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AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND THE CULTURAL TURN

Ryan C. McIlhenny

Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *The Ideas that Made America: A Brief History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. x + 222 pp. Notes and index. $18.95.

It seems that no other branch of historical study is as buoyant as intellectual history. There have been dips in terms of its popularity, especially in relation to what may be the sexier developments within cultural studies, but intellectual history consistently reappears to provide critical assessment not only of historical changes but also changes in the methods of historical research. In the generation after Merle Curti, Perry Miller, or Henry Commager, intellