

CHAPTER NINE

AMERICAN HISTORY

American history has not been subject to the same influences as British history being rather less in chronological extent and without the need to justify the lineage of the various English dynasties of monarchs. Nevertheless it has been subject to its own myths and ideologies dating from the first English settlement and given force with the American Revolution. They can be grouped as various varieties of what is known as "American exceptionalism."

In the Puritan John Winthrop's 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity", preached on board the ship Arbella. Winthrop told the future Massachusetts Bay colonists that their new community would be "as a city upon a hill", watched by the world and this became the ideal the New England colonists placed upon their hilly capital city, Boston Winthrop's sermon gave rise to the widespread belief in American folklore that the United States of America is "God's country" because metaphorically it is a "Shining City upon a Hill".

This sentiment was echoed just before the Revolution by Thomas Paine in his influential 1776 pamphlet "Common Sense". He argued that the American Revolution provided an opportunity to create a new, better society: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand...." Many Americans agreed with Paine, and came to believe that the United States' virtue was a result of its special experiment in freedom and democracy. To Americans in the time following their proclaimed freedom for mankind, embodied in the Declaration of Independence, could only be described as the inauguration of a new era in human history because the world would look back and define history as events that took place before, and after, the Declaration of Independence. From this it seemed that Americans owed to the world an obligation to expand and preserve these beliefs.

In the nineteenth century this changed into the concept of Manifest Destiny as America expanded westwards. Historians have generally agreed that there are three basic themes to Manifest Destiny:

- the special virtues of the American people and their institutions,
- America's mission to redeem and remake the west in the image of agrarian America,
- an irresistible destiny to accomplish this essential duty.

Historian Frederick Merk wrote that this concept was born out of "a sense of mission to redeem the Old World by high example ... generated by the potentialities of a new earth for building a new heaven". Other historians have emphasized that "Manifest Destiny" was a contested concept. Democrats supported the idea but many prominent Americans, such as Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and most Whigs rejected it. Many Whigs saw America's moral mission as one of democratic example rather than one of conquest. American historiography reflects this influence of these political ideas.

The Whigs (19th century)

For most of the 1800s the history of the American Revolution was presented as an epic story of idealism, nationalism and progress. This grand narrative portrayed the revolution as a struggle between the forces of liberty and modernity (America) and the regressive, corrupt and morally bankrupt Old World (Britain). Needless to say, this perspective was one-sided and far from rigorous. These early histories belonged firmly to the Whig school, which imagined history in general and the American Revolution in particular, as a journey of progress, advancement and improvement. Many of the first 'histories' that appeared in the early 1800s took the form of biographies of notable revolutionary leaders. These early works mirrored the approach of Plutarch, an ancient historian who wrote history as the product of

great men in difficult times. Books like Parson Weems' *Life of Washington* and *Life of Benjamin Franklin* and William Wirt's *Life and Character of Patrick Henry* celebrated the lives and achievements of their subjects, but contained little rigorous research, critical examination or objective analysis. Instead, these writers relied on word-of-mouth, myth or rumour; they exaggerated, embellished and in some cases falsified critical facts about the revolution and those involved in it. Wirt's biography of Patrick Henry, for instance, contained verbatim records of Henry's speeches, even though no transcripts of these speeches existed; it seems certain that Wirt reconstructed the speeches himself. According to Ray Raphael, the author of *Founding Myths*, a good deal of the conventional understanding of the American Revolution is based not on factual accounts or evidence but on the dubious literary creativity of these 19th century biographers.

The second half of the 1800s saw the appearance of more rigorous accounts of the revolution. These histories maintained the Whig view that the American Revolution was a profound event in human history. However, they supported this position with more rigorous uses of evidence and analysis. These late 19th century historians portrayed the revolution as a worthy cause guided by benevolent and wise leaders. The revolution's foundation documents, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, were the culmination of Western political philosophy, democracy and liberalism. That these achievements came to pass with minimal bloodshed or destruction was testimony to the American people and their desire for freedom and progress. Some of the historians who advanced this Whig perspective included George Bancroft (*History of the United States of America*) and John Fiske (*The American Revolution*).

