

The Little Picture



Or, who's afraid of the big question?

I have a friend who's always ranting about the fact that historians can no longer handle a good scholarly fight. Mea culpa. Wimp. Coward. That's me. I have never written anything that put a shot across another historian's bow. My first book was about a subject historians don't much care about: language. Insofar as it got any play, it was among the lit crit crowd. And my subsequent work has been tame to the point of cowardly solicitude. I would place most of it in a genre whose origins lay with the very curse my friend believes to have been visited upon historians. That genre—usually referred to as microhistory—has little ambition at all when it comes to disproving another scholar's thesis. It is, abashedly, about telling stories that, much like short stories, somehow move the reader by evoking distant experience and place. It also inclines toward the blatantly antiquarian in its relish for the small particulars of the past. Old things, long-vanished turns of phrase, antiquated behaviors, small cul-de-sacs of culture—these tend to be the stuff from which

microhistorians forge their stories.

I have, of late, been greatly taken with this approach to the past. It has seemed the perfect home for the sheepish among us who'd rather putz around in an archive and toy with their prose than dethrone some betweed historical titan. Fortunately, I'm not alone. One only has to read this journal, whose very founding and survival have depended on a similar interest, among those of us who write about the past, in just publishing well told stories.

But, in keeping with my general lack of conviction about many things, I have to confess to having had some doubts about the enterprise. I'll spare you the autobiographical part of the story and simply say that I've begun to miss those good old days when big questions were all the rage and when some Harvard or Yale professor would happily trundle out a book explaining the origin of the American Revolution or the meaning of Progressivism—at the expense of whatever poor sap had previously tackled the problem.

I've even started to look back fondly on what has become the most absurd and laughable of all modern scholarly trends: the original American Studies movement. Who, in our own post-postmodern age, would dare to ask a question as simple as: What does America mean? And yet, I've found myself drawn to the writings of Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, Perry Miller, and others. For all their exceptionalism and reductionism, for all their dependence on the canonical, for all their quaint idealism, there is much in what they did that I find myself admiring.

They cared about ideas, they cared about language, and they cared about writing. At the very least, in this last regard, they make less strange bedfellows for the microhistory crowd than one might suppose. These scholars wanted to write about the past in dense and redolent ways, and they wanted to do so while reaching beyond small scholarly circles. But their unabashedly bold and big questions are what really define them. How wonderfully innocent and unironic to simply ask, "What does it all mean, this thing we call America?"

The origin of the American Studies movement has to do with political ideology in the middle of the twentieth century. The scholars I mentioned above were all various shades of left. Not yet prepared to throw the communal baby out with the totalitarian bath water, they embraced a high-bred social-democratic polity, something that allowed for a sharply limited free market, collective social security, and so on. But they faced a very difficult antagonist in the postwar liberals who clung to the pre-depression idea that America was somehow different, that it didn't need a large interventionist state to regulate the economy or take care of people. The reason for this was that Marx (Karl) was simply wrong when it came to America: here history was not born of class conflict. It was instead born of Hegelian *Geist*, embodied in the great, collective middle-class leviathan that carried the nation forth on its acquisitive, work-hardened shoulders.

The leaders of the American Studies movement, at bottom, sought to disprove this idea, or at least part of it. They accepted the notion that America was different—that it had no long history of class conflict, of peasant uprisings, and tyrannical rule. But that did not mean America was a nation without conflict. Those very same middle-class people who carried American history on their backs did so by fighting their way through a thicket of barriers, whether it was the natural ones of the West or the mind-numbing, human-made ones of industrialization.

This American Studies brand of conflict—conflict as ideal versus anti-ideal, as historical ego versus historical id—has come to seem profoundly disconnected from reality. Since the 1960s (the connection to campus and urban upheaval is not coincidental), historians—or at least those in the academy—have generally come to believe that in fact the old American Studies model of conflict was pretty much a fiction. America may still not quite uphold a Marxian model of class conflict, but broaden your conception of social conflict—from the narrow rubric of proletarian versus bourgeoisie—and you begin to see an American past riddled with actual, sometimes bloody social antagonism. You see agrarian revolt, from the colonial New York tenant wars to the Whiskey Rebellion; you see race and ethnic conflict, from the New York draft riots to the urban clashes of the 1960s. The list could go on.

Although pretty much every reasonable student of our past accepts the idea that American history is a history rife with conflict, it is also the rare outlier who believes that any single formula—e.g., corporate capital versus labor—explains American history. Instead, we tend to think about our past in terms of an interwoven series of conflicts and tensions, few of which alone define any single era or set of events, let alone the entirety of the American past.

If you cannot point to any historical silver bullet to explain a discreet event in the past (let alone all of American history), why not simply find satisfaction in the evocative story well told? If the past is an infinitely complex web of conflicting causes and effects, why bother with the pretense that we can actually explain something? Instead, let us rest comfortably in the realm of craft where value comes from formal properties rather than superior argument. Instead of trying to be more right than the last interpreter of, say, the election of 1800, let's simply tell a better story, more alive with engaging prose and rich anecdote.

