

## What Is Still Living In "Consensus" History And Pluralist Social Theory\*

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If we listen closely, we can still hear the ghostly echo of their ideas in the Berkeley Hills, in bars along Morningside Heights, and near the newsstand in Harvard Square: alienation, anomie, *resentiment*, status anxiety. These were some of the keywords of the so-called consensus historians and pluralist social theorists who dominated our corner of American intellectual life—as well as several nearby neighborhoods—from the mid-1950s until at least the mid-1970s. We must listen closely, of course, because the ghostly echoes are nearly drowned out by louder sounds in contemporary intellectual life: hegemony, discourse, paradigm, social construction, thick description, the Other, privilege (as a verb), project (as something different from a lamp made in eighth grade wood shop), agency (as something different from bureaus dispensing licenses or social security checks), and—loudest of all—race, class, and gender.

While reminding readers of the basic features of consensus history and pluralist social theory, I explore four themes in this article: first, what aspects of these old orthodoxies seem safely dead insofar

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as serious scholarship is concerned; second, what aspects still survive, unacknowledged, or under new rubrics in the current privileged hegemonic discourse at the higher circles of American history and American studies; third, what aspects still flourish in academic fields that no longer influence the main course of historiography, notably political science and sociology; and fourth, what interred aspects deserve resurrection in the everlasting hope of enlivening discussion now that the “new” social and cultural histories developed during the past quarter century have entered a complacent baroque phase, a phase in which now formulaic concepts are ritualistically presented in needlessly ornate or obscure language.

Insofar as consensus history and pluralist social theory linger in our profession’s collective memory, they survive as shards from their own baroque phase. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, these orthodoxies generated countless predictable targets for authors of countless dissertations—including my own.<sup>1</sup> The targets were particularly enticing because consensus history and pluralist social theory were obviously products of the cultural Cold War. Simply put, both intellectual persuasions incorporated into scholarship the premier axiom of the era, that a self-consciously moderate center was vital and valid while the political, theological, and psychological “extremes” were symmetrically deluded and dangerous. Moreover, starting in the early 1960s, the foremost keywords were invoked to stigmatize the campus left as status anxious extremists.<sup>2</sup>

But these intellectual frameworks were not only or simply products of the cultural Cold War. The best consensus historians and pluralist social theorists, including Richard Hofstadter, Oscar Handlin, Daniel Bell, David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Louis Hartz, Will Herberg, Robert Dahl, and Seymour Martin Lipset, were attempting in the aftermath of World War II to resolve intellectual problems that had been building since the late nineteenth century. These writers, rather than lesser figures who came to use status anxiety as the explanation-of-last-resort in every conceivable circumstance, are the central figures in this article.

The term “consensus history” entered our professional vocabulary in 1959, when John Higham criticized the emerging “cult” of consensus in American historiography. Higham’s term obscures as much as it clarifies. There was no consensus among the so-called consensus historians about the degree of consensus in the American past. While usually focusing on majority beliefs or attitudes dominant in the public sphere, they nonetheless stressed ethnic diversity

more than the progressive historians whose ideas they were revising, scholars who had emphasized class and regional divisions. Nor did they agree on the virtues of consensus. Most important, the extent to which Americans shared ideological assumptions and values was not their only major concern. Therefore, counterprogressive, a term coined by Gene Wise in 1973, is a preferable short hand label. The most theoretically oriented of these historians concerned themselves primarily with the United States since the Civil War, yet the trend itself was much broader. Perry Miller qualifies as a counterprogressive as much as Richard Hofstadter, and the counterprogressive propensity for psychological explanations found its way into Stanley Elkins's description of antebellum abolitionism and Fritz Stern's analysis of late nineteenth century German nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

As Edward A. Purcell, Jr. brilliantly showed twenty-five years ago, the hardest intellectual issue facing counterprogressive and pluralists was what had come to be called the problem of relativism. Epistemological issues spread from philosophy to history, and by the 1930s even the formerly confident progressive historian Charles Beard was meditating on scholarship as an "act of faith." Moreover, in what could have been called the "culture war" of the 1930s, philosophical absolutists accused philosophical relativists of preparing the way for ethical chaos and fascism.<sup>4</sup>

Counterprogressives and pluralists were not oblivious to this complex of problems. Throughout the 1950s, graduate courses in historiography routinely taught that interpretations changed over time, and Karl Mannheim's relativist writings remained in the Harvard social relations curriculum. Models used in historical analysis were "not identical with any historical situation," Handlin said. Writing during pluralism's baroque era in 1973, Glazer sounded like Beard. In the absence of a "Supreme Historian" telling "which way the balance of history ran," one "picks out a dominant theme, on the basis of one's experience as well as one's knowledge, and our choice is made, in part, on the basis of our hopes for the future as well as our experience."<sup>5</sup>