The Progressives (early 1900s)

The Whig view of the American Revolution was challenged in the early 20th century. A new breed of historians, loosely referred to as the Progressives, began to query whether the revolution was driven by economic factors as much as by patriotism, conscience and benevolence. **Charles Beard** (1874-1948) was one of the first historians to deconstruct the Whig 'hero worship' of the Founding Fathers. Beard's "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution", in effect a close study of the men who drafted the Constitution, dared to suggest that their actions were affected by self-interest and conservatism as much as national progress. **Arthur Schlesinger** (1888-1965) wrote "The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution" suggesting that a good deal of the revolutionary sentiment in the 1760s and 1770s was whipped up by American businessmen, keen to increase their profits by shedding British trade regulations and gaining a foothold in British-dominated markets. Progressive historians became prominent in the first three decades of the 1900s and their work changed and shaped how many viewed the American Revolution. The Whig idea of a national consensus was largely abandoned; colonial attitudes to the revolution were more complex and divided than previously assumed; colonial and revolutionary American society was no longer seen as idyllic and homogenous. According to Progressive historians the American Revolution had unleashed a popular democratic spirit that was important in for the completion of the revolution but became problematic after 1783. They saw the Constitution as an attempt to calm and disperse this unsettling popular democracy, which reached a climax in the farmers' rebellions of 1786-87. The ratification debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists highlighted some of the fundamental political divisions that remained in post-revolutionary America.

The Imperial School (early 1900s)

Contemporary with the Progressives was another group of historians who viewed the American Revolution in a broader context. The Imperial school, as this group became known, considered the revolution in the context of the British Empire, its rapid growth and its management and mismanagement. These historians did not consider British mercantilism

and the Navigation Acts to be particularly oppressive or restrictive. If they had been then the American colonies could not have flourished as they had before 1763. Lewis Namier's "Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III" suggests the source of the American Revolution was political instability in Britain itself. The appointment of Tory ministries, obsessed about imperial management but too inexperienced to understand it, was crucial to the problems in America. These conservative ministers were confronted with pressing economic problems at home and responded by adopting poorly-considered imperial policies. They did not understand the political ramifications of these policies, which triggered a shift in Anglo-American relations.

An important late variation of American Exceptionalism was contained in the views of **Frederick Jackson Turner** (1861-1932). Turner's contribution to American history was to argue that the frontier past best explained the distinctive history of the United States. He most cogently articulated this idea in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which he first delivered to a gathering of historians in 1893 in Chicago, then the site of the World's Columbian Exposition, an enormous fair to mark the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' voyage. Turner's lecture eventually gained such wide distribution and influence that a contemporary scholar has called it "the single most influential piece of writing in the history of American history."

Three years before Turner's pronouncement of the **frontier thesis**, the U.S. Census Bureau had announced the disappearance of a contiguous frontier line. Turner took this "closing of the frontier" as an opportunity to reflect upon the influence it had exercised. He argued that the frontier had meant that every American generation returned "to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line." Along this frontier -- which he also described as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" -- Americans again and again recapitulated the developmental stages of the emerging industrial order of the 1890's. This development, in Turner's description of the frontier, "begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on with the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader... the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled farm communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with the city and the factory system."

For Turner, the deeper significance of the frontier lay in the effects of this social recapitulation on the American character. "The frontier," he claimed, "is the line of most rapid Americanization. The presence and predominance of numerous cultural traits -- that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism -- could all be attributed to the influence of the frontier."

Turner's essay reached triumphalist heights in his belief that the promotion of individualistic democracy was the most important effect of the frontier. Individuals, forced to rely on their own wits and strength, he believed, were simply too scornful of rank to be amenable to the exercise of centralized political power.

Turner offered his frontier thesis as both an analysis of the past and a warning about the future. If the frontier had been so essential to the development of American culture and democracy, then what would befall them as the frontier closed? It was on this foreboding note that he closed his address: "And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."

Despite Turner's "Frontier thesis" Progressive historians held sway until the Second World War and the late twentieth century saw a proliferation in different schools of history. After the

Second World War a new school of historians, **the Consensus historians**, for example **Richard Hofstadter** (1916 – 1970), emerged who stressed that the shared ideas of Americans were more important in our history than conflicts among them. This school of history was in many ways a throwback to the traditional history writing of the previous century, but also reflected the recent emergence of the United States as a global superpower. They believed that Americans possessed a much narrower range of divisive issues and conflicts compared with other peoples of the world. There were conflicts, but domestic disputes had never approached the nastiness of European uprisings and revolutions. The bloody reign of terror in the French Revolution had no comparable American counterpart.

