist fellow travelers.")⁴⁷

⁴⁶The two phrases from the right appeared, respectively, as the title of Claire Z. Carey's review in *The Intercollegiate Review* 9 (Winter 1973-74): 51, and in Jack Chatfield's review, *National Review* 25 (1973): 904-5; Handlin's remarks in "The Failure of the Historians," *Freedom at Issue* 32 (September-October 1975): 5; Graebner review of Maddox, *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (1974): 138-39. The review which particularly outraged Handlin was that by Warren F. Kimball, "The Cold War Warmed Over," *AHR* 79 (1974): 1119-36.

⁴⁷Kaplan, "Response" to Gaddis, "Post-Revisionist Synthesis," 194; Hughes, "The Second Year of the Cold War," *Commentary* 48 (August 1969): 27; Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," 22-23; Schlesinger, "Communication" to *AHR* 78 (1973): 190-91; Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1946), 409, 508.

Though Schlesinger's memory may have been inexact, the larger point he was making directs attention both to the principal source of "orthodox" dismay at cold war revisionism, and to the grounds on which the controversy might be, if not resolved, at least moderated. As so often, the dispute over the origins of the cold war had been moralistic, a matter of apportioning guilt, blame, or responsibility. With some exceptions, moralism among the contenders was more characteristic of the orthodox than of the revisionists. A recurring theme in antirevisionist arguments was that it was astigmatic, if not vaguely obscene, to ignore the evils of the Stalinist regime, to evaluate the foreign policy of the Soviet Union without consideration of its domestic horrors. H. Stuart Hughes attacked revisionists for their "reluctance to plumb the full monstrosity in Stalin's character"; Oscar Handlin, for attempting to "establish a moral parity in the post-war world between the United States and the Soviet Union." Schlesinger said that the great omission of the revisionists was "the fact that the Soviet Union was *not* a traditional national state." The key was agreement on the "big truth" of Stalinist depravity. If that were acknowledged all around, one could continue to wrangle over particulars, but at least a measure of historiographical détente might be achieved.⁴⁸

The problem faced by defenders of the orthodox version of the cold war was not unlike that which had confronted southerners in the late nineteenth century with respect to the historiography of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Given the centrality of the cold war in American society since the 1940s, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that cold war revisionism threatened the myth which defined and justified the postwar American polity, as northern scholarship in the previous century had threatened white southerners' self-image and confidence in their own righteousness. In that case, as we have seen, the key was consensual agreement on black inferiority. Once that was granted, one could acknowledge that slavery had been often cruel and had become anachronistic; even that secession was a mistake; that the Ku Klux Klan might have been guilty of excesses. But, on the premise of black inferiority, actions taken to preserve white supremacy were understandable, and, even if mistaken, to be judged charitably. As acknowledgment of black inferiority was the key to a history acceptable to white southerners a hundred years earlier, acknowledgment of Soviet depravity (and thus the moral superiority of Western society) was for defenders of American

⁴⁸Hughes, "The Cold War and Detente," *New York Review of Books* 26 (19 February 1976): 4; Handlin, introduction to Robert J. Maddox, "Cold War Revisionism: Abusing History," *Freedom at Issue* 15 (September-October 1972): 2; Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," 46.

policy. If this was granted, substantial concessions could be made on particular interpretations, because nothing done to combat the "evil empire," no matter how ill-advised or excessive, could narrow the great moral gulf which separated the two superpowers.

This was the key to the partial cooling out of the controversy, on the basis of "postrevisionism," the label attached to interpretations of the origins of the cold war which incorporated many of the revisionist findings, but did so within a context which emphasized Soviet depravity and American virtue. Its first and fullest expression was John Lewis Gaddis's *United States and the Origins of the Cold War*, which unlike Maddox's book won widespread academic approbation, and garnered three professional prizes. Gaddis's narrative of the actual conduct of wartime and postwar Soviet-American diplomacy frequently had more in common with revisionist than with orthodox accounts. He saw the Soviet posture as defensive rather than expansionist. He acknowledged that during the war Roosevelt had indicated to the Russians that "they could count on a free hand in Eastern Europe"—a position abruptly reversed after 1945. On the key points in contention, he granted that Soviet but not American "vital interests" were at stake. The reviewer for the *American Historical Review* suggested that had Gaddis's arguments been presented six or seven years earlier, they would have led the work to be labeled "an example of New Left history."⁴⁹

But Gaddis did not limit himself to a diplomatic recital, the level on which his work could lead to unacceptably "revisionist" conclusions. Throughout the book he treated American leaders as heavily constrained by calculation of the difficulties of going against public opinion, and the possibility of electoral costs if a more accommodating policy were pursued. "Surely," he wrote, it would be "uncharitable, if not unjust, to condemn officials for rejecting courses of action which, to them, seemed intolerable." In a conclusion which William H. McNeill generously described as "rather glib," Gaddis explained why, whatever the course of diplomacy, whatever the rights and wrongs of the substantive issues in dispute, the onset of the cold war was primarily the responsibility of the Soviet Union, precisely because of the vices of its political system, the virtues of ours.