On a visceral level, Nazism, World War II, and the Cold War convinced counterprogressives and pluralists that the prior, progressive generation of scholars had been unduly optimistic about human behavior. Nonetheless, in a generally confident era for the country and a prosperous time for academics, few scholars doubted that some interpretations were better than others, or that empirical re-

searchers attuned to the latest "social science" could separate the good from the bad and the mediocre. Furthermore, a limited culturally relativist debate was viewed as beneficial if there were agreement on basic values and procedures, rival groups of comparable power balanced each other, questions of ultimate truth and personal identity were relegated to the private sphere, and society settled for slow but steady progress instead of demanding sudden transformation.<sup>6</sup>

Conveniently enough, the United States looked like just such a society. As Bell wrote in *The End of Ideology*, the working class accepted prudent trade unionism, college students eschewed "chiliastic dreams" of Socialism or Communism, and even leaders of organized crime adhered to the American gospel of success. Testing pluralist hypotheses in the city of New Haven, Robert Dahl found political pros smoothing out the rough edges of local disagreement. Looking backward, Hofstadter credited Martin Van Buren and fellow founders of the second party system with performing an analogous service on a larger scale. Counterprogressives also minimized differences between Jacksonians and Whigs, reinterpreted political progressivism as a "mild and judicious" movement substantially different from Populism, and endlessly celebrated New Deal "pragmatism."<sup>7</sup>

The chief pluralists, some of whom had been Marxists briefly during the Depression, scorned what Bell called "'vulgar' Marxist" interpretations of power in the post-World War II United States. None denied that there were disparities of wealth, social classes, or earlier, unsuccessful efforts by big business to establish what Bell called "ideological hegemony." But as Bell stressed in his critique of C. Wright Mills, there was no ruling class or "power elite." The life-and-death decisions that Mills emphasized were the consequences of war and the Cold War, not the product of any cohesive elite group or coherent strategy.<sup>8</sup>

Pluralists preferred to focus on the "problems of power in the everyday life of the country . . . *the stuff of politics*," as Bell put it. Even on this level power was seen as widely dispersed. In New Haven, Dahl found "remarkably little direct influence" by the social elite on government decisions. While more ambiguous than Bell in assessing their indirect influence, Dahl, too, revised an "older view" that left "very little room for the politician." He concluded: "If we ask, 'Who governs?' the answer is not the mass nor its leaders but both together; the leaders cater to mass tastes and in return use the

strength provided by the loyalty and obedience of the masses to weaken and perhaps even annihilate all opposition to their rule."<sup>9</sup>

Although only Lipset and Hartz made systematic international comparisons, the leading pluralists often supported their generalizations about the United States with ad hoc references to Europe.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes Europe served (in contemporary parlance) as the Other, a place where intellectuals still battled over ideological questions that pragmatic Americans had resolved. Mills misunderstood power in America, Bell wrote, partly because his "key concepts" were European. Conversely, European countries were also presented as orderly places unperturbed by indecorous battles over ethnicity and status that produced "extremists" like Father Charles Coughlin, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and Senator Barry Goldwater. Such a cozy conception of Europe obscured the fact that Auschwitz was as much the product of a crisis of national identity as the 1964 Republican National Convention.<sup>11</sup>

This lapse looks particularly odd because, as much as the Cold War and the repudiation of Soviet Communism, World War II and the Holocaust shaped pluralist social theory. In Nazi concentration camps, human beings proved themselves capable of crimes unimaginable to the supposedly naive progressive generation. Accordingly, historians and social theorists alike closely watched dangerous movements pressing on the American center from the far right and far left "extremes."<sup>12</sup>

The theory of extremism was central to their interpretative framework as a whole, as *The New American Right*, a noted anthology edited by Bell, illustrated.<sup>13</sup> Political extremists were said to differ from sensible centrists in two main ways. First, instead of practicing interest politics, in which deals were made and goods or services apportioned, extremists indulged in mere "status politics," or "cultural politics," in which they vented intense feelings about personal unhappiness, prestige, and ethnic or racial identity, and pursued symbolic rather than substantive solutions. Second, extremist expressions often took the form of ungrounded conspiracy theories (and almost without exception, conspiracy theories were thought to be ungrounded), a way of thinking Hofstadter called the "paranoid style." Sometimes, too, the paranoia among anomic, alienated, and resentful extremists was substantive as well as stylistic.<sup>14</sup>

