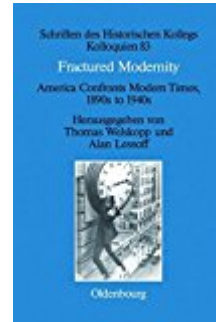




Thomas Welskopp, Alan Lessoff, eds. *Fractured Modernity: America Confronts Modern Times, 1890s to 1940s*. Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2013. vi + 242 pages. EUR 56.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-71695-5.



Reviewed by Jennifer M. Black

Published on H-SHGAPPE (December, 2013)

Commissioned by Julia Irwin (University of South Florida)

Modernity: Ripe with Contradictions

This book, born out of selected proceedings from a 2009 conference in Munich, proposes a revised theoretical paradigm for understanding the “modern” in the United States. With contributions from a range of German and American scholars on literature, urban culture, religion, reform, race relations, intellectual consciousness, and consumption, *Fractured Modernity* suggests that American society in this period presented a “multifaceted, incoherent whole, a ‘fractured’ landscape full of ruins of former times and permanently under construction” (p. 2). The book thus breathes new life into Marshall Berman’s 1982 assertion that modern life embodies “ambiguities and ironies ... paradox and contradiction” marked by constant change, reinvention, and destruction—with elements of the old and outdated always ironically persisting though and blending with new creations.[1]

The main theoretical contribution of this anthology is its effort to destabilize previous theories of modern development, including classical modernization theory and the concept of “multiple modernities” argued by Shmuel

Eisenstadt in the mid-twentieth century.[2] According to the current volume’s editors, both of these theories betray an underlying Eurocentrism dependent upon predetermined trajectories and developmental models rooted in the experience of western Europe and the United States. The current volume’s argument for a more fragmented understanding of modernity emerged serendipitously out of the discussions at the aforementioned 2009 conference. This conference asked participants to explore the “problems” of modernity in the United States—namely, reconciling the European tendency (in the editors’ words) to regard the U.S. case as an “archetype” or model of modernization with persistent elements of pre- or antimodern sensibilities/issues in actual U.S. experience. What the essayists found, however, was that many of the themes that seemed to oppose theories of modernization actually emerged as integral parts of modern American life. Together, the essays in the book thus attempt to argue that the United States experienced “an incoherent, ruptured modernity” made up of “diverse and often contentious reactions” to the processes that struc-

tured change in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: industrialization, immigration and racial strife, the institutionalization of punishment, the shift from production to consumption, etc. (p. 7). Ultimately, as the editors suggest, rethinking modernity as “fractured” opens up possibilities for understanding the “interchange, appropriation, flux, conflict, competition, and resistance that characterized the United States” after the Civil War.

Two of the most compelling essays in the book present this argument in quite interesting ways. For example, in his article on consumer-citizenship in the 1920s and 30s, Christopher McKnight Nichols argues that the construction of middle-class identities through consumption—the “glorification of affluence” that equated consumer-citizenship with success and happiness—persisted through the 1930s despite Depression-era critiques of 1920s decadence and spending. Rather, New Deal politics elevated consumerism as essential to economic recovery and equated a person’s spending power with the essential American freedoms of life, liberty, and happiness. As Nichols argues, consumerism in these years became coterminous with “modern” American life. This ironic persistence of consumerist rhetoric throughout the economic hardships of the 1930s demonstrates the book’s focus on the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in modernity.

Likewise, Manfred Berg presents a convincing argument for the ways that the preponderance of lynching in nineteenth-century America was intertwined—rather than at odds—with the modern civilizing process. In his view, the extralegal punishment that characterized lynch mobs in the American South originated in colonial notions that the community writ large bore the responsibility for the punishment for criminal acts. When mob violence increased in the United States after the 1830s, it was a confluence of factors traditionally associated with modernity that precipitated this rise, including an increase in immigration (which inevitably led to racial tensions), the emergence of the mass press, a deep commitment to popular sovereignty, and the institution of slavery, including sectional arguments over its existence and the planter class’s strong belief in their own right to administer corporeal punishment whenever necessary. As Berg asserts, it was the planters’ assertion of property rights that stemmed the frequency of lynching in the pre-war South, and the lack of these objections (combined with postwar anxieties over white supremacy) that fueled the rise of mob violence towards the end of the century. Only with improved law enforcement against lynch mobs and the increasing use of the death penalty as a sub-

stitute for such extralegal punishments—in short, the monopolization of justice by the state—did the frequency of lynching subside in the United States. Berg’s compelling argument that lynching emerged in tension with the rise of the modern state provides another interesting illustration of the ways that modernity defies our assumptions of civilization and development, and of the ways that particular histories can fracture our understanding of what it means to be “modern.”

Yet one of the problems with defining modernity as “fractured” is that the concept itself defies attempts to codify or describe elements that might fit within this fragmented paradigm. Without a clear concept of what modernity *is*, how can one go about the task of dismantling its assumptions? In other words, the seemingly disparate topics covered in this book, in their attempts to illustrate the ways in which American modernity is actually “fractured” and disjointed, ultimately only succeed in disassembling our very understandings of what modernity is supposed to be. Perhaps this was one of the editors’ goals in choosing their title and contributors; yet there are ways that the conceptual framework for the book serves to break up any unifying structure that might be found within the essays themselves, lending a very fragmented (no pun intended) feeling to the book itself. Aside from this conceptual issue, the book’s bilingual publication may deter some readers who lack fluency in German: the chapter summaries and the book’s foreword are written in Welskopp’s native tongue, and since the majority of the contributors are European, their footnotes, in some cases, demonstrate a better familiarity with sources published in Europe rather than in the United States.

These minor issues notwithstanding, the book will certainly be of use to scholars of the Gilded Age, Progressive Era, and interwar years for its intriguing examinations of urban bachelor culture, the cult of personality, transnational movements in Progressivism and conservatism, the mass press, Prohibition, the Harlem Renaissance, the Scopes Trial, evolving religious discourses, and NAACP activism in the 1930s and 40s. American modernity, as this book asserts, cannot be understood as a monolithic entity but rather a fragmented confluence of contradicting opinions, cultural trends, and episodes that defy scholars’ efforts to categorize. It would seem, in the words of Berman, that once we think we know what modernity *is*, “all that is solid melts into air.”[3]

Notes

- [1]. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*:

The Experience of Modernity (New York: Penguin, 1988 [1982]), 13.

[2]. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 1-29.

[3]. Berman took the title of his book from Marx's de-

scription of the bourgeois mode of production, and its infinite need to reinvent itself to remain competitive in the capitalistic system, which would lead to a constant cycle of creation and destruction (*All That is Solid*, chapter 2). See also Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 1999 [1848]), 68.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: Jennifer M. Black. Review of Welskopp, Thomas; Lessoff, Alan, eds., *Fractured Modernity: America Confronts Modern Times, 1890s to 1940s*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. December, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39602>



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