If one must assign responsibility for the Cold War, the most meaningful way to proceed is to ask which side had the greater opportunity to accommodate itself, at least in part, to the other's position. . . . Revisionists have argued that American

⁴⁹*The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York, 1972), 134, 354-55; Kimball, 1123.

policy-makers possessed greater freedom of action, but their view ignores the constraints imposed by domestic politics. Little is known even today about how Stalin defined his options, but it does seem safe to say that the very nature of the Soviet system afforded him a larger selection of alternatives than were open to leaders of the United States. The Russian dictator was immune from pressures of Congress, public opinion, or the press. This is not to say that Stalin wanted a Cold War. . . . But his absolute powers did give him more chances to surmount the internal restraints on his policy than were available to his democratic counterparts in the West.⁵⁰

Other postrevisionist works varied in their assessment of blame or responsibility, but all emphasized Soviet depravity. For Vojtech Mastny the matter was straightforward: "the evils of the Soviet system were the ultimate cause of the Cold War." In a very different fashion, Daniel Yergin's *Shattered Peace* was inclined to assign greater responsibility to the United States, focusing on the visceral and rigid anti-Sovietism of the American diplomatic establishment. But it won broad approval, because, as Charles Maier noted, Yergin "temper[ed] his basically revisionist critique with evocations of Stalin's domestic repression."⁵¹

The extent of convergence should not be exaggerated: the moderation of controversy, to the extent that it occurred, was as much the result of temporary exhaustion as of anything else. The greatest limitation of the analogy with the nineteenth-century debate was that in the earlier case there was a powerful will to achieve reconciliation, which, while not completely absent, was much less powerful in the grumpy and sullen mood of the 1970s and 1980s. For most revisionists, Gaddis's postrevisionism was simply "orthodoxy restated." Yergin's narrative account, because of its avoidance of questions of structural determination, was "a toothless revisionism." The most intransigent traditionalists found Gaddis wishy-washy, and Yergin beyond the pale.⁵²

And with the passage of time, there were shifts in the grounds of contention. "Orthodoxy" was attacked from a new (in fact a very old) direction. The conventional wisdom on the cold war had originally been formulated in response to Republican charges that Democratic administrations had been, perhaps treasonably, too accommodating to the

⁵⁰*Origins of the Cold War*, 357, 360-61; McNeill, review of Gaddis, *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (1974): 287.

⁵¹Mastny, *Russia's Road to the Cold War: Diplomacy, Warfare, and the Politics of Communism, 1941-1945* (New York, 1978), 312; Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in Kammen, *Past Before Us*, 370-71.

⁵²Barton J. Bernstein, "Cold War Orthodoxy Restated," *Reviews in American History* 1 (1973): 460 (review of Gaddis); Carolyn Eisenberg, "Reflections on a Toothless Revisionism," *Diplomatic History* 2 (1978): 295 (review of Yergin).

USSR, rather than that they had been too intransigent. Now these charges, minus the imputation of treason, were revived. Oscar Handlin endorsed the explanation of the cold war advanced by Aleksander Solzhenitsyn—"a novelist with integrity enough to value the truth." The cold war began at Yalta

as the cowardly pens of Roosevelt and Churchill, anxious to celebrate their victory with a litany of concessions, signed away Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Mongolia, condemned to death or to concentration camps millions of Soviet citizens, created an ineffectual United Nations Assembly, and finally abandoned Yugoslavia, Albania, Poland, Bulgaria, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany.