An immense literature of varying quality filled in the details from Jedidiah Morse through Joseph McCarthy to Barry Goldwater, with an amorphous disposition called "Populism" serving as the chief

source of the twentieth-century far right. In an era when social scientists preached value neutrality and historians dreaded the insult "present-minded," extremism was a subject where emotional juices could flow freely without fear of censure from anyone more mainstream than William F. Buckley, Jr. On the whole, Communists fared better than did far right activists in the chronicles of American extremism. The former could return to the center relatively unscathed and perhaps wiser for the experience; the later seemed permanently afflicted with authoritarian personalities.<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary critics charged the pluralists and counterprogressives with incorporating their post-World War II pessimism about human nature into their scholarship.<sup>16</sup> Equally significant, the pluralists typically confused their prescription for American politics, a flexible center untainted by extremes, with an accurate description of American politics, which had been considerably messier for two centuries. Similarly, non-political beliefs about God, science, or human behavior that failed to qualify as precursors of mid-twentieth century rationalism and secularism were relegated to the fringes even if they had been (or still were) accepted by most Americans. In short, as Bernard Sternsher observed in 1975 counterprogressive and pluralist scholarship often exuded an "abstract quality."<sup>17</sup>

But not always. Emotional juices marinated counterprogressive and pluralist accounts of immigration and ethnicity, often to good effect. In the case of Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted*, the juices flowed without apology. His account of alcoholism and mental illness among immigrants stood out in the 1950s as a rare instance in which personal problems were seen to have derived from social conditions. In their study of New York ethnic groups, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan sought greater detachment, but detachment mixed with empathy. McCarthyism in the abstract was no more admirable than in *The New American Right*, but local McCarthyites appeared as flesh-and-blood Irish-Americans rather than abstract exemplars of status anxiety. Similarly, though Glazer and Moynihan did not quite endorse white ethnic organized crime, neither were they particularly outraged. The famous gathering of crime bosses at Apalachin, New York, was said to resemble an Italian "family picnic." The weakest part of this scholarship was a hesitancy to explore grassroots conflicts between ethnic groups formed out of the "new immigration" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For example, anti-Semitism among agrarian radicals

bulked much larger than anti-Semitism among urban Irish, Italian, or Polish Catholics; to a remarkable degree even Father Coughlin was presented as a generic "populist" rather than an Irish Catholic leader.<sup>18</sup>

The thick description of life among Catholics and Jews was absent from accounts of white Protestants. Pluralist and counterprogressive theorists alluded often to the social impact of religion, especially to the impact of Protestantism. Except for the work of Will Herberg and, intermittently, Hofstadter, who borrowed from the specialized historical literature, their accounts were caricatures. American history was "saturated" with religious (as well as racial and ethnic) conflict, Hofstadter wrote, while paying scant attention to the specifically religious—not to mention theological—aspects of those controversies. "Fundamentalists," a catchall category for troublesome Protestants, fared worst of all among the pluralists and counterprogressive. Not only were fundamentalists fading into the status anxious fringe of a secularizing society, but also the faster they faded the better.<sup>19</sup>

Among the foremost counterprogressive and pluralists, only Glazer and Handlin paid serious attention to African Americans, and both were sympathetic. According to Glazer, blacks bore the burden of the "most awful" form of slavery in world history. Yet both he and Handlin inferred two mistaken assumptions from that history: that black culture differed little from a white American norm and that black migrants to the cities essentially replicated the experience of white ethnic "newcomers" and would continue to do so.<sup>20</sup>

As these converging arguments by historians, sociologists, and political scientists show, the signal trait of American historiography for two decades after World War II was its affinity for the social sciences. The trend was so strong that methodological conservatives like Samuel Eliot Morison feared for the survival of history as "literary art." Among the historians most optimistic about the trend, Lee Benson believed that "human behavior can be studied scientifically," and that the "scientific study of past human behavior is indispensable to the scientific study of human behavior, past and present." For their part, leading pluralist sociologists and political scientists tried to understand the historical origins of their current concerns. For example, Glazer wrote a history of American Judaism and Lipset co-authored a chronicle of far right extremism.<sup>21</sup>

Given the prevailing caricature of intellectual life in the "fifties," we need to remember that counterprogressive historiography and

pluralist social theory did not emerge in an instant as rigid orthodoxies. There was considerable intellectual experimentation, some of which prefigured the hegemonic privileged discourse of our own day. Handlin and Glazer and Moynihan emphasized that ethnic identity was (to use the current term) socially constructed. A generation before our profession discovered Antonio Gramsci and the concept of cultural hegemony, David Riesman and his co-authors of *The Lonely Crowd* inferred from a children's book that "other directed" tots were inculcated with the ethic of Tootle the Engine: "always stay on the track no matter what." What John E. Toews, following philosopher Richard Rorty, calls the "linguistic turn" in our historiography did not occur until the 1980s, but there were at least linguistic wiggles in American intellectual life as early as the 1930s, when Stuart Chase helped to popularize the general semantics movement. After World War II, interest in the problematical nature of language survived, for example, in Lee Benson's deconstruction (to use the current term) of the "concept of Jacksonian democracy," Hofstadter's fascination with Thurman Arnold and the "folklore of capitalism," and the pervasive interest in symbolic politics.<sup>22</sup>

