

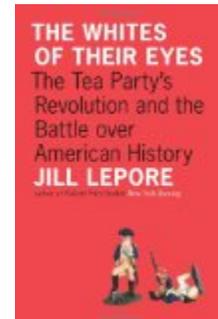
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jill Lepore. *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle Over American History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 224 S. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-15027-7.

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The Chief Practical Use of History

Since early 2009, many historians of the American founding period have watched with mixed feelings of perplexity, frustration, bemusement, and alarm as a vigorous and inchoate popular movement has erupted on the national political stage. Generally referred to as the Tea Party, this movement presents itself as a nonpartisan expression of general public anger at politicians of all stripes, so long as they are deemed part of the American political “establishment.” In particular, these activists seek to label themselves as the true legatees and representatives of America’s Founding Fathers, and their professed goal is to bring American politics back to the true basis of the creed on which the Founding Fathers declared independence from Great Britain and launched their great experiment in self-government. Lowering taxes, limiting government, and reminding elected officials that they hold their offices not as of right but on loan from the electorate—these are core principles of those who identify with the Tea Party movement.

It is all too easy for historians to deride the Tea Party for what many scholars deem to be its threadbare, caricatured, and idealized vision of the American past—of the American Revolution and the Constitution, of the worldview of the Founding Fathers that they believe guided those events, and of the gap separating past and present. To her credit, in her new book *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*, Jill Lepore largely manages to resist that temptation. Instead, she has written a book that is far more

useful and interesting. Through her prologue, five substantive chapters, and epilogue, she has crafted a classic “braided narrative” juxtaposing the imagined history that inspires Tea Party activists in Boston, Massachusetts (the home of the original Tea Party of December 1773) with the actual history of the Boston Tea Party, the events preceding and succeeding it, and the lives and ideas of the actual key players in the era of the nation’s founding.[1]

Lepore is the David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History at Harvard University and a frequent contributor to the *New Yorker*, in which some passages from the book under review first appeared. Her previous books include the award-winning *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (1998). In *The Whites of Their Eyes*, she boldly ventures into the realm not just of writing history but of analyzing and understanding the workings of historical memory. In this enterprise, she follows in the footsteps of a former colleague, the late Professor David Herbert Donald of Harvard University. In 1956, Donald published the first edition of his now-classic collection of essays, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (1956). The first two essays in Donald’s book, “Getting Right with Lincoln” and “The Folklore Lincoln,” helped to define a new genre of historical scholarship, which we now know as the study of historical memory—the consideration of changes over time in popular understandings of key individuals, historical events, or ideas of American history. Donald’s essays presaged such later classic works as Merrill D. Pe-

terson's *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (1960) and *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994).[2]

Historians' interest in the general public's evolving understandings of history has not always been disinterested, of course, as Professors Donald and Peterson have shown. Historians regularly seek to intervene in public controversy and debate, often by bringing to bear real- or claimed-historical expertise when they deem the public's grasp of relevant history to be skewed, fragile, or distorted. Some of these historians' interventions have provided easy game for critics of the profession, because of their presentism, arrogance, or fileopietism.[3] Lepore's book is valuable precisely because it is free of these damaging characteristics; instead, she brings to the enterprise of juxtaposing history and memory sensitivity to context past and present, empathy for the people she writes about, and humility about the historian's task.

