Edward Countryman. *Americans: A Collision of Histories.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1996. xxiii + 285 pp. $25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-2593-0.

Reviewed by Patrick Riordan

Published on H-PCAACA (October, 1996)

Identity is central to Edward Countryman's tracing of the coming together and falling apart of American society between 1763 and 1876. Countryman reflects the diversity both of his subject and of recent scholarship as he seeks the elements that might have created a psychological kinship among a broad range of Americans.

Countryman argues that American society resulted from "a collision of histories." From their colonial origins, Americans were the product of confrontations of uprooted people with nothing in common beyond the need to deal with each other. What people shared, he writes, was their longing "to make sense of their lives, to organize the world around them, and to claim American freedom for themselves" (p. xvii).

Countryman insists that four trajectories--"romantic American democracy," slavery's expansion, the destruction or removal of eastern native peoples, and the conquest of northern Mexico--are closely linked and central to nineteenth-century American social history. Native Americans were displaced and Mexicans conquered and defrauded to provide the "free" land (in latitudes suitable for slavery) that represented the ticket to equality for white males.

Against this background, Americans fashioned a society predicated on a contradiction--unprecedented social equality and political liberty for white males versus bondage, dispossession, and disenfranchisement for others. Hidden within the rhetorical underpinnings of nationhood, like a coiled spring, lay the inferiority of slaves, native peoples, white women, and immigrants. This tension energized the development of society as each oppressed group in turn staked its claim to the promise of American freedom and found thereby an identity having much in common with the others.

The Constitition's unstable fusion of freedom and slavery came unstuck as African Americans and their allies pressed for abolition and other causes, and gender issues and class tensions reshaped northern politics. As white southerners grew convinced that there was nothing left for them in the Union, a northern reform movement coalesced, capable of taking over society and transforming the national government. After the

war, Reconstruction prepared the way for an activist national government, intervening to promote economic expansion. This process, Countryman argues, created an American myth that endured until after World War II.

The book is clearly organized, effectively argued, and--like all of Countryman's work--gracefully written, as in this passage: "Northeastern industrialization only looks remote from what was happening in the South and the West. Every millworker handled cotton that slaves had also touched, grown on land that Native Americans had just lost" (p. 112).

Countryman's exploration of identity would be enhanced with a bit more attention to economic factors--such as the Bank crisis, periodic panics, and growing economic inequality. Further, while *Americans* is based on an admirable synthesis of recent work, it also extends earlier ideas (those of Edmund Morgan, for example), quarrels with others (Edward Pessen, Robert Remini), and repudiates still others (Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.). A discussion of this historiographical trajectory would have been useful. Finally, the use of Native American demography, while generally on track, would be better informed by consulting the work of Russell Thornton and Anthony Paredes.

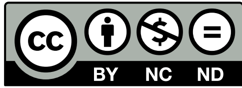
But these are quibbles. This is a thought-provoking work, graceful enough for general readers and probing enough for graduate seminars. It is appropriate for American Studies courses touching on issues of identity, for pre-Civil War surveys, and for any reader interested in the history and nature of American society.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca

Citation: Patrick Riordan. Review of Countryman, Edward. ***Americans: A Collision of Histories.*** H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=644


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