The most productive give-and-take occurred between pluralist social theorists and counterprogressive historians on the one hand, and the small contingent of 1950s intellectual radicals on the other. Sometimes the encounters occurred face-to-face. Hofstadter and C. Wright Mills were close friends for a time, and their descriptions of the nineteenth century old middle class overlapped (though Mills betrayed some nostalgia for their way of life and Hofstadter seems to have expected them to pass quietly into oblivion without manifesting the grievances of status anxiety). Mills was also a colleague at Columbia University of some of the pluralist social theorists he came to disdain. And although Bell criticized Mills's dissection of the power elite as a kind of conspiracy theory, both sociologists were trying to understand the relationship between social class and political power.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the most prominent scholars subsequently credited with or chided for creating "new left" history in the late-1960s and early-1970s shared much common ground with the counterprogressives and pluralists whom they criticized. James Weinstein disagreed with Daniel Bell about the nature of American Communism and the prospects for American socialism, but both recognized the importance of these dissident parties for an understanding of the United States as a whole. Barton Bernstein's conclusion that the New Deal was



"narrow" rather than "bold" challenged the interpretation of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (a kind of progressive counterprogressive), but both Bernstein and Schlesinger recognized that any sensible judgment required an understanding of how government agencies actually worked. William Appleman Williams was a consensus historian in the sense that he documented widespread support for the "modern American empire."<sup>24</sup>

From the current perspective, three aspects of this congruence among intellectual adversaries stand out. First, nobody doubted the centrality of government and politics. There was no need in the 1960s and early 1970s for the left to "bring the state back in" to historiography and social science because it was already there, and denying its importance would have seemed absurd while the state outside the texts was shaping an ever larger share of the gross national product and bombing other states. Second, though methodological dispositions ranged from Gabriel Kolko's positivism to William Appleman Williams's Beardian relativism, nobody on the left denied that some historical explanations were better than others, or that empirical investigation helped to establish which was which. Even Jesse Lemisch, a pioneer in the social history of the inarticulate, sounded like Lee Benson. Counterprogressive scholarship was not "genuinely scientific," Lemisch wrote in the landmark anthology, *Towards a New Past*, but "sympathy for the powerless brings us closer to objectivity." Third, virtually everyone thought it possible and desirable to understand the United States as a whole. In *The Contours of American History*, Williams was no less a practitioner of "grand narrative" than Daniel Boorstin.<sup>25</sup>

Three decades later, such high ambitions seem naive to most practitioners of American history and American studies, grand narratives are viewed skeptically as threats to minority voices, and the notion of scientific history rests at the bottom of the dustbin of deconstruction. In the interim, the new social and cultural history in particular have transformed not only the premier list of subjects studied, but also the language used to study most subjects. In addition, there is a strong sense that the past could have been different from what it was or, at least, should have been different. Consequently, emotional juices now marinate virtually all subjects, and explicit moral judgments are almost compulsory.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, responding to the shifts in American and academic politics, several

major counterprogressives and pluralists moved, at least temporarily, from centrist liberalism to conservatism or neoconservatism.<sup>27</sup>

The impact, first, of the "new left" history developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then of the new social and cultural history, have left some aspects of counterprogressive history and pluralist theory dead as far as serious scholarship is concerned. And justly so. The social history of the United States encountered by the typical graduate student today looks not only more diverse, but also (to recall Bernard Sternsher's phrase) less abstract than thirty years ago. The most obvious changes relate to the keywords race, gender, and (to a lesser degree) class. Historians have provided thick descriptions of the lives of women as well as men, gays as well as heterosexuals, artisans and industrial workers as well as members of the old and new middle class. We know about their leisure time and their love lives as well as their occupational mobility and voting habits. Whatever her position on affirmative action or the relative degree of congruence between black and white experiences in the aggregate, no reputable scholar now routinely conflates the modern histories of urban African Americans and European immigrants. Nor does she homogenize the experiences of immigrants from countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The discovery of diversity goes beyond race, gender, and class. No longer constrained to take seriously only ideas or movements that prefigured mid-twentieth century rationalism, historians discovered that Americans were far more peculiar than had been supposed (Peculiar contains no invidious connotation in my lexicon). Even the Puritan-led "mixt assemblies" that settled New England were much more mixed than Perry Miller thought.<sup>28</sup>