By the mid-1980s Gaddis was hailing the "striking new interpretation," in fact an amalgam of the old orthodoxy and even older Republican charges against Roosevelt and Truman, that "the primary cause of the Cold War was Stalin's own ill-defined ambition. . . . A secondary cause was the West's failure to act soon enough to stop him." Theodore Draper, who had been one of the most vocal antirevisionists, was warning against the resurgence, among neoconservatives, of the McCarthyite version of the "Yalta surrender."⁵³

In a symposium on postrevisionism at the 1983 meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Lloyd Gardner said that debate was probably pointless since "we will not convince one another." Bruce Kuniholm thought that given the wide differences in assumptions and judgments, any agreement reached "will always be as much a matter of fashion as of 'truth.'" In part these remarks indicated acceptance of a perspectival relativism: a number of review articles on the cold war controversy used the Kuhnian language of "incommensurable paradigms." In part they signaled recognition that America was putting the Vietnam experience behind it.⁵⁴

In his 1968 presidential address to the American Historical Association, John K. Fairbank had called the Vietnam War "an object lesson in historical nonthinking." Greater historical sophistication, he said, could have averted a situation in which probably the greatest menace to mankind was "the American tendency to overrespond to heathen evils abroad, either by attacking them or by condemning them to outer dark-

⁵³Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 160-61, citing Solzhenitsyn, "The Big Losers in the Third World War," *New York Times*, 22 June 1975, sec. 4; Gaddis, "Post-Revisionist Synthesis," 176; Draper, "Neoconservative History," *New York Review of Books* 32 (16 January 1986): 5-15.

⁵⁴Gardner and Kuniholm, responses to Gaddis, "Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis," 191 and 201-2, respectively.

ness." After a generation of revisionist and postrevisionist scholarship, much of it devoted precisely to exploring and analyzing the roots of the phenomenon which Fairbank deplored, the fashion in American foreign policy was once again messianic rhetoric and global interventionism. In the 1960s Robert Freeman Smith and Ronald Radosh had been members of the Wisconsin school, and severe critics of American intervention in Latin America. In the age of Reagan they were denouncing the menace of leftist regimes in the hemisphere. A survey of diplomatic historians in the early 1980s reported that those who had moved to the right during the last ten years were three times as numerous as those who had moved to the left. It remained to be seen exactly how "fashionable" American diplomatic historiography would become.⁵⁵

III

It is not always easy to clearly identify a dominant interpretive orientation within the historical profession in any given period, but usually something more or less adequate can be patched together. The designation "conservative evolutionist" probably applies to the great majority of American historians from the 1880s through the first decade of the twentieth century. "Progressive" historiography had strong support from the teens through the forties, and "consensus" interpretations thereafter, and while in neither case did these orientations drive all competitors from the field, no great violence is done to the record by employing these labels as roughly descriptive of the leading schools in these successive periods. Certainly it is true that in each period most historians found one or another of these schema both coherent and satisfying.

A striking feature of the American historical profession in the last twenty years has been its inability to move toward any overarching inter-

⁵⁵Fairbank, "Assignment for the '70's," *AHR* 74 (1969): 873, 879; survey cited in Jeffrey Kimball, "The Influence of Ideology on Interpretive Disagreement: A Report on a Survey of Diplomatic, Military and Peace Historians on the Causes of 20th Century U.S. Wars," *History Teacher* 17 (1984): 364. The case of Radosh is particularly interesting. He is best known for *The Rosenberg File* (New York, 1983), co-authored by Joyce Milton. In it, Radosh concluded that the case against Julius Rosenberg was solid, and that leftist protests of "frame-up" were without foundation. In the controversy which followed the book's publication, Radosh was feted and fawned upon by the right and center, while receiving rough treatment from various sections of the left. Throughout, Radosh's greatest supporter on the left was the historian James Weinstein, since become editor and publisher of the socialist newspaper *In These Times*. Weinstein's consistent defense of the book cost him considerable personal abuse, canceled subscriptions, and the like. By 1986, Radosh, in the course of rebutting an article favorable to the Sandinista regime, noted that it appeared in "the ostensibly democratic socialist *In These Times*." (Radosh, "Nicaraguan Myths," *Partisan Review* 53 [1986]: 68.)

pretation which could organize American, or for that matter, non-American, history. Perhaps even more significantly, rather than there being vigorous competition between schools, each confidently pressing the claims of its own scheme, potential contenders seem to be in the process of breaking down, with many of their erstwhile promoters experiencing declining confidence in either their coherence or capacity to satisfy.

Schools of historical interpretation are never politically neutral. Overall views of the past are tied in countless ways to visions of the present and future. Which is to say that they are, in a broad sense, "ideological." In Chapter 3, I suggested that, broadly conceived, an ideology can be said to include (1) beliefs about the way things are, (2) beliefs about the way things ought to be, and (3) an ensemble of propositions about the relationship between the first two. Increasingly throughout the 1970s, and dramatically by the 1980s, not only was there no ideological consensus within the American intellectual community, but many of those previously committed to particular ideological perspectives were experiencing deep crises of confidence in their adequacy. The discontent and disarray were both academic and political. Scholarly experience suggested their inability to explain the past; political discouragement and disillusionment led to doubts about their adequacy as orientations in the present. There was confusion about what was, both now and in the past; uncertainty about what ought to be, beyond the vaguest generalizations; and, for the most part, not the foggiest notion of how "is" and "ought" could converge. The only proposition that seemed likely to command a plurality was the meta-ideological conviction that is and ought, however pictured, were diverging.

