



Changing Paradigms: The Collapse of Consensus History

John Higham

The Journal of American History, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Sep., 1989), 460-466.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8723%28198909%2976%3A2%3C460%3ACPTCOC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1>

The Journal of American History is currently published by Organization of American Historians.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/oah.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Changing Paradigms: The Collapse of Consensus History

John Higham

Jon Wiener's lively, informative essay has two objectives: the first celebratory, the second analytic. On the primary level, Wiener gives us a proud narrative of suffering, persecution, and triumph. Through their ordeal, the vision of the radicals is clarified and their perseverance rewarded. Their labors win respect; their message is heard. A secondary objective of the essay, largely distinct from the first, is to understand how and why these unwelcome outsiders gained admission to the citadel where the historical establishment held sway.

Struck by the contrast between the exclusion of leftist scholars prior to the 1960s and their rapid acceptance thereafter, Wiener refuses a simple explanation for the change. The power and beauty of the outsiders' testimony could not alone have forced the gates. The state of mind of the defenders was crucial. Unfortunately the narrative that supports Wiener's celebratory objective does little to answer the questions his analytic objective poses. By keeping the progress of radical scholarship at the center of attention, Wiener allows himself only a passing glance at what is most significant in his paper—how and why an entrenched professional elite lost the will to exclude. Nevertheless, Wiener's summary judgment that a window of opportunity for radical historians opened between 1966 and 1968 because key leaders of the consensus approach to American history underwent "a loss of confidence" in the prevailing historiographical paradigm provides a good starting point for further inquiry.¹

For me that inquiry leads primarily into the context rather than the content of radical scholarship, into the market rather than the product. Yet it is essential not to concede Wiener's point that the historical profession has traditionally been deaf to politically distasteful scholarship of high caliber. To agree, as one must, that an occasional radical book before the 1960s deserved a friendlier and fuller hearing than it got is not to suppose that ideology foreclosed any hearing at all. Wiener fails to take account of the scantiness and conceptual simplicities in earlier Marxist

John Higham is professor emeritus of history at the Johns Hopkins University. He wrote the paper while holding a Mellon Senior Fellowship at the National Humanities Center.

¹ My use of *paradigm* is much looser than the usage in Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962). Here it is simply a shorthand designation for a conceptual framework and/or its underlying presuppositions.

historiography, so searchingly exposed in Ian Tyrrell's *The Absent Marx*. Tyrrell shows that a completely unprecedented level of interpretive power and theoretical sophistication entered American radical historiography in the 1960s, especially in the work of Eugene Genovese, Gabriel Kolko, and Barrington Moore, Jr.² That does not fully explain the collective breakthrough their example encouraged. Nevertheless, the long-enduring shortcomings of Marxist scholarship in this country before 1965 need to be noticed. Otherwise we are tempted to dump on the Cold War—and on the historians who flourished then—too much of the culpability for dismissive attitudes that had long prevailed toward radical scholarship. During the Cold War as well as before, when major Marxist or quasi-Marxist works appeared they were taken seriously.

Prior to 1965 the most significant of such works in the field of American history, I believe, were Merle Curti's first important book, *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, and W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*. Both were published in 1935. *Social Ideas* brought Curti a call to Columbia University. Several years later, when he was invited to the University of Wisconsin, it was still his principal work. *Black Reconstruction* did nothing of the sort for Du Bois. Although it must have added to his stature at Atlanta University, in the general academic world Du Bois faced a racial exclusion that was far stronger than any antiradical taboo. Nevertheless, his book could go where he could not. In the late thirties and forties white scholars who spurned Du Bois's Marxism read appreciatively his massive evidence "of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America" in the post-Civil War era. In Du Bois's case as well as Curti's, the quality of radical scholarship enabled it to receive a hearing.³

The problem of reception becomes more complicated and interesting when we ask why studies of this caliber were so few and so rarely imitated. Neither the consensus paradigm nor the Cold War can explain the marginalization of radical scholarship throughout the first half of the twentieth century. An understanding of how radical perspectives became suddenly acceptable and even highly attractive in the 1960s has to begin with the long-term constraints on radical history, which gave way at that time. Only then will we be in a position to appreciate how consensus history actually facilitated the rise of radical history instead of standing in its way.