Although "radical right," "extremism," and "paranoid style" remain fixtures in the national political vocabulary, they survive as shibboleths rather than as concepts in a coherent theory of political behavior. Few specialists in the subjects now present the far left and far right as symmetrically neurotic, and reductionist psychological explanations have generally fallen from fashion. The large literature portraying the human face of American Communism elicits sharp criticism, yet even the sharpest critics question the morality and judgment of party members rather than their mental health. Symbolic politics are no longer considered the unique province of extremists but rather a technique used by successful politicians across the spectrum. Although the phrase "power elite" has been superseded by the more stylish and less precise "hegemony," few histori-

ans would dispute C. Wright Mills's judgment that "in our time the pivotal moment does arise, and at that moment, small circles do decide or fail to decide."<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, there have been (often unrecognized) intellectual continuities as well as changes, stagnation as well as insightful innovation, and intellectual losses as well as gains. An ironic development of contemporary intellectual life is the fierce combat between self-conscious multiculturalist historians on the one hand, and surviving pluralist and counterprogressive students of ethnicity on the other. Although they typically celebrate different ethnic or racial groups and advance different political agendas, their "projects" share two common features. The first is the temptation to celebrate. Just as Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants enjoyed better relations in the pluralist scholarship of the fifties than on urban street corners, "people of color" coexist more amicably in multiculturalist monographs than in American life past or present. Second, both groups of scholars tend to postulate—rather than to demonstrate through systematic international comparisons—that the United States is, as Lawrence Levine claims, a "particularly intricate society." Two or three billion citizens of other countries might disagree. For example, sociologist K. Anthony Appiah, who was born in Ghana, credits American society with "less diversity than most others." During the past thirty-five years, four major countries—Pakistan, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union—proved to be so diverse that they fell apart, and another, Nigeria, was held together by a brutal civil war<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, much as a revival in religious studies and a nationwide revival of religion itself left unaltered pluralist and counterprogressive assertions of secularization during the fifties, the continuation of both revivals into the new millennium has barely affected the current privileged hegemonic discourse at the higher circles of American history and American studies. In varying degrees, the religious beliefs of slaves, white ethnic voters, pre-industrial artisans, and early industrial workers have been incorporated into our de-facto multiculturalist grand narrative. Yet the beliefs of Protestant theological conservatives, always a large and politically significant part of the population, remain virtually unknown beyond specialists in religious history.<sup>31</sup>

This long-standing obliviousness to religious issues is especially striking because it intersects with a big question that concerns both counterprogressives and their intellectual successors: in what ways

does the United States resemble other countries and in what ways does it differ (a big question often subsumed under the confusing fighting words "American exceptionalism")? We need at least to consider George M. Marsden's claim that the United States is the "only modern nation in which the dominant culture was substantially shaped by low-church Protestantism."<sup>32</sup>

While our profession made significant left and linguistic turns away from counterprogressive history and pluralist social theory, the social sciences that had nurtured pluralism changed less dramatically. To some extent, all fields have been affected by fresh concerns about race and gender. Yet a large branch of sociology continues in time honored fashion to compile empirical data about American beliefs, behavior, and social standing. In survey after survey, moreover, these scholars discover widespread agreement among Americans in asserting individual "rights," affirming equality of opportunity, and accepting regulated capitalism.<sup>33</sup>

Political scientists study presidents and members of Congress without asking whether they might have been socialists; undeterred by the instability of language and the possibility that causality may not exist, they also concoct a handful of crude categories, poll a few thousand voters, and predict with considerable accuracy who will win the presidency. Seymour Martin Lipset served as president of the American Political Science Association in 1981-82, at a time when no well-known intellectual supporter of Ronald Reagan could have been nominated—let alone elected—to head a major historical society or the American Studies Association. In a sense, then, pluralism is still living on the same campuses with the new sensibility in history and American studies departments—sometimes in the same building, and (at small colleges) even on the same floor of the same building.

Indeed, Bell, Glazer, and Lipset remain alive and, in the latter two instances, prolific. Their essential worldviews stand intact but, no longer feeling beset by extremists, both have mellowed. Still adventurous enough to compare whole countries, Lipset now acknowledges that a "double-edged" American exceptionalism produces negative as well as positive forms of behavior. Glazer seems nostalgic for class analysis, regrets having paid so little attention to African Americans in his earlier scholarship and, as a professorial version of the political deal maker celebrated in pluralist theory, proposes terms for a truce in the so-called culture war.<sup>34</sup>

Although pluralism is still living, so to speak, down the hall, historians are less likely to consult pluralists—or social scientists of any methodological bent—than the literary critics across the quad are. Indeed, whereas enthusiasm for the social sciences was the signal development in American historiography during the 1950s, the adoption of ideas and issues from literary criticism and linguistically-oriented philosophy and anthropology has been the signal feature of American historiography and American studies since the early-1980s. Accordingly, scholars engaged in the privileged hegemonic discourse at the higher circles of our profession make ritual bows to the instability of texts, discuss the perils of canons and grand narratives, and allude knowingly to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Clifford Geertz, Stanley Fish, and Richard Rorty. Although most historians still write the word “reality” without quotation marks, versions of these notions do filter down, much as an earlier generation latched onto the concept of status anxiety without studying Max Weber. Even *Diplomatic History*, a valuable source of information about what one clerk wrote to another, now publishes articles about the discourse of what one clerk wrote to another.<sup>35</sup>

