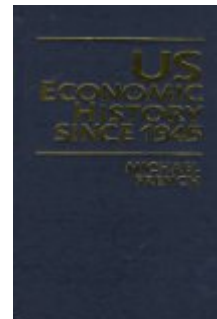


Michael French. *U.S. Economic History Since 1945*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997. 236 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-4185-3.



Reviewed by Randy R. Grant

Published on EH.Net (October, 1998)

Michael French, Senior Lecturer in Economic and Social History at the University of Glasgow, examines the U.S. economy since 1945, dividing the postwar era topically rather than chronologically. Although each chapter develops chronologically, the emphasis is on critical events within each theme. I include the table of contents to provide an initial description of the topics covered.

1. The U.S. population since 1945 2. U.S. government since 1945 3. U.S. government and management of the economy 4. U.S. regional economic change since 1945 5. Work in the United States since 1945 6. Agriculture and the rural United States 7. Mastery to uncertainty: corporate America, 1945-90 8. African-Americans and the civil rights movement 9. U.S. incomes and consumption since 1945 10. The United States in the world economy 11. U.S. productivity growth since 1945

French's objective is to provide more than just an overview of the era. In his own words French writes,

This book charts the main economic changes in the United States since 1945. In any historical study demarcation lines involve an uneasy com-

promise between placing an era in its long-run context or examining a short span more thoroughly. The period from 1945 to the early 1990s has often been treated as the tail-end to a longer book surveying two or three hundred years of American economic development. This establishes the grand schema, but at the expense of detail. [Introduction]

Interestingly, French's perspective is that he is providing a detailed examination of a shorter period. I was struck initially with the opposite perception. French's work, if nothing else, is ambitious. In roughly two hundred pages, French attempts to describe and explain adequately events in the U.S. economy covering a 50+ year span. His efforts are to be applauded, but the results are mixed. Such is the nature of the uneasy compromise that French identifies.

Economic historians familiar with the postwar period will have mixed reactions, depending on areas of specialization. To illustrate, as one who has focused on postwar macroeconomic policy, I found the chapters on the role of government to be seriously deficient in the discussion of the

Employment Act of 1946 and the role of the Keynesians in policy-making. On the other hand, as one with limited academic experience with regional economic changes, I saw that chapter as providing a strong overview of the issues with most of the critical details provided. In short, one must be aware of one's own parochial view, as it will likely influence the assessment of how well French examines each topic.

The other general dissatisfaction with the text is the less thorough discussion of the 1980s and 90s. While the coverage from 1945 to the 1970s is thorough, the discussion of the last two decades is, at times, excessively limited.

The first chapter describes demographic changes in the postwar period. It is an interesting discussion in and of itself, but it also provides a nice context for the rest of the topics covered. It almost literally puts a face to the subsequent content.

Chapters Two and Three address the federal government's role in the economy in the postwar era. A good view of the defense and welfare sectors is provided, as is a discussion of the prevailing attitudes toward government. Coverage of key legislative action is inadequate, as is the discussion of the role of economists (or lack thereof) during the period.

Chapter Four, dealing with regional economic changes since 1945, is one of the clearest in its presentation. Connections to product cycle and industry structure models are made, although a more explicit framework for discussion would be useful. Overall this chapter provides a good overview of regional economic change, both in identifying the changes and their causes.

The fifth chapter, covering work since 1945, provides balanced discussion of women's labor issues and changes in the power of labor in the postwar period. This chapter does a better job of covering recent history (i.e. 1980s and 90s), including a discussion of the Reagan administra-

tion's dealings with organized labor (such as with the air traffic controllers).

Chapter Six addresses issues of agriculture and the rural United States. Here French emphasizes the roles of changing technology and farm structure and the development of agribusiness. A solid discussion of regional impacts and the rural poor is also provided. The chapter concludes with a fairly extensive overview of federal farm policy in the postwar period. The section provides good coverage of both legislative and attitudinal changes since 1945.