While a deeply pessimistic *Weltanschauung* is by no means inconsistent with historical scholarship of the highest order—the case of Henry Adams is the most obvious American example—it is difficult to imagine a national historical profession, conscious of its social responsibilities, organizing scholarly work around such a view. And almost equally hard to imagine it forming the tacit consensual basis on which historical scholarship is judged "objective."

The left presence within the historical profession from the 1960s onward was substantial compared to previous periods, but its strength is often exaggerated. In no important historical specialty were leftists a majority; in no major history department were they more than a small minority. The ranks of the historiographical left were depleted by the departure from the profession of most of those who had been associated with the Lynd faction of radical historians. Some, like Lynd himself, who became a lawyer, found other employment. No doubt for many younger

leftists whose first taste of academic life was in the exhilarating late sixties, the campus climate in the decades that followed was too bland for their taste, and they drifted away. A handful of left historians emigrated abroad; a few emigrated to the right. And, of course, from the early seventies the continuing job crisis excluded many who would have found permanent positions in the sixties.

What left historians did achieve was a certain legitimacy. As the election of Louis Gottschalk to the presidency of the AHA at a relatively young age had been a deliberate symbol of the acceptance of Jews within the profession, so the selection in 1978 of Eugene Genovese, at an even younger age, as president of the Organization of American Historians signaled the legitimacy of the left. The naming of John Womack, who called himself a (small "c") communist, as chairman of the Harvard History Department was perhaps an even more significant symbol of left "arrival." When left historical scholarship first appeared in the mid-sixties, it often received rather grudging tolerance, as when Robert R. Palmer reluctantly advised the editor of the *AHR* to let a young radical's work appear in the *Review*: "Otherwise it might seem that the *AHR*, as an organ of the establishment . . . seem to be trying to silence him or brush aside ideas emanating from the Left." But within the next decades leftists became a recognized constituency, not unlike other constituencies based on region or historical specialty, and as such fully entitled to representation on professional committees, on programs at professional meetings, and in professional journals.⁵⁶

But the very acceptance of radical historians as legitimate participants in a pluralistic professional discourse carried with it the likelihood that particular aspects of their work would be assimilated in a way which defused its bite—a process we have observed earlier in this chapter, and which, in another connection, I have referred to as "restriction through partial incorporation." And what was true of left scholarship was equally true of left scholars. Unlike that of blacks and women, whose identity is harder to shed, leftists' political identification could gradually attenuate until it was little more than a sentimental memory. It was awareness of these dangers that led E. P. Thompson, while stressing the importance of radical historians' participating fully in mainstream academic life, to warn that they should never allow themselves "to become wholly dependent upon established institutions." They had to occupy

some territory that is, without qualification, their own: their own journals, their own theoretical and practical centers—places where no one works for grades or

⁵⁶Palmer to Henry Winkler, 7 January 1966, AHA Papers, Box 846.

for tenure but for the transformation of society; places where criticism and self-criticism are fierce, but also mutual help and the exchange of theoretical and practical knowledge; places that prefigure in some ways the society of the future.⁵⁷

Various ventures of this kind were launched in the seventies. One was Eugene Genovese's *Marxist Perspectives*, a somewhat slick quarterly, intended to serve as both a forum for Marxist scholarship and a vehicle through which Marxists could engage those "on the other shore." Perhaps in part because of the ambiguity of its purpose, the journal never seemed to find its focus, and if it prefigured the society of the future, that future is bleak: following dissension among its editors, it ceased publication after two years. Meanwhile, a much younger group, some of whom as graduate students had been members of the Lynd caucus, began publishing the *Radical History Review*. This was a more raucous and countercultural journal, which evolved from a crudely reproduced bulletin into a major outlet for left scholarship—still going strong after a dozen years. (To the extent that the *Radical History Review* prefigures the society of the future, its citizens will have a lot of fun.) But in the very years that historical studies written from a left perspective multiplied, and won professional respect, the political morale of leftists was repeatedly battered by successive defeats abroad, and the all but total collapse of left and working-class movements at home. And at the same time, the theoretical core of left perspectives—Marxism—was starting to be perceived by many of its former followers as disintegrating.