Although the adoption of ideas and issues from literary criticism and linguistically-oriented philosophy and anthropology has been the signal feature of American historiography since the early-1980s, an unanswered—and rarely posed—question is “Why?” It is by no means self-evident that anyone trying to understand the United States learns more from Foucault, Derrida, Geertz, Fish, and Rorty, than, for example, from economists John Kenneth Galbraith, Robert Heilbroner, and Paul Krugman, political scientists Robert Booth Fowler, Gerald Pomper, and Stephen Scowronek, sociologists Robert Wuthnow, Herbert Gans, and Alan Wolfe, or, for that matter, from Bell, Glazer, and Lipset. And Rorty’s flashy renovation of the problem of relativism (which he declines to call the problem of relativism) is no better than John Dewey’s and his solution is worse.<sup>36</sup>

The short answer to the question, “Why?” is that a *certain kind of left* has triumphed among practitioners of American history and American studies while any kind of left has lost virtually everywhere else. Unlike Williams, Kolko, and others who created “new left” history in the late 1960s, this academic left hesitates to examine the whole United States for fear of what might be discovered. The intellectual trends of the past twenty years provide a rationale for evasion. If thick descriptions of politically progressive thin events are no less consequential than grand narratives ending with Ronald

Reagan and Bill Clinton, then why not privilege the former? This baroque project can persist only in an insular environment where provincialism masquerades as cosmopolitanism and hardly anyone asks embarrassing questions. If language is so unstable that reality must appear in quotation marks, then why do so few historians deconstruct "fundamentalism," "isolationism," and "racism" instead of using *these* terms as unexamined epithets? If all narratives are "really" equal, then on what basis can we criticize Newt Gingrich's televised history of the United States, a master narrative in which winners are celebrated and losers scorned? Rortyan solidarity? Certainly not solidarity with most Americans living or dead, for whom Gingrich's celebration of the gospel of success rings true.<sup>37</sup>

For those unconvinced that we have reached the end of methodology, let me suggest, first, acknowledging the limits of currently compulsory keywords and, second, reconsidering some of the questions—and even some of the "old" approaches—that characterized counterprogressive history and pluralist social theory.

Acknowledging the limits of the prevailing keywords does not mean dismissing them out of hand as jargon. One scholar's jargon is another's intellectual tool and vice versa; many if not most useful concepts sounded strange when they were first introduced and remain problematical even after they are assimilated into "common sense." "Deconstruction," "hegemony," and "the Other" are no less legitimate than "pragmatism," "status anxiety," or "balance of power." These terms and the ideas undergirding them represent efforts to make sense of human experience. At some point, however, ritual invocation of any verbal formula serves to reinforce an orthodoxy rather than to prompt thought. That point has now been reached for the keywords of the new cultural and social history, as was the case with pluralist and counterprogressive catch phrases three decades ago.

As we have seen, many of the questions central to American intellectual life from World War II through the 1970s engaged the best dissident scholars as well the leading counterprogressive historians and pluralist social scientists. Several of these questions remain important and unresolved. For instance, although "class" bulks large among current keywords, most practitioners of American history and American studies probably know less about *relations* among classes and the behavior of those whom C. Wright Mills called the power elite than their counterparts knew three decades ago. Economic, business, and public policy historians still address the issues

that formerly produced interesting disagreements between Bell and Mills or Gabriel Kolko and Robert Wiebe.<sup>38</sup> Yet these studies have scant impact on our profession's privileged hegemonic discourse. Rather, this discourse incorporates countless examples of local working class and dissident agrarian culture. At the same time, the ubiquitous concept of hegemony has in some respects discouraged the study of relationships among classes. Once hegemony is postulated, there seems to be little need for thick descriptions of the hegemonic process itself, let alone the culture of the elite hegemons. And if the hegemony's force is assumed to be primarily cultural, then historians can avoid dismal studies of the Federal Reserve Board in favor of juicier, not to mention easier, examinations of popular films and fiction.

Furthermore, we need to re-examine the degree of consensus in American life past and present, as well as the degree to which widespread areas of agreement about politics, government, race, religion, and ethnicity were imposed, and the degree to which they were accepted voluntarily. In the midst of passionate controversies over multiculturalism in public schools and museums, a dispassionate academic debate about ethnic and racial diversity may be difficult. Yet it is nonetheless worthwhile.

While recognizing that the United States has always contained many angry and peculiar people speaking what David Riesman called "big talk," we should not reject out of hand the possibility that most Americans have shared significant beliefs and values, though the components of this "consensus" has certainly varied over the centuries<sup>39</sup> In a sense, of course, this statement is a truism applicable to any country that holds together. Yet it is a complicated truism that is more-or-less true depending on time, place, circumstance, and frame-of-reference. Early critics of counterprogressive history liked to ask rhetorically how the Civil War fit into a consensus interpretation. Hofstadter conceded that it did not but perhaps yielded too much.<sup>40</sup> Most whites on both sides prayed to the same God, as Abraham Lincoln observed, and cited the same Founders to justify taking up arms; during truces, soldiers in the opposing armies fraternized to a degree unimaginable in the Spanish or Chinese civil wars.

