

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Irwin Unger, Robert R. Tomes. *American Issues: A Primary Source Reader in United States History*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999. xii + 410 p. \$39.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-13-775552-3.

Reviewed by Marcus C. Robyns (Central Upper Peninsula and Northern Michigan University Archives, Northern Michigan University)

Published on H-Survey (March, 2000)

Critical Thinking and Primary Sources

Historical research and analysis can be fun! No doubt about it. How many times have we heard students and others comment on how a trip to an archives is very much like a detective story? Examining the actual documents that record historical events can be a momentous experience for a student. Primary sources form the basis of historical research and if properly used can be a powerful force in a student's intellectual and cognitive development. Through the study of primary sources, students learn that history is written from the records of someone's observation of an event or activity. They become empowered through the use of their own analytical skills, and they learn that the study of history is an ongoing and changing process.

Irwin Unger and Robert R. Tomes have made an admirable contribution to this adventure in learning with the second edition of *American Issues: A Primary Source Reader in United States History*. Volume II covers the period from the beginning of Reconstruction through the end of the twentieth century and continues the objective of "stimulating critical thinking and active learning about American history, leading students to reject received ideas when appropriate, relate the past to their own experience, and reach conclusions on the basis of evidence" (p. xi). This emphasis on critical analysis and reflection clearly sets *American Issues* apart from other compilations of original documents and makes the work an important addition to any general survey course in United States history.

American Issues is a comprehensive offering that covers all the major historiographical themes, such as the Progressive impulse, the New Deal, the cold war, the civil rights revolution, the New Feminism, the Reagan revolution, and the New Environmentalism. Each chapter pulls together a set of primary sources in a manner that provides contrasting points of view concerning the issue at hand. Moreover, the authors begin each chapter with

a very concise, yet complete, narrative overview of the historical context for the documents. Most importantly, and effectively, each section of primary sources begins with a brief narrative explanation of the documents and their creators, including analytical questions that direct the reader toward a critical and reflective review.

The definitions for critical thinking are about as numerous as the published articles and books on the subject. Historians have never questioned the existence of a historical fact, yet professors of history in higher education have not always done a great job integrating critical thinking skills into historical research methods instruction. This problem makes *American Issues* that much more refreshing, since the authors recognize that the historical research method does, of course, incorporate critical thinking skills into the analysis and interpretation of primary sources.

American Issues approaches the study of primary sources from the two core components of historical analysis, internal and external criticism. External criticism is the process of authentication and verification of authorship, determining where, when, why, and by whom a document was written. Internal criticism is the process of evaluation and interpretation of the evidence once the researcher has determined its provenance and authenticity. Here the researcher must establish, to the best of her ability, the real and literal meaning of the information or evidence. The researcher must also test the author's competence, detect any bias in the author, and ascertain the truth of the author's conclusions or observations. Internal criticism, essentially, is the analysis of the credibility of the statement.

American Issues presents original documents in a way that facilitates a student's critical analysis. Indeed, an interesting thread throughout the book is the degree to which debate and polemical rhetoric characterized American political discourse in the twentieth century.

This observation is reinforced by Theodore Roosevelt's rather offensive attack on the unmanly character of anti-imperialists and Herbert Hoover's almost sanctimonious characterization of FDR and the New Deal as an assault on freedom and the American Way. The juxtaposition of two very different interpretations of an event or issue makes it easy for students to conduct a critical analysis of the documents. At the same time, the documents challenge students to consider whether or not partisanship has ever been an important or relevant component of American politics.

The inclusion of a set of analytical questions preceding each section of documents is a unique contribution of *American Issues*, for without them the book would just be a pointless compilation of original documents. The questions are couched within a nicely-written narrative that provides important historical context, thereby providing the reader with the necessary provenance for external criticism. In general, the questions guide students toward effective internal criticism of the documents. They ask students to determine the validity of any stated or unstated assumptions, judge whether or not the author's claims are warranted, or detect any bias on the part of the author. Also, many questions ask the reader to compare and contrast the past with the present; for example, in the section on Social Justice Progressivism, the authors ask: "Child labor is now illegal in the United States, but what is its current global status?" (p. 119). This question makes the past immediately relevant to the reader, further stimulating the student's interest and improving her ability to effectively analyze the documents.

Despite the success of *American Issues* in presenting primary sources in a way that encourages and facilitates critical analysis, the book has some important drawbacks that detract from the authors' stated objective. Although the questions effectively prompt the reader to critically analyze the documents, their use would be strengthened by a more effective method of presentation. Given that many students and instructors are unfamiliar with the pedagogical use of critical thinking skills, the inclusion of a critical analysis worksheet for each section of documents would provide students and instructors with a useful structure to follow and a consistent approach to analysis by more clearly organizing a student's review around the core concepts of historical criticism.

Second, one can argue that many of the documents presented are not primary sources. Despite their similarities, the critical analysis of secondary sources requires a different approach from the analysis of primary sources. The most obvious examples are the documents in Chapter 12, The Cold War. Here, section 12.1 reprints George

Kennan's "X" article and William Appleman Williams's famous response. Both documents are published, secondary sources. The inclusion of selections from Kennan's unpublished letters or journals or secret State Department memorandum on the subject would have better met the authors' stated goal of "forcing students to grapple with the same ambiguous raw materials that historians process to reach their conclusions" (p. xi).

Third, the book tends to avoid the role of labor and the working class in American history. Indeed, the majority of documents are written from the same old tired perspective of the elite, whether from government, business, or academia. Strangely enough, we see very little comment from working people on some of the issues most important to them, such as the radical labor challenge to industrial capitalism following World War I or the conservative reaction to the labor movement following World War II. An inclusion of primary sources created by the common person would greatly strengthen the relevance of the book to young students, particularly those from lower middle or working class backgrounds.

Fourth, the layout of *American Issues* follows a very traditional approach of compartmentalizing United States history into familiar old themes, such as outward thrust or the Progressive impulse, yet the book's title suggests something more philosophical and challenging. Of course, no volume can possibly cover the whole scope of the American experience, yet this traditional arrangement offers no new perspective. We see, for example, no interpretation of the Progressive movement as an attempt to reconcile American society and economy to the reality of corporate capitalism, no discussion of the indelible impact class has had on the country's historical development, and no discussion of the importance of regional identity in United States history.

Despite these drawbacks, *American Issues* remains an important contribution to the publication of primary sources for use in the classroom. The authors have succeeded in selecting documents that pique a student's interest and provide a dramatic look at the thoughts and actions of historical actors. They have also succeeded in their objective of encouraging critical and reflective thought in the analysis of primary sources, clearly in the tradition of historical research methodology. *American Issues* is an effective resource for all instructors of United States history.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact <h-net@h-net.msu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Marcus C. Robyns. Review of Unger, Irwin; Tomes, Robert R., *American Issues: A Primary Source Reader in United States History*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3919>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.