

# Introduction to the First Edition

IN THE COURSE OF THE PAST TWENTY YEARS, AMERICAN HISTORY HAS BEEN REMADE. Inspired initially by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—which shattered the "consensus" vision that had dominated historical writing—and influenced by new methods borrowed from other disciplines, American historians redefined the very nature of historical study. The rise of the "new histories," the emphasis on the experience of ordinary Americans, the impact of quantification and cultural analysis, the eclipse of conventional political and intellectual history—these trends are now so widely known (and the subject of such controversy) that they need little reiteration. The study of American history today looks far different than it did a generation ago.

This book comprises essays by thirteen scholars—many of whom have been at the forefront of the transformation of historical study—each assessing recent developments in historians' understanding of a period or a major theme in the nation's past. The idea for the collection originated with a request from the American Historical Association for a series of pamphlets addressed specifically to high school teachers of American history and designed to familiarize them with the most up-to-date historical scholarship. High school teachers, the association believed, sense that the study of history has changed dramatically of late;

overwhelmed as they are with classroom responsibilities, however, they have little time for extensive reading and are unable to keep up with all the trends in research and interpretation.

After a false start or two the proposal, somewhat revised, was adopted by Temple University Press. The project's central purpose remains the same: to provide an introduction to current thinking on key issues and periods of the American experience. The essays that follow will, as planned, be distributed in pamphlet form to high school teachers. But *The New American History* is addressed as well to a far wider audience: students and teachers at the college level and the broad public concerned with the current state of American historical study.

Although the book does not claim to offer a comprehensive view of all the subfields of American history, it is safe to say that no one can deny the centrality of the subjects that *are* included.

Each author was given a free hand in developing his or her reflections; consequently, there is some inevitable overlap in coverage. Leon Fink and Richard McCormick, for example, both touch on the labor politics of the Gilded Age; Thomas Holt, Sean Wilentz, and I all discuss recent literature on slave culture (a reflection of how important the body of scholarship dealing with that subject has been). No attempt has been made to fit the essays into a predetermined mold or impose a single point of view or interpretive framework. Nonetheless, certain themes recur with remarkable regularity, demonstrating how pervasively the "riew histories" have reshaped our understanding of the American past.

If anything is characteristic of the recent study of American history, it is attention to the experience of previously neglected groups—not simply as an addition to a preexisting body of knowledge but as a fundamental redefinition of history itself. Women's history, as Linda Gordon shows, has greatly expanded its subject area, moving beyond the movement for suffrage, which preoccupied earlier women's historians, into such previously ignored realms as the history of sexuality. Leon Fink shows how labor history, from a field that defined its subject as the experience of wage workers in factories and the activities of unionized workers, has expanded to encompass the study of slaves, women at home, and the majority of laborers, who in America have always been unorganized.

Even more striking, perhaps, is that Afro-American history and women's history have matured to the point where they are not only widely recognized as legitimate subfields with their own paradigms and debates but are seen as indispensable to any understanding of the broad American experience. These points are made effectively in surveys of the two fields by Thomas Holt and Linda Gordon, but they are evident in other contributions as well. Richard McCormick makes clear that any

calculus of Americans' gains and losses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must take into account the severe reverses suffered by blacks in those years. William Chafe places the civil rights movement at the center of his analysis of social change in post-World War II America. My own essay on the Civil War era argues not only that slavery and emancipation were the central issues in the sectional crisis but that blacks were active agents in shaping the era's history.

Women's history, too, has forced historians not simply to compensate for their previous neglect of one-half of the population but to rethink some of their basic premises. John Murrin explains why the study of family structure is essential to an understanding of colonial society. Linda Kerber delineates how the American Revolution affected prevailing definitions of "manhood" and "womanhood" and how patriarchy itself was restructured as a result of the revolutionary crisis. Leon Fink emphasizes the obvious but long-ignored fact that women have always been part of the country's labor history. Sean Wilentz shows that a key result of economic changes in the Jacksonian era was an ideological division between the public sphere of men and the private sphere of women. And Richard McCormick deals with the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the settlement houses not simply as women's organizations but as exemplars of the kinds of organizations that arose in response to the changes affecting all aspects of late nineteenth-century American life.

Many of the essays also demonstrate the impact of new methods on recent historical study. John Murrin shows how historical demography has yielded a new estimate of the human toll exacted by the colonization of the New World and how epidemiology affects our understanding of the decimation of the hemisphere's original inhabitants. Alice Kessler-Harris outlines the ways in which the "new empiricism" of statistical analysis has helped shape developments in social history. Richard McCormick and Alan Brinkley assess the impact of modernization theory on the study of both the pre- and post-World War I periods.

Despite the apparent ascendancy of social history, these essays do not lend credence to recent complaints that historians are no longer concerned with politics, economics, the Constitution, and intellectual history. Such traditional concerns appear in virtually every essay, although often in forms that earlier historians might find unrecognizable. The old "presidential synthesis"—which understood the evolution of American society chiefly via presidential elections and administrations—is dead (and not lamented). And "politics" now means much more than the activities of party leaders. Some essays devote attention to the broad political culture or "public life" of a particular era; others stress the role of the state itself in American history and the ways various groups have

tried to use it for their own purposes. My essay examines the significance of changes in the Constitution and the structure of federalism during the Civil War and Reconstruction (a “traditional” concern) and finds that the mobilization of the black community helped to establish the period’s political agenda (a “new” perspective, although one anticipated a half-century ago in W. E. B. Du Bois’s monumental *Black Reconstruction in America*).

Other contributors also accord political and intellectual developments a central place. Linda Kerber devotes considerable attention to the political culture of the generation of colonists who made the American Revolution. Sean Wilentz places ideological and political conflicts at the center of his analysis of the Jacksonian era. James Shenton explores the effect of persistent ethnic loyalties and the tensions spawned by immigration on American political alignments. Alan Brinkley discusses the New Deal within the context of the constraints imposed on government by the nature of America’s political and economic institutions, and the general impact of the period on the evolution of the American state. And Walter LaFeber shows how the Constitution has helped to shape the evolution of American foreign policy.

Many historians have lamented of late the failure of the current generation of scholars to produce a modern “synthesis” of the American past. Older synthetic interpretations, ranging from Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis to the consensus view of the 1950s, have been shattered, but no new one has emerged to fill the void. Indeed, the very diversity of the “new histories” and the portrait of America they have created seem to have fragmented historical scholarship and impeded the attempt to create a coherent new vision of the national experience. Several of the essays echo this concern, but there is sufficient similarity in their approaches and interpretations to suggest that the fragmentation of historical study may have been overstated. If the essays do not, and by their very nature cannot, produce the widely called-for new synthesis, several do point in that direction. Sean Wilentz, for example, suggests that the social, political, and economic history of Jacksonian America can be integrated into a coherent whole by placing the market revolution at the center of the account. McCormick demonstrates that “public life” can be a flexible, imaginative concept, capable of integrating a variety of social, economic, and political developments.

Taken together, these essays leave the impression that American history is a field of remarkable diversity and vitality. Its practitioners continue to grapple with the most pressing issues and persistent themes of our national experience: definitions of liberty and equality, causes of social change, the exercise of political power. Today, popular knowledge—or lack of knowledge—of the nation’s past has once again be-

come a subject of intense public discussion. Certainly, the more all of us—students, teachers, and other citizens—know of our national experience, the better. But as these essays illustrate, American history at its best remains not simply a collection of facts, not a politically sanctioned listing of indisputable "truths," but an ongoing mode of collective self-discovery about the nature of our society.

ERIC FONER

*Columbia University*