The period since the 1890s highlights another aspect of the consensus question. Starting with the Populists, there have been four waves of radicalism challenging the basic premises of corporate capitalism, and after each wave has receded the left has been weaker than before. These questions can be illuminated through a study of

what Bell called the "stuff of politics." Many historians still attend to elections and agencies (in the older sense of the term), but, here too, the impact on the main course of historiography and American studies is slight. There was ample reason to reject the narrow pluralist and counterprogressive view that wheeling-and-dealing constituted the only legitimate form of politics. Now that political history has become a wholly owned subsidiary of social and cultural history, the reverse error has become commonplace. Politics is treated primarily as an expression of class, race, ethnic, or generational identity with minimal attention to legislative compromises, victories, and defeats. As Robert Dahl earlier complained about progressive historiography, in which politics was often subordinate to a kind of economic history, the current perspective leaves "very little room for the politician." And even less for the complicated functions of government.

Finally, without breaking relations with philosophers, anthropologists, and literary critics, practitioners of American history and American studies should pursue a rapprochement with political scientists, sociologists, and economists. Even the least theoretical among them can provide information pertinent to the issues of consensus, multiculturalism, and hegemony. We can learn, for example, that 90% of Americans claim to pray, that almost one third of the recently unemployed voted for Ronald Reagan's re-election in 1984, that roughly one-third of Hispanic "people of color" voted for George Bush against the ostensibly ethnic Michael Dukakis in 1988, and that roughly 20% of American voters call themselves liberals (and not because the other 80% call themselves radicals).<sup>41</sup>

Now seems a particularly good time to pursue this enterprise (the word historians used before they discovered project). Although the dominant paradigms may not yet be cracking, the keywords do seem to be creaking. Books on religious history have recently won the Pulitzer Prize, Curti Prize, and National Book Award.<sup>42</sup> Scholars have noticed that some white ethnics left their close-knit communities with more joy than regret.<sup>43</sup> A few even understand that Barry Goldwater and George Wallace were at least as important during the "sixties" as Abby Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, and that the conservatives who now influence American public life did not appear suddenly out of thin air.<sup>44</sup>

The end of the current baroque era in American intellectual life probably will not usher in a renaissance, or even much romanticism. But we may start to recover the excitement of questioning a lifeless orthodoxy.



\* An earlier version of this article was presented at the American Historical Association convention in January 1998. For their helpful comments then and later, I want to thank Phillip Gleason, David Hollinger, and Michael Sherry, all of whom nonetheless still disagree with parts of the argument.

1. Leo P. Ribuffo, "Protestants on the Right" (Dissertation, Yale University, 1976), later published in substantially revised form as *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1983).

2. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).

3. John Higham, "The Cult of 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History" *Commentary* 27 (February 1959), pp. 93-100, and "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," in *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 139-156. Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood: Dorsey, 1973), especially Chapters 8-9. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (New York: Universal Library, 1963), Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the German Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). See also Robert Booth Fowler, *Beyond Liberalism, American Political Thought Since the 1960s* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 21-34.

4. Edward A. Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973).

5. Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Bacon, 1997), p. 99. Oscar Handlin, *The Newcomers: Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a Changing Metropolis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), [p.1]. Nathan Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (New York: Basic, 1975), p.13.

6. Levine *Opening of the American Mind*, p. 99. Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty," *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995), pp. 661-662.

7. Bell, *End of Ideology*, Ch. 7, 10, 13. Robert Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961). Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) and *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage, 1955), pp. 163, 302-330. Daniel Joseph Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *American Historical Review* 89 (October 1984). See Bernard Sternsher, *Consensus, Conflict, and American Historians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 166-207, for the debate over the Jacksonian era. Sternsher's book contains the best survey of counterprogressive reinterpretations and the responses of early critics.

8. Bell, *End of Ideology*, pp. 62, 67.

9. Bell, *End of Ideology*, p. 64. Dahl, *Who Governs?*, pp. 233, 6-7.

10. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, Anchor, 1960), Ch. 2-8 and *Agrarian Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950). Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South America, Canada, and Australia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1964), Ch. 1-4.

11. Bell, *End of Ideology*, p. 58.

12. Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right, Expanded and Updated* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963).

13. Another comprehensive critique of the theory of extremism seems unnecessary at this point but readers interested in my judgment on the merits can consult *The Old Christian Right* and "The Complexity of American Communism," in Leo P. Ribuffo, *Right Center Left: Essays in American History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 129-160.

14. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1964), Ch. 1-4. Lipset, "Working-class Authoritarianism," in *Political Man*, pp. 87-126.

15. For example, see Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America 1790-1970* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

16. For example, see C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," in *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), pp.141-166.