Perhaps the severest restriction on the production of radical scholarship in America before the 1960s was the underlying, culturewide intolerance of deviance

² Ian Tyrrell, *The Absent Marx: Class Analysis and Liberal History in Twentieth-Century America* (Westport, 1986), 29–34, 176–82, 208–13.

³ Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (New York, 1935); Warren I. Susman, "Merle Curti," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (18 vols., New York, 1968–1979), XVIII, 132–36; W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York, 1935). Du Bois wrote the book while holding a Rosenwald Fellowship. It was finished at Atlanta University, where he moved in 1934 on resigning from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. For the early academic reaction to *Black Reconstruction*, see Howard K. Beale, "On Rewriting Reconstruction 'History,'" *American Historical Review*, 45 (July 1940), 809, 813. Du Bois's Marxism began to be critically examined, rather than rejected out of hand, in the 1940s. See Armstead L. Robinson, "Beyond the Realm of Social Consensus: New Meanings of Reconstruction for American History," *Journal of American History*, 68 (Sept. 1981), 279.

that caught Alexis de Tocqueville's eye in the early nineteenth century. In contrast to societies in which traditional hierarchies exercise a highly visible authority, American society has practiced a subtler tyranny of opinion, a democratic despotism that induces people to conform to the attitudes of those around them. Perhaps even more than elsewhere, deviance here needs a deviant community, whose members can buffer themselves from external opinion because they have, in E. P. Thompson's words, "some territory which is, without qualification, their own: their own journals, their own . . . centers."⁴

Curti and Du Bois illustrate how the coercions of opinion have isolated individual radical achievements. Both men wrote their explicitly anticapitalist books at the height of the radical wave of the early 1930s, when they had close at hand the moral and intellectual support of congenial associates. They wrote, one might say, as prospective members of a deviant community-in-the-making, a community of radical scholars. But the community never solidified. After 1935 radicalism receded, particularly among intellectuals. Moreover, the decade turned out to be hostile to the deep social nonconformity that would make possible a radical counterculture thirty years later. Du Bois, by holding to an increasingly belligerent and outspoken Marxism, cut himself off from other students of Negro history and thus had no disciples. Curti, by moving back to the eclectic empiricism of his earlier work, retained his base in an anti-Marxist academic community. The two radical books survived as isolated achievements instead of becoming contributions to a school.

In addition to the patterns of societal conformity that militated against radical dissent of any kind, a powerful historiographical tradition also stood in the way of Marxist history. The Progressive school of Charles A. Beard, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Vernon L. Parrington, holding the intellectual initiative in the historical profession at least from the 1920s to the 1950s, constructed a paradigm for American history that Marxism could not breach.

Paradoxically, Progressive historians disarmed Marxist theory by absorbing its most attractive elements. Marxism's sympathy with the underprivileged and its dynamic of struggle between opposing social strata resonated with a strong native heritage of the Jacksonian-populist ideas. Progressive scholars, following Beard's lead, could therefore give the language of social conflict a distinctively American inflection. By detaching the themes of class and social protest from the specifically Marxist theory of an irreconcilably polarized social system, Progressive history made Marxism seem both alien and unnecessarily doctrinaire. Americans would surely have put Marxism to more and better use if Progressivism had not suffused their perceptions of it.

The sharpest difference between the Progressive and the Marxist scheme lay in the contrast between the nationalism of one and the internationalism of the other. Progressives assumed that the pursuit of liberty and opportunity in the United

⁴ See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols., New York, 1945), I, 273-80, II, 99-103, 114-28.

States reached a level and breadth unattainable elsewhere. The country's destiny was therefore in its own hands. Other social categories were less important than the distinction between what was American and what was not. The Marxian conception of a larger social system, within which no national variant deserves a privileged status, was simply outside the parameters of professional discourse.⁵

One may well ask what all of this has to do with the breakthrough that rebellious young historians eventually made. As Wiener reminds us, it was the consensus paradigm that radicals challenged in the 1960s. By then the Progressive school had largely broken up. Yet the crucial changes that brought Marxism fully into American historiography began in the 1950s. It was then, without anyone's intending to do so, that a new paradigm opened a space in the American historiographical tradition for Marxist ideas, and then too that the intolerance of deviance, which had formed the other major obstacle to radical scholarship, first showed signs of crumbling.