These Consensus historians celebrated the accomplishments and achievements of American democratic capitalism. A key word used to describe them is continuity. They rejected much of the periodization of American history, and studied ideas that crossed over the typical political periods. Consensus historians saw in American culture common traits, expressed in the longevity and durability of its institutions. America held together through widespread prosperity and universal acceptance of the principles summarized in the first parts of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Political struggles were always within the centre rather than between left and right extremists. What passes for conflict between the haves and have-nots in American history is really competition between competing groups of businessmen and entrepreneurs. The writings of consensus historians perpetuated the idea of American uniqueness that carried with it the implication of superiority. An example is **Thomas Andrew Bailey** (1902-1983) whose “The American Pageant (1956)” was a widely used textbook which is still used in schools.

Great changes accompanied America’s transition into the 1960s. The 1950s had been characterized by a general agreement on national goals, by secure self-confidence, and by a categorization of other nations into good guys and bad guys. In the late 1950s, this self-assurance dissolved in successive waves of polarization over the issues of racism, imperialism and poverty. The seeming reemergence of conflict in current events stimulated a reexamination of conflict in American history.

The new champions of the theme of conflict in American history were part of an approach termed the “**New Left**”. The “left” signifies an orientation toward methods and concepts that focus on the masses and their experiences, “history from the bottom up,” as it was called. Unlike the old left, the New Left avoided preconception of Marxist theories, which selected facts to fit a doctrine. Some historians of the New Left demand the inclusion of those features of American history that explain how America came to be a violent, racist and repressive society. An example of the re-examination of the conflict is the work of **Stanley Elkins** (1925-2013) whose “Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life” (1959) compared American slavery with Nazi concentration camps. Although his conclusions have been superseded his methodology has been very influential in the discipline of history in America.

The renewed emphasis on conflict and polarization was fed by the civil rights struggle. Unrest over the draft and the war in Vietnam, impatience with the pace of civil rights, and examples of political assassinations combined to produce explosions of violence in the cities in the 1960s. The final ingredients convulsing American society was the emergence of first the women’s, and then finally, the gay and lesbian movement. Women and minorities destroyed the homogenized image of “consensus” America. The new emphasis was on pluralism, the existence of many different peoples, ethnic groups, and races. There were new histories of Black Americans, American women and Native Americans. Many of these branches of history reject the traditional methodology of history arguing that such an approach is structured by ethnocentric or gender biases.

During the 1970's and 1980's there were many reactions to the changes sought by New Left social movements. The resulting **Neo-Conservative** history movement was arguably a simple re-assertion of consensus historiography. Like Consensus historians, Neo-Conservatives stressed traditional American values, viewing the U.S. as a uniquely moral, stable country. In general, unity is valued over pluralism. Thus, Neo-Conservatives minimized conflicts in history and dismissed New Left historians as "politically correct". In distancing themselves from the expressly political style of the New Left, while celebrating "traditional American values", Neo-Conservatives tried to present themselves as non-ideological and objective.

However, there are differences between Consensus and Neo-Conservative historians. Today, neo-conservatives are divided over the proper role of the Federal government. While many neo-conservatives are deeply suspicious of the use of Federal power, especially after the Civil Rights movement, some neo-conservatives stress the historic use of the Federal government to shape American culture, and now want Federal power to support conservative goals.

An essential strand in American historiography is that of **Black American history** with important historians such as **Rayford Logan** (1897-1982) who edited the Dictionary of American Negro Biography, **Dorothy Porter Wesley** (1905-1995) who built a collection of 200,000 primary sources on African-American history at Howard University, **Charles H. Wesley** (1891-1987) whose "Negro Labor in the United States" destroyed the stereotypical view that Black Americans were feckless and lazy, **John Hope Franklin** (1915-2009) whose "From Slavery to Freedom" (1947) was a landmark book in African-American history and **John W. Blassingame** (1940-2000) whose "The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South" (1972) used original slave narratives and other materials to show how these had influenced mainstream American ideas and culture.