This, at least, explains my own tendencies over the past seven or eight years. Enter the identity crisis: So who am I? Am I simply a storyteller who writes about the past? If so, what of all that stuff that got me into this line of work in the first place? What of those debates about the meaning of the American Revolution? What of my infatuation with Tocqueville and his *Democracy in America*? A bigger book about America has never been written.

I have found myself drawn once again to the likes of Tocqueville, particularly

the impulse—which he was the first to yield to in any serious way—to ask, “What does America mean?”

It turns out the question is not quite as out of fashion as I had thought. The Web is crawling with bloggers pontificating on the need to define America in the twenty-first century. There are high-school kids and church groups churning out page after page of discussion about what America means. And they all generally agree that the question is urgent because of the war on terror. If we are really to defeat our shadowy and ubiquitous enemy, they say, we need to know what we stand for. We need to know what we like about ourselves and what our enemies hate about us—what makes us unique. Everyone knows that you can’t fight a war unless you know what you’re fighting for.

Most of the general Web chatter on this subject advocates one of two familiar positions: melting pot and founding creed. The first is simply that age-old notion that America is diversity made workable by middle-class values—the “we’re all hard-working middle-class people, and we don’t have time to develop irrational hatreds of our various differences” theory. And that makes us special. The Islamists hate that about us because it is a tolerant attitude, and they hate tolerance. Then there’s the more pious notion that what defines us is our founding creed, our embrace of liberty, our insistence on the rule of law, our religious-like devotion to a set of founding principles enshrined in the oldest written constitution in the world. Without those founding values, we are just another ethnically divided nation, easily bullied by our corrupt leaders.

These shrill meaning-of-America-as-patriotic-mantra explanations are a depressing reminder of just how intellectually marginal the question “What does America mean?” has become. Perhaps that’s less because they come from people who spend little time thinking about the matter than because they come from Americans themselves. Tocqueville, in some ways the true father of American Studies, was of course French. So maybe it takes foreigners, judgment unclouded by patriotism, to figure out what America means. If you search the Web (I Googled “Meaning of America”), you’ll find an article in the *Economist*, dated November 10, 2005, entitled “The Meaning of America: Where Men are Men and Pumpkins are Nervous.” The article’s subject? Millsboro, Delaware’s nineteenth annual Pumpkin Shooting Contest. As the very English *Economist* sees it,

“[a]ll in all, Punkin Chunkin is a symbol of what makes America great. Only in the richest country on earth could regular guys spend tens of thousands of dollars building a pumpkin gun. Only in a nation with such a fine tradition of inventiveness, not to mention martial prowess, would so many choose to. And only in a land of wide open spaces would they be able to practise their chunkin without killing their neighbors.”

There it is. America is a nation of wasters: we have so much land, money, time, and inventiveness that we can afford the whacky pastime of Punkin Chuckin. The argument has been made before. In 1950, the Yale historian David M. Potter

delivered a set of lectures (published in 1954 as *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*) arguing more or less what Punkin Chunkin suggests to the *Economist*: what defines America is the sheer abundance of its resources. From Potter's vantage in the prosperous 1950s, it appeared that with so much to go around, most Americans were pretty well provided for. Like it or not, accidents of nature had given rise to a huge, dominating middle class and with its unbounded purchasing power, that middle class defined America.

Compared to the patriotic-mantra approach to the meaning of America, the free-market, material-abundance, *Economist* interpretation (via Potter) feels at least a bit more substantive. Perhaps we should be happy about its very existence; perhaps it is a symptom that foreigners—as they struggle to reconcile our militarism with our professed high-minded, democratic values—are once again trying to figure us out. And perhaps, too, a few American historians who don't quite feel at home in their own country will be inspired to follow suit. Perhaps, once again, you won't be laughed out of the seminar room or lecture hall if you stand up and claim to know what America means. On the other hand, maybe we're just too much the grave liberals, too much the nuanced antitheses to the Fox News/AM radio approach to the world, to ever lay claim to such grandiose territory. How can my world be reduced to one defining trait—the West, material abundance, ethnic diversity, etc.? And yet, there is no denying the appeal of this kind of thinking, even if understood as pure intellectual exercise. What America needs are critical faculties, and critical faculties need a thesis to knock around. Maybe that great nervous scholar and monumental equivocator Moses Herzog put it best when he declared, "What this country needs is a good five-cent synthesis."

Further Reading:

Major works from the midcentury American Studies movement include Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950); Perry Miller, *New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953); and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York, 1964). For the reference from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and for an insightful discussion of Potter's *Land of Plenty*, see Robert M. Collins, "David Potter's *People of Plenty* and the Recycling of Consensus History," in *Reviews in American History* 16:2 (June, 1988): 321-35.

This article originally appeared in issue 6.4 (July, 2006).

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