17. Sternsher, *Consensus, Conflict*, p. 80.

18. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* ([1951] Boston: Little Brown, 1973), pp. 140-142. Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, pp. 269-271. 196. Gary Gerstle. "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans," *Journal of American History* 84 (September 1997), pp. 531-534.

19. Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Knopf, 1968), p. 459.

20. Glazer, "Introduction" to Elkins, *Slavery*, p. ix. Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, pp. xix-xx, 53. Handlin, *Newcomers*, pp. 61, 119-12-.

21. [Samuel Eliot Morison], "History as a Literary Art," in Oscar Handlin, et. al., *Harvard Guide to American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 44-49. Lee Benson, *Toward the Scientific Study of History: Selected Essays* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972). Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*. Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

22. R. Alan Lawson, *The Failure of Independent Liberalism 1930-1941* (New York: Putnam's, 1971), pp. 226-230. Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961). Handlin, *The Uprooted*. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* ([1963] Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970) pp. 15-18. David Riesman, with Reuel Denney and Nathan Glazer, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 107-111. Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, pp. 319-324. John E. Toews, "Intellectual History After the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1987), pp. 879-908.

23. Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, especially Ch. 6. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), Ch. 1-3 and *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956). Daniel Bell, *End of Ideology*, Ch. 3. Richard Gillam, "Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills, and 'the Critical Ideal,'" *American Scholar* 47 (Winter 1977-78), pp. 69-86.

24. Bell, *End of Ideology*, Ch. 12 and *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925* (New York: Vintage, 1967). Barton Bernstein. "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Pantheon: 1968), 276. William Appleman Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Random House, 1969).

25. Jesse Lemisch, "The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up," in Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past*, pp. 4, 6. William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966).

26. For good accounts of these developments, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Ch. 13-16 and Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 153-237.

27. The problematic term neoconservative remains a useful if time-bound category to encompass some prominent "vital center" intellectuals who joined the Reagan coalition but remained (critical) supporters of the welfare state during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Subsequently, however, most either became full-fledged conservatives or drifted back to a Clintonesque center. Many of the intellectuals labeled as neoconservatives always disliked the term, which was first applied by liberal opponents. For example, see Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996), pp.193-202.

28. For example, see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), especially Ch. 1-3.

29. Mills, *Power Elite*, p. 22.

30. Levine, *Opening of the American Mind*, p. 155. K. Anthony Appiah, "The Multiculturalist Misunderstanding," *New York Review of Books* (October 9, 1997), p. 31. Levine sees the affinity between pluralists and multiculturalists but not the shared problems. For an account that stresses the

differences between pluralists and multiculturalists, see David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic, 1995).

31. For an expanded version of this argument, see Leo P. Ribuffo, "God and Contemporary Politics," *Journal of American History* 79 (March 1993), pp. 1515-1533.

32. Depending on the definitions of "nation," "substantially," "dominant culture," and "low-church Protestantism," Scots, Swiss, Canadians and Germans might have grounds for demanding refinement of Marsden's sweeping assertion.

33. For a review of the survey literature on shared American values, see Fowler, *Enduring Liberalism*, especially Ch. 4-5.

34. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, p.18. Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 4, 8-9, 16, 28.

35. For a critique of this tendency, see Bruce Kuklick, "Commentary: Confessions of an Intransigent Revisionist," *Diplomatic History* 18 (Winter 1994), pp.121-124.

36. For a good critique of the Rorty fad, see James T. Kloppenberg. "Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking," *Journal of American History* 83 (June 1996), pp. 100-138. This fad among historians is especially odd. In his most historically oriented book, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), Rorty occasionally alludes to the value of expertise but never bothers to develop any expertise as a historian. Accordingly, he makes ungrounded grand claims about "our country" on the basis of slim evidence and, perhaps because no beliefs can be grounded anyway, retrospectively endorses the Cold War liberalism that suits his—and the country's—current mood.

37. Leo P. Ribuffo, "The Newtong of America," *Public Historian* 19 (Summer 1997), pp. 71-86.

38. Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press, 1963). Robert Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

39. David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered and Other Essays* (New York: Free Press, 1954), p. 143.

40. Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, p. 459.

41. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.165. Gerald M. Pomper, "The Presidential Election," in Marlene Michels Pomper, ed., *The Election of 1984: Reports and Interpretations* (Chatham: Chatham House, 1985), p. 67. Gerald M. Pomper, "The Presidential Election," in Gerald M. Pomper, et al. *The Election of 1988: Reports and Interpretations* (Chatham: Chatham House, 1989), p.134.

42. Respectively, Edward J. Larson, *Summer of the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic, 1997); Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, Saint Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), and Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

43. George E. Pozzetta, "'My Children Are My Jewels': Italian-American Generations During World War II," in Kenneth Paul O'Brien and Lynn Hudson Parsons, *The Home-Front: World War II and American Society* (Westport: Greenwood: 1995), pp. 63-82.

44. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).