Until the 1960s there had been so little serious Marxist historical scholarship that, as with the old aphorism about Christianity, it could be said the problem with Marxism was not that it had failed, but that it hadn't been tried. Hostility to Marxist currents within the Anglo-American academic community was so pervasive, and so often both ill-informed and manifestly politically motivated, that anyone even mildly skeptical of the conventional wisdom was likely to suspect that there must be a good deal of value in anything so widely anathematized. And, of course, there was, as attested by the work of great power and originality which began to be produced by highly talented Marxist historians in the English-speaking world. That work gave credence to their claims for Marxism as the overarching theoretical orientation which, suitably modified and "modernized," could offer a comprehensive understanding of the past.

But as "Marxist" scholarship flourished, the modifications and modernizations multiplied to the point that the coherence and distinctiveness

⁵⁷March 1976 interview with Thompson, *Visions*, 22–23.

of what remained became very doubtful. With the increasing emphasis on culture and consciousness, how far back did one have to reach to find materialist determination "in the last instance?" Did not newer Marxist stress on the relative autonomy of state and bureaucracy stretch to the breaking point their links to the mode of production? Marx's theory of exploitation through the extraction of surplus value might be sublime moral philosophy, but how useful was it as a tool of economic analysis? How many epicycles could one introduce into the Marxist taxonomy of class identity before it collapsed of Ptolemaic overload? As these questions were being raised with greater and greater urgency, there was a deep crisis in the interpretation of what had always been the center of the Marxist model, the French Revolution. Work by scholars in England, France, and the United States effectively challenged so many axiomatic propositions about this paradigm of "bourgeois revolution" that the subject became an embarrassment to Marxists throughout the western world.

Most American leftist historians were "Thompsonians," lining up with the author of *The Making of the English Working Class* in his continuing debate with supporters of French structuralist Marxism; endorsing his effort to develop a distinctively Marxist historiography which allowed for contingency, stressed human agency, was expressed in an "empirical idiom." But Thompson's effort to define a coherent and distinctive Marxist tradition which steered a course between dogmatism and eclecticism met with very limited success, as he himself admitted.

Some, without abandoning a left commitment, went further. Perhaps the most important American journal of critical Marxist thought was *Telos*, an interdisciplinary venture whose leading figures included several historians. In the late seventies one of its editors noted that for the last few years almost everyone associated with the journal had been "independently developing a fairly elaborate critique of Marxism."

Since everything in Marxism has turned out to be either wrong or trivial, maybe we should dump such a theoretical albatross. . . . Very few of us still believe in the falling rate of profit, the inherent revolutionary character of the proletariat, . . . materialism understood in any of the ordinary senses, . . . or the ridiculous claims of "scientificity" for Marxism. . . . We must stop blaming Kautsky, Engels, Lenin, or Stalin for "Marxism" in the effort to pump formaldehyde into a theoretical cadaver. . . . Looking back over the last eight years, it can be said that our historical function has been primarily to provide Marxism with a decent burial.⁵⁸

In the late seventies and early eighties the *Radical History Review* published interviews with eight of America's leading leftist historians. All

⁵⁸Paul Piccone, "Internal Polemics," *Telos* 31 (Spring 1977): 178–79.

of the eight referred in one way or another to the importance of Marxism, its influence on their thought, the distinctive contributions Marxism had to offer, and the questions it raised. But none identified him- or herself as a Marxist; none suggested that Marxism constituted a sufficient method or world view. And none suggested any alternative candidate. Natalie Davis spoke of her devotion to demonstrating "that things don't have to be the way they are now." David Montgomery thought it important to show that "the working class has always formulated alternatives to bourgeois society in this country." Herbert Gutman saw his work as "transform[ing] historical givens into historical contingencies." John Womack was concerned to combat the widespread belief that "Niggers and Indians don't hurt like white people. . . . Poor people don't hurt like rich people." "Teaching about pain," he said, "is the most important thing history can do." The volume in which the interviews were collected was entitled *Visions of History*. The interviews, said the editors, "reveal the basic unity of purpose that all radical historians share": a determination, following Marx, "not only to interpret the world, but to change it." No group of historians in recent years had done more to advance the interpretation of the world; their determination to fulfill the second half of the injunction may have remained intact, but the "vision" of how it was to be accomplished—either through structural determination or any foreseeable human agency—was not to be found.⁵⁹

Historically, "conservatism" is as much a child of the French Revolution as are ideologies of the left. The values of conservatism—order, tradition, legitimacy—were defined against the revolution, and in practice the center of conservatism is often "counterrevolution." Since revolution is rare, what passes for conservatism is often anachronistic, as when McCarthyites, in the 1950s, directed their fire against domestic Communists whose trivial influence had long since dissipated. So it was with "neoconservatism," which often degenerated into neo-McCarthyism, in the late 1970s and 1980s. Academic neoconservatives' principal targets were the leftist turmoil on and off the campuses in the sixties, and its aftermath, the temporary victory of the McGovern forces in the Democratic Party in 1972. By the time that neoconservatism became an organized force in the late 1970s, when peace had returned to the campus, and the right had become ascendant, it was doing battle with ghosts and chimeras. As Daniel Bell, who increasingly distanced himself from his former neoconservative associates, observed, ideologues of the right

⁵⁹Davis, Montgomery, Gutman, Womack and the editors quoted in *Visions*, 114, 180, 203, 260–61, and xi respectively. There were American historians who continued to call themselves Marxists, particularly among students of the American South.

could not afford to acknowledge the change. Through "a parochialism which has stopped time . . . one never loses an enemy but reincarnates him in different guises in order to maintain one's original momentum."⁶⁰

In the late sixties a beleaguered counterrevolutionary posture was common among academics distressed by turmoil on and off the campus. But neoconservative scholars continued to maintain that posture long after it had become more than a little ridiculous. In 1986, Secretary of Education William J. Bennett warned that "nowadays [*sic*] . . . campus radicals . . . see the university as a kind of fortress at war with society, an arsenal whose principal task is to raise revolutionary consciousness, frustrate the government, discredit authority and promote a radical transformation of society." The Harvard historian Richard Pipes described attitudes within the historical profession in ways which most found unrecognizable. "The majority of practicing historians," he wrote in 1979, view the Bolshevik Revolution as "a progressive event . . . pav[ing] the way for the triumph of freedom and equality." Gertrude Himmelfarb saw the dominant tendencies in the historical profession in 1983 as radical, dedicated to "a trashing of the past . . . a degradation of history and also, therefore, a degradation of the present, which has always been presumed to be our heritage from the past."⁶¹

Neoconservative scholars traduced their adversaries in a style reminiscent of the most intemperate young radicals of the sixties. The targets were not infrequently historians, even when the marksmen were not. Allan Bloom of the University of Chicago accused Sir Moses Finley of being a Marxist ideologue, Edmund Morgan of having cravenly prostituted his scholarship to "keep in the good graces of the wave of the future." The most extreme example of neoconservative misrepresentation came from the medievalist Norman Cantor, who denounced Lawrence Stone as a long-time Marxist, "peddl[ing] . . . a more subtle and poisonous Marxism than traditional Leninism." Under Stone's influence Princeton University had become "a central school for indoctrination of the young in Marxist ideology." This was rather too much for Himmelfarb, who, repeating the argument of 1950s liberal anti-Communists who disliked McCarthy for discrediting the cause, chastised Cantor for using the term "Marxist" so loosely, and thus "distract[ing] attention

⁶⁰Bell, "Our Country—1984," *Partisan Review* 51/52 (1984/1985): 630–31.

⁶¹Bennett, speech prepared for delivery to American Jewish Committee, *New York Times*, 15 May 1986, B12; Pipes, "The Revolution: Conventional Attitudes," *New York Times Book Review*, 30 December 1979, 7; Himmelfarb, contribution to symposium *Our Country and Our Culture: A Conference of the Committee for the Free World* (New York, 1983), 52–53.

from . . . historians to whom it does properly apply and who are influential enough to warrant serious concern." And it was counterproductive for the cause in the case of J. H. Hexter, who remarked that some years ago, in response to the "McGovernizing" of his party and insolent students, he "began a slow quiet crawl to the right—and there I find Norman Cantor. Guess I'll start crawling back."⁶²