IMPORTANT HISTORIANS

Frederick Jackson Turner (1861 – 1932) was an American historian in the early 20th century, based at the University of Wisconsin until 1910, and then at Harvard. He trained many PhDs who came to occupy prominent places in the history profession. He promoted interdisciplinary and quantitative methods, often with a focus on the Midwest. He is best known for his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", whose ideas formed the Frontier Thesis. He argued that the moving western frontier shaped American democracy and the American character from the colonial era until 1890. Historians and academics have argued strenuously over Turner's work, but all agree that the **Frontier Thesis** has had an enormous impact on historical scholarship and the American mind.

Charles Beard (1874 – 1948) was, with Frederick Jackson Turner, one of the most influential American historians of the first half of the 20th century. His works included a radical re-evaluation of the founding fathers of the United States, who he believed were motivated more by economics than by philosophical principles. Beard's most influential book, **An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States**, has been the subject of great controversy ever since its publication. While frequently criticized for its methodology and conclusions, it was responsible for a wide-ranging reinterpretation of American history of the founding era. He was also the co-author with his wife, Mary Beard, of **The Rise of American Civilization**, which had a major influence on American historians.

Arthur Schlesinger (1888 – 1965) was an American historian who taught at Harvard University, pioneering social history and urban history. He was a Progressive Era intellectual who stressed material causes (such as economic profit and conflict between businessmen and farmers) and downplayed ideology and values as motivations for historical actors.

Thomas Andrew Bailey (1902 – 1983) was a professor of history and authored the widely used American history textbook, **The American Pageant**. He was known for his witty style and clever terms he coined, such as "international gangsterism." He popularized diplomatic history with his entertaining textbooks and lectures. He contended foreign policy was significantly affected by public opinion and that current policymakers could learn from history.

John Hope Franklin (1915 – 2009) was an American historian of the United States. He is best known for his work **From Slavery to Freedom**, first published in 1947 and continually updated. More than three million copies have been sold. In 1995, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honour.

Richard Hofstadter (1916 – 1970) was an American historian and public intellectual of the mid-20th century. Rejecting his earlier approach to history from the far left, in the 1950s he embraced consensus history, becoming the "iconic historian of postwar liberal consensus", largely because of his emphasis on ideas and political culture rather than the day-to-day doings of politicians. His most important works include **The American Political Tradition** and **The Age of Reform**.

Stanley Elkins (1925 – 2013) was an American historian, best known for his controversial comparison of slavery in the United States to Nazi concentration camps.

MAIN POINTS

- American history began in mythical fashion as an epic narrative beginning with John Winthrop's legendary sermon 1630 with America to become „the city on the hill.“ This was a foundational legend that gave rise to the concept of American exceptionalism, an ideology that still exercises a powerful influence.
- Later Whig historians still regarded the Revolutionary War as an event of profound significance and the declaration of Independence and the Constitution were regarded as primary documents.
- Progressive historians questioned the beliefs of the Whig historians and analyzed economic factors in the revolution as opposed to idealistic motivations.
- The Imperial historians placed the American Revolution into a wider European historical context seeing it as an outcome of British political problems and failures to understand American colonial realities.
- A later variation on the Whig historical perspective was Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis which still has an influence on American self-perception. This argued that the western frontier developed qualities unique to American culture and character.
- The Consensus historians argued that conflicts in America were less important than shared values and achievements. Their work coincided with the post-war era of Presidents Truman and Eisenhower.
- The New Left historians moved away from a focus on political leaders and movements to writing history from the bottom. This has led to a number of different historical perspectives such as history by Black historians and feminists.

- A late twentieth century shift came with the neo-conservatives who like the Consensus historians stressed the importance of traditional American values in driving history.

SEMINAR EXERCISES

- What is the importance of myth in American history especially those concerning historical characters such as George Washington, Davy Crockett and the Alamo, the Wild West?
- What role do Native Americans play in mainstream American history?
- How does Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis contribute to mythical views of American history?
- How much of American history has been driven by economic motivations. Examine, for instance, the Boston Tea Party incident of 1773.
- Identify some American values with which the great majority of Americans agree? Have these always been present in American history? Have any values become less important?
- What are the different views present today in America over the treatment of slaves? Are Stanley Elkins' claims closer to the truth than those who claim that Afro-American slaves were treated relatively well?
- How is the importance of women emphasized in American history?
- How has the historical view of women changed in the last two hundred years?

READING

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