That does not mean that this book isn't strongly critical of the version of American history offered by Tea Party activists. Lepore argues, with considerable force and persuasiveness, that that version of history amounts to "historical fundamentalism." As she points out, Tea Party activists speak and write as if the Founding Fathers are still among us, and as if the distinction between past and present has been collapsed. To them, the Obama administration's health care program is the modern version of the British Intolerable Acts of 1774; Obama himself is some sort of alien fusion between George III and Lord North; and those who oppose them are the new patriots, allies of the original Sons of Liberty. A pivotal paragraph early in the book crystallizes her case: "Historical fundamentalism is marked by the belief that a particular and quite narrowly defined past-'the founding'-is ageless and sacred and to be worshipped; that certain historical texts-the founding documents-are to be read in the same spirit with which religious fundamentalists read, for instance, the Ten Commandments; that the Founding Fathers were divinely inspired; that the academic study of history (whose standards of evidence and methods of analysis are based on skepticism) is a conspiracy and, furthermore, blasphemy; and that political arguments grounded in appeals to the founding documents, as sacred texts, and to the Founding Fathers, as prophets, are therefore incontrovertible" (p. 16). (I can testify, as a historian working on this period and frequently in the position of speaking to general audiences, that in discussing this period with general audiences I have experienced firsthand many of the phenomena that Lepore catalogues.)

Lepore further notes that in many ways, the phenomenon of conscripting the Tea Party in particular and the founding in general in the service of the present is nothing new in American history; the new factor is what she identifies as "historical fundamentalism" or, on occasion, "anti-history." As early as 1841, she notes, the constitutional historian and lawyer George Ticknor Curtis published a small book, *The True Uses of American Revolutionary History*, in which he decried too-easy invocations of the past supplanting efforts to understand the past.

Throughout American history since the founding, as Lepore documents here, contending political and legal forces have sought to claim the support of the Founding Fathers and the American Revolution for their contemporary positions.[4] In a particularly illuminating discussion, she focuses on the struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s over the bicentennial of the American Revolution, in which an official commemoration jockeyed for public attention with a heterogeneous and feisty People's Bicentennial Commission, which claimed the symbols of the American Revolution, including the Tea Party, as precursors of leftist critiques of the war in Indochina, the imperial presidency, corporate America, and pollution of the environment. (Of course, recent historical and constitutional quarrels over the jurisprudence of originalism, to which Lepore refers occasionally in these pages, have left readers of H-LAW all too familiar with the clashing views of historians and legal scholars over the appropriate and inappropriate uses of the past in modern controversies.)[5]

In shuttling between her thoughtful meditations on her encounters with ordinary Americans who have enlisted under the banner of the Tea Party and her equally thoughtful explorations of the actual history of the Tea Party, the Revolution, and the nation's founding, Lepore not only brings to life the historian's task but stresses that task's difficulty by contrast with what she deems the all-too-easy caricaturing of the American past by the Tea Party movement. Historical facts are hard to know, for much of the evidence is beyond our reach, having succumbed to the depredations of time. What remains has to be sifted with care, interpreted with constant awareness of the difference between past and present and the need to understand the past on its own terms. Thus, despite the most assiduous and careful historical research, historians are all too aware of the limits of their own efforts to understand and explain the past. (The Founding Fathers themselves lamented this problem-as we see most memorably in the correspondence of the aged John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.) It is precisely this contrast

between the historian's mindset and that characterizing the Tea Party movement that Lepore seeks to explore and understand, with historical rigor yet seeking at all times to avoid easy mockery and smug derision.

In the opening pages of his classic study of the United States, *The American Commonwealth*, James Bryce observed, "The chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies." [6] The comment could have served as the epigraph to this elegant, thoughtful, and valuable book. The only problem may be that those who will read *The Whites of Their Eyes* already will agree with it, and those who need to read it most are least likely to pick it up.

Notes

[1]. By coincidence, or perhaps not by coincidence, a fine new book on the Boston Tea Party has just appeared: Benjamin Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[2]. For a valuable work furthering and deepening

our understanding of "what history has made of Thomas Jefferson," see Francis D. Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

[3]. See, for example, David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), passim. For a valuable discussion focusing on the uses of history in legal and constitutional controversy, see Laura Kalman, *The Strange Career of Legal Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), chapter 6.

[4]. See R. B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 115-167.

[5]. Kalman, *Strange Career of Legal Liberalism*, passim; see also Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered*, ix-xi, 108-114, 143-167, and 168-176.

[6]. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, second edition in 2 volumes (London and New York: Macmillan, 1891), 1:5.

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