In fact, while the rightward drift in the political culture was reflected in various academic disciplines, history was relatively untouched by conservative currents. It had long been a commonplace that America, "born liberal," lacked a conservative tradition in the European sense: organicist, legitimist, antiliberal. The few representatives of this tradition in the American historical profession never had much influence before the 1960s, and had no more thereafter. While right-of-center academic journals proliferated in other disciplines, the only explicitly conservative historical venture was *Continuity*, which began publication in 1980. Its masthead included the traditional conservative Thomas Molnar, the anti-Progressive Forrest McDonald, the antirevisionist Robert Maddox, and Aileen Kraditor, who at some point in the seventies moved across the spectrum from left to right. The journal's inaugural statement announced that *Continuity* would publish scholarship committed to "the quest for truth for its own sake; the superiority of our free society, with all its faults, to any practicable alternative; legitimate authority; and the presumptive value of tradition as the accumulated wisdom of the past." It would criticize "historiographical idols" which contributed to "the current erosion of scholarly discourse within the academy and to the fashionable vilification of our country among intellectuals throughout our society." Five years after *Continuity* began publication, its circulation was 300, less than one-tenth that of the *Radical History Review*. It was a curiosity, without influence or even visibility. A sense of "continuity" was precisely what was missing from American society from the sixties onward, which could lead a moderately conservative historian like David Donald of Harvard to despair of his vocation.

What undergraduates want from their history teachers is an understanding of how the American past relates to the present and the future. But if I teach what I believe to be the truth, I can only share with them my sense of the irrelevance of

⁶²Cantor, letter to *New Criterion* 4 (December 1985): 86–87; Himmelfarb and Hexter letters, *ibid.*, 4 (March 1986), 85 and 86. Cantor's original article, which initiated the exchange, was "The Real Crisis in the Humanities Today," *ibid.*, 3 (June 1985): 28–38. For Bloom on Finley, see his review of Finley's *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, *New York Times Book Review*, 11 January 1981, 8, 19; on Morgan, his "University Standards and the Decline of Humane Learning," in John W. Chapman, ed., *The Western University on Trial* (Berkeley, 1983), 160–61.

history and of the bleakness of the new era we are entering. . . . Perhaps my most useful function would be to disenfranchise them from the spell of history, to help them see the irrelevance of the past.

In both American and European history some individual works exhibited a strong conservative tilt, but even these were not very numerous. If the left had tried and failed to create an overarching historiographical framework congenial to its views, the right did not even attempt such a task.⁶³

The most serious breakdown of interpretive framework, and ideological faith as well, was not at the extremes of left and right, but in the broad liberal center which had united the vast majority of American historians around a faith in orderly progress. Formally, professional historians disparaged the teleological "Whig interpretation of history," in which historical actors were graded according to whether they advanced or retarded the growth of liberalism and democracy. But in a larger sense a liberal, Whiggish orientation had continued to guide the pens of most American historians and gave larger meaning to their monographic labors. By the 1970s and 1980s both Americanists and Europeanists found this framework no longer satisfactory. Bernard Bailyn wrote that the old structure, "which explained the present in terms of an inferior but improving past" had been completely eroded, and there was no substitute in sight to take its place. William H. McNeill, reviewing American scholarship on European history in the 1970s, offered the image of "a powerful fountain whose jet ascended high into the air, only to break up into unstable, inchoate shapes, dispersing in every direction before commencing a glorious descent."

The cascade of a descending fountain is entrancing to the beholder—far more spectacular, in fact, than the narrowly focused, ascending jet. But the fountain can persist only if an ascending jet sustains descending multiplicity. . . . The jet has been turned off. European history has lost the necessary focus on some kind of fundamental meaning such as once was provided by the liberal vision of the human condition. . . . Without such an organizing vision of the whole, how long can we expect the variety and technical virtuosity of the decade of the 1970s to be sustained?⁶⁴

For those who were liberals in the narrower sense, supporters of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, American politics after 1968 was a scene of unmitigated disaster. The liberal electoral base steadily eroded,

⁶³"Statement of Policy," *Continuity* 1 (Fall 1980): [ii]; Donald, "Our Irrelevant History," *New York Times*, 8 September 1977, reprinted in *AHA Newsletter* 15 (December 1977): 3–4.

⁶⁴Bailyn, "The Challenge of Modern Historiography," *AHR* 87 (1982): 3; McNeill, "Modern European History," in Kammen, ed., *Past Before Us*, 109.

liberal social programs were eviscerated, and a successful effort was mounted to deliberately redistribute income from the poorest to the richest segments of society. With no end in sight to the rightward march of politics, erstwhile liberal figures rushed to climb on the neoconservative bandwagon. If the 1964 election had been a referendum on the welfare state, racial equality, and the avoidance of nuclear confrontation, it was the last such referendum won by liberals; every subsequent augury pointed in the opposite direction—signaling a reversal of the long-term course of American political developments in the twentieth century.