Chapter Seven is arguably the best this text has to offer. It provides a comprehensive yet concise history of the growth, decline(?), and power of corporations since 1945. What is especially appreciated is the pre-1945 background discussion, which is critical to understanding the postwar activities of corporate America. While appropriate attention is given to mergers, joint ventures, etc., a discussion of corporate interlocks (aka interlocking directorates) would help complete what is already a good picture of corporate America since World War II.

Chapter Eight, "African-Americans and the civil rights movement," integrates the earlier discussions of demographic and regional economic changes. As with the chapter on corporations, the chapter reaches back to before 1945 to establish necessary background information on the struggles of African-Americans. It blends well the personalities, legal changes, and economic realities underlying the civil rights movement. As with all of the topics this book addresses, more could be added, but overall this chapter covers this extensive topic well.

Chapter Nine deals with income and consumption issues. While it provides an adequate overview, every topic addressed within the chapter warrants, at the minimum, its own chapter in a work of this nature. French first deals with income distribution, but only barely scratching the surface. His pre-1945 data are more thorough

than the postwar data he provides. A first pass is made at explaining trends in inequality, but it is not enough to provide even a cursory understanding of the forces involved. The chapter then moves to a discussion of poverty which, like the income distribution, warrants a more complete analysis. Weak also is the discussion of gender issues. The best part of Chapter Nine is the examination of changes in the consumer society in the postwar period. If a choice had to be made between leaving Chapter Nine as is or deleting it, it should remain in the text, but I would hope that any revision of the book would include expanded coverage of these important topics.

The U.S. in the world economy is the topic of Chapter Ten. Any author would be hard pressed to provide adequate coverage of this subject in a single chapter. Despite this, French does manage to introduce the central themes in U.S. global economic activities, providing sufficient overview of economic policy, multinationals, and US economic performance in the global economy since 1945.

French's concluding chapter addresses productivity growth in the postwar period, and the slowing of productivity growth in the 1970s and 80s. He summarizes the standard explanations, providing a brief overview of the evidence for each.

While I would have liked to keep this review focused on content, I digress to three technical issues affecting the book's usefulness. For its size, the text contains a wealth of information on each topic. Furthermore, the bibliography is extensive. The book has the potential to be a nice reference complement to a library collection on the postwar era. The problem is that the index is a woefully inadequate guide to important subtopics.

The second technical matter regards the writing style. I approach the book from the perspective of teaching economic history to undergraduates. In my quest for text materials I must look both for content and how well it is communicated. In some chapters I found the arguments diffi-

cult to follow because of the style. I am desperately trying to avoid sounding nit-picky or simplistic, but a more generous use of paragraphs would improve dramatically the readability of this work. In some places the typical undergraduate would get bogged down in the structure and lose sight of the important information which French's work offers.

Finally, I am left with the question, "for whom is this book written?" It has the appearance of a text that one might find in an undergraduate or graduate economic history course, but in places it assumes knowledge that the typical undergraduate will likely not possess, especially in the area of theoretical models. French demonstrates the application of the models, but does not establish the theoretical framework. The usefulness for undergraduate study is thus limited, leaving open the question of audience. As noted previously, those with expertise in these areas may be unsettled by what they see as gaps in the content. It is uncertain which master this work intends to serve, and it may be that it serves no master well.

As I look back at this review, it appears even to me to be somewhat schizophrenic. I leave it as such, as it reflects the mixed reaction I have to this work. Some parts excite while others disappoint. For those seeking a clear recommendation for or against this book, I am loathe to give it. I believe it is worth a look, but I say that knowing that some will be disappointed.

Copyright (c) 1998 by EH.NET and H-Net. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational uses if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact the EH.NET Administrator. (administrator@eh.net, Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-6992)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<http://eh.net/>

Citation: Randy R. Grant. Review of French, Michael. *U.S. Economic History Since 1945*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. October, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2387>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.