Let us look first at the reshaping of conformity and deviance. During the 1950s, while scholars sketched theories of consensus in American history, certain structures of conformity that came apart in the 1960s began to weaken, at least in the urban middle class and on college campuses. Catholics in large numbers slipped free from the authority of their priests, young blacks began to flout the etiquette of segregation, college students started to challenge parietal restrictions on their living arrangements, and a bevy of social critics deplored conformity as the cardinal failing of American institutions.⁶ I remember an evening in the late 1950s at Rutgers University when William H. Whyte unsettled a large student audience by describing how modern business was turning college graduates into "organization men." His hearers wanted some prospect of escaping that fate; he had little to offer. By the early 1960s, a hunger for deviance, for some posture of radical dissent that could create new identities, was tugging strongly at the kinds of people attracted to the study of history and society.⁷ The intense urge of a new generation of students to build oppositional subcultures supplied the manpower and womanpower essential to the development of schools of historical writing that would rally around their own sustaining orthodoxies.

⁵ Tyrrell, *The Absent Marx*, 15–56; David W. Noble, *The End of American History: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Metaphor of Two Worlds in Anglo-American Historical Writing, 1880–1980* (Minneapolis, 1985).

⁶ David Riesman with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, 1950); William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York, 1956); Vance Oakley Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York, 1957); Winston White, *Beyond Conformity* (New York, 1961); Robert M. Lindner, *Must You Conform?* (New York, 1956). On the beginnings of desegregation, see Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984). On Catholics and college students, I remember particular incidents.

⁷ The visceral intensity of that hunger first struck me at the annual meetings of the American Historical Association in December 1960. Sharing the platform with two leading exponents of consensus history, I gave a paper—later published as John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," *American Historical Review*, 67 (April 1962), 609–25—which assailed the lack of moral engagement in current scholarship. My argument was far from conclusive. But the roars of approval that came from a huge audience, along with its obvious uninterest in the cogent reply from my assigned critic, Rowland Berthoff, made dramatically clear what an emerging generation wanted to hear.

At the same time that a diffuse discontent with established patterns of conformity was rising, the great intellectual barrier to Marxist scholarship—the Progressive paradigm—was breaking up. The agents of destruction were, of course, the consensus historians. Their downgrading of social conflict in American history, their stress on continuities in a stable social order, and their explicit critique of Progressive ideas about class severely damaged the features of Progressive historiography that appealed most strongly to scholars dissatisfied with the status quo. The Progressive paradigm lost the capacity to absorb dissent. The center no longer held.

The new paradigm proved far less capable of repulsing critics and consolidating explanatory power. In part its fragility reflected the intrinsic difficulty of demonstrating cohesion in a highly heterogeneous country, and the special risk of focusing on “conformity” just when that was becoming an epithet. In part also the consensus paradigm lacked solidity because of its recency and incompleteness. In framing their perspectives on American history, Progressive historians benefited from twenty years of trial and error, and they then had another thirty years or more in which to flesh out and refine their grand design. In contrast, the scholarship I labeled consensus history in an article in *Commentary* in 1959 had sprung up in barely more than a decade. Although its authors shared a dissatisfaction with Progressive history and certain attitudes about how it should be revised, they felt little programmatic affinity with one another. They never became a school. Whether or not, in a more tranquil era, they could have revised, elaborated, and institutionalized a sturdy synthesis of American history we will never know. By the end of the 1960s the principal writers of consensus history had fallen silent or changed their points of view or ceased to make expansive claims.⁸

The flight from consensus was so precipitous as to suggest that the paradigm was not only fragile and incomplete but that it somehow invited its own destruction. This possibility inheres in the stress on flux and tension in the vision of America that consensus scholars offered. Theirs was a picture of social diversity, not of solid uniformity. One of their objectives was to encompass within American history a greater variety of groups and impulses than could find a place in the simple social dualisms of the Progressive school. They proposed, therefore, that Americans were a variegated people held together by a unifying ideology or a common way of life.

That was indeed their own experience. Many, if not most, of the leading consensus historians were secularized, highly assimilated Jews. Themselves the sons of immigrants, they belonged to the first generation of Jewish students who encountered no serious obstacle in rising into the humanistic disciplines. How could they avoid perceiving the United States as an increasingly inclusive society resting on a

⁸ John Higham, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus’: Homogenizing Our History,” *Commentary*, 27 (Feb. 1959), 93–100; John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore, 1983), 171–229. On divisions within the consensus paradigm (if that is not too strong a word for it), see Daniel Joseph Singal, “Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography,” *American Historical Review*, 89 (Oct. 1984), 976–1004. No one seemed to disagree when I asserted, in a lecture delivered in 1968 and published in 1970, that all general frameworks for understanding American history had collapsed. John Higham, *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington, 1970), 173.

universalistic value system? And in looking abroad, how could they fail to contrast American success and affluence with the catastrophes of Europe?⁹

Yet the sense of inclusion, so recently experienced, could hardly have been secure. It is not surprising, therefore, that the idea of a consensual society advanced in the 1950s was charged with tension, paradox, and anxiety. The kind of research the new paradigm called for would have to test the limits of inclusion. Who *had* belonged in different times and places, and who had not? By bringing into a single framework the diversities of an admittedly heterogeneous society, the consensus approach laid itself open to the avalanche of anticonsensual social history that descended upon it.

Radical or Marxist history was only one of the channels through which the avalanche poured. In many other quarters as well the consensus paradigm provoked charges of exclusion and protestations of resistance. Women's history, black history, and a dozen more specialties joined class-conscious labor history in describing a nonconsensual America, and Marxist conceptions or attitudes proved useful in diverse settings. Yet Marxism, in addition to being one of the beneficiaries of the fragmentation of consensus, also owed a special debt of its own to consensus historians. It was they, the consensus historians, who placed American history in an explicitly comparative matrix and thus exposed to critical scrutiny the old assumption of national uniqueness.

Before the rise of consensus history, American exceptionalism had been a self-evident truth, undebatable because it was unquestioned. Consensus historians agreed with their predecessors that the United States was unique. In fact they insisted that it was. However, in raising to the level of explicit argument what had remained mostly implicit in Progressive history, consensus historians needed to specify the substance of American distinctiveness and thus to identify what knit the country together. Explanations for American uniqueness varied—mobility, abundance, pragmatism, the absence of feudalism—but all had in common an explicit appeal to an external perspective and a comparative standard of judgment. Whereas the Progressives' preoccupation with internal conflicts enabled them to take the national arena for granted, the consensualist pursuit of national contrasts impelled historians toward a larger, cross-cultural framework.

Since Marxism offered the most elegant, historically sensitive cross-cultural framework available, it entered the mainstream of American historiography as a submerged component of consensus scholarship. It was hardly an accident, as Marxists used to say, that the consensus historian Stanley Elkins derived his comparative interpretation of North American slavery from the Old Left Latin American historian Frank Tannenbaum and that the two together inspired the explicitly Marxist work of Genovese. Nor was it fortuitous that the most fertile of the several

⁹ The importance of postwar affluence in molding consensus theory can be seen most clearly in the contribution of a displaced Protestant southerner, David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954). See Robert M. Collins, "David Potter's *People of Plenty* and the Recycling of Consensus History," *Reviews in American History*, 16 (June 1988), 321–35. For a suggestive and relevant comment on Jewish intellectuals in the 1950s, see Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York, 1987), 84–96.

consensus interpretations of American history, Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*, was built on class analysis. In construing the United States as a thoroughly bourgeois society, Hartz's thesis was essentially a revision, rather than a hostile rejection, of the Marxism of his youth. It also anticipated what a later and more subtle Marxism would call hegemony.¹⁰

All that remained in the 1960s to shatter the consensus paradigm was to brush aside the question of American exceptionalism. What had been a key problem for consensus historians was redefined as a myth. In an atmosphere of assertive group consciousness and widespread anti-Americanism, that was easily done. But the ease of the victory made it less advantageous for anyone than a sustained debate might have been. Marxists, if they wished to do so, could now settle down comfortably in their own enclave of working-class history without having to engage other formulations of American history. The death of American consensualism deprived Marxism of a worthy adversary, and the comparative outreach they had together fostered once more languished.

¹⁰ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959); Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York, 1947); Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York, 1965); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955). On Hartz's early Marxism, see Louis Hartz, "Seth Luther: The Story of a Working-class Rebel," *New England Quarterly*, 13 (Sept. 1940), 401-18. The Marxist underpinnings to Hofstadter's "initial statement of the consensus idea," in Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), are noted in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 334.