But discouragement and disillusionment were also common among those who were liberals in the broader, "Hartzian" sense, the sense in which almost all Americans are liberals. The fundamental values and assumptions of the American liberal tradition in this broader sense all came to be at risk. The most sophisticated theorists of liberal democracy explained that voting was irrational, and that it was well that most of the potential electorate appeared to share this view, because widespread participation in the democratic process could destabilize the system. "Justice," according to the most advanced thinkers, was not a transcendent social ideal, but "allocative efficiency." In the view of a growing group of social theorists—left, right, and center—the liberal malaise was not transient, but epochal, the tragedy of its triumph, which only revealed itself gradually, over centuries. Michael Walzer of the Institute for Advanced Study was impressed by the observation of the neoconservative Irving Kristol that bourgeois society had lived for years off "the accumulated capital of traditional religion and traditional moral philosophy," capital it did not effectively renew. For all of its achievements, Walzer said, liberalism "has been parasitic not only on older values but also and more importantly on older institutions and communities."

And these latter it has progressively undermined. For liberalism is above all a doctrine of liberation. It sets individuals loose from religious and ethnic communities, from guilds, parishes, neighborhoods. It abolishes all sorts of controls and agencies of control: ecclesiastical courts, cultural censorship, sumptuary laws, restraints on mobility, group pressure, family bonds. It creates free men and women, tied together only by their contracts—and ruled, when contracts fail, by a distant and powerful state. It generates a radical individualism and then a radical competition among self-seeking individuals. What made liberalism endurable for all these years was the fact that the individualism it generated was always imperfect, tempered by older restraints and loyalties, by stable patterns of local, ethnic, religious, or class relationships. An untempered liberalism would be unendurable. That is the crisis the neo-conservatives evoke: the triumph of liberalism over its historical restraints.⁶⁵

⁶⁵Walzer, "Nervous Liberals," *New York Review of Books* 26 (11 October 1979): 5–6.

The acceleration in the pace of recent history was paralleled by an acceleration in the succession of historiographical sensibilities. The fifties was the "era of no hard feelings" among historians—the decade of consensus, and "the end of ideology." Hard on its heels came the violent acrimony and polarization of sensibilities in the hyperideological sixties. Polarized consciousness overlapped with, but ultimately gave way to, the confused fragmentation which accompanied the ideological *Gotterdammerung* of the seventies and eighties, when even the pragmatic, liberal welfare-capitalist ideology of the end-of-ideologists threatened to collapse.

In the postwar period a chastened objectivism had been the natural concomitant of a convergent mood—of substantive consensus, optimism, and goodwill. The historiographical consequences of the following periods of polarization and fragmentation were by no means as clear. On the one hand, those most committed to ideological postures were the most likely to insist on the objectivity of their findings—that it was they who saw clearly; their antagonists who saw darkly, through ideologically tinted glass. On the other hand, the need to restore comity within a polarized profession could lead to a resigned perspectivalism, and abandonment of hope for convergence on unitary truth. Robert Berkhofer saw American historians irreconcilably split into rival camps, "social scientific" and "radical," with "no hope of a congenial fusion."

The logical underpinnings of each paradigm are mutually exclusive in ultimate source of theory, in method and criteria of verification, and in moral and political positions. The two histories are not like two ships passing in the night upon the same sea of history; rather, they are like two ships sailing upon two quite different oceans. . . . In consequence, their chances of communicating seem only slightly less remote than their chances of colliding.⁶⁶

Both Bailyn and McNeill had seen fragmentation rather than polarization as the most noteworthy characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s, but they responded very differently to the phenomenon. Bailyn's response was transcendence through value-freedom. He believed it "possible to approach that ultimate stage in historical interpretation where partisanship is left behind"; to produce an historical account which was "neither whig nor tory, idealist nor materialist, liberal nor conservative." McNeill's response to the crisis of faith was a call for historians to dedicate themselves to the care and repair of public myth; for them to be, recognizing the "elastic" character of truth, "truth-seeking mythogra-

⁶⁶Berkhofer, "The Two New Histories: Competing Paradigms for Interpreting the American Past," *OAH Newsletter* 11 (May 1983): 11–12.

phers," shaping "shared truths that provide a sanction for effort."⁶⁷

Despite their differing prescriptions, both Bailyn and McNeill responded to historiographical fragmentation and confusion by unifying version of the past, one that could appeal to all sections of the community, national in Bailyn's case, global in McNeill's. Both wrote, important elements within the American historical canon were moving in the opposite direction, deliberately employing particularistic criteria to fashion accounts serviceable to particularistic tendencies. It is to this development that we now turn.

⁶⁷Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., and New York, 1973), 15, 23; McNeill, "The Care and Repair of the Past" (1982), and "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians" (his presidential address), both reprinted in McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (1986), 7, 22.