

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Louis P. Masur, ed. *The Challenge of American History*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. x + 331 pp. \$16.96 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-6222-9.

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Keeping Up with American History

Every few years, someone puts together a book of historiographical essays that describe the current state of the field—William H. Cartwright and Richard L. Watson, Jr.'s *The Reinterpretation of American History and Culture* (1973), Michael Kammen's *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (1980), Eric Foner's *The New American History* (1990), and so on. The newest such collection is *The Challenge of American History*, a volume edited by Louis P. Masur and originally published as the March 1998 issue of *Reviews in American History*. "The essays in this volume," writes Masur in the Preface, "explore how scholars have reformulated the study of American history over the past fifteen years and identify new headings for future work" (ix). This sentence could have appeared in any of the books listed above. But these volumes are as different as they are similar; they change as the writing of American history changes.

In the book's first chronological chapter (and the one with the most straightforward title), Peter C. Mancall surveys recent trends in the "The Age of Discovery." He describes "three crucial contributions" in this latest scholarship. "First, no scholar in the future will presume that sixteenth-century European impressions of American Indians are necessarily accurate; each text needs to be assessed as the product of peoples eager to conquer the Americas. Second, the native peoples of the Americas can no longer be seen as mere victims but, instead, should henceforth be interpreted as historical agents facing specific circumstances. Third, the sources for future histories of the American sixteenth century will more explic-

itly derive from many cultures, including the many cultures of Europe" (45). Practically all the essays in the volume make the same general points: recent historians have taken greater care to read sources in their particular contexts; groups formerly seen as victims are now discussed more as agents of their own destiny; and historians have begun to broaden their base of evidence to help understand old topics.

In "Porous Boundaries and Shifting Borderlands: The American Experience in a New World Order," Jeanne Chase discusses various frontiers (geographical and conceptual) and spatial concepts/cultural boundaries in early American history. Ian K. Steele's "Exploding Colonial History: Amerindian, Atlantic, and Global Perspectives" describes two new emphases in both colonial history and American history: a new attention on marginalized groups and on the larger context (here, Atlantic and global) for American history. Kathleen M. Brown's "Beyond the Great Debates: Gender and Race in Early America" examines the aftermath of the old (!) "golden age" theory in colonial women's history and the "origins debate" concerning American slavery. The very title of Alex Lichtenstein's "Was the Emancipated Slave a Proletarian?" shows how much things have changed; a generation ago, this essay might have been titled "New Directions in Civil War/Reconstruction History." Lichtenstein discusses the roles of Eric Foner and the Freedmen and Southern Society Project in shaping our new understanding of post-Civil War social and economic issues.

Other chapters include Eric Arnesen's "Up from Ex-

clusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History”; Timothy J. Gilfoyle’s “White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History”; Daniel R. Ernst’s “Law and American Political Development, 1877-1938”; Jacqueline Jones’s “Race and Gender in Modern America”; and John T. McGreevy’s “Faith and Morals in the United States, 1865-Present.”

Several essays are broader in scope. Michael Kammen’s “An Americanist’s Reprise: The Pervasive Role of *Histoire Probleme* in Historical Scholarship Concerning the United States since the 1960s” discusses a change in American historiography over the last thirty-five years or so: history as problem-solving rather than story-telling (explaining rather than describing the anti-slavery movement, for example). It is worth noting that most of the essays in this book take a *problematique* approach to their topics. The vast majority of American historians today cannot remember a time in their careers when this was not the goal or model, according to Kammen, but this approach did not gain widespread recognition here until the 1960s.

James Goodman’s “For the Love of Stories” provides an interesting companion piece, if not outright counterpoint, to Kammen. Goodman too is interested in solv-

ing problems, but for him, “A story could show readers things about the past that traditional social analysis and cultural interpretation could not” (255). Goodman’s essay uses his own *Stories of Scottsboro* as an organizational device to discuss the “new narrative history.”

George H. Roeder, Jr. provides a useful overview of the new emphasis on visual culture with his “Filling the Picture,” and Douglas Greenberg’s “‘History Is a Luxury’: Mrs. Thatcher, Mr. Disney, and (Public) History” traces recent developments in that field. The book concludes with David Hollander’s “National Culture and Communities of Descent,” a fascinating look at national identity and cultural cohesiveness.

Overall this is a fine book. The essays are more tightly focused on particular historical problems than those are in previous collections, but that has been the trend in the writing of American history (see Kamen’s essay). For those of us who spend much of our time teaching the U.S. Survey and less and less time keeping up with the field, books such as this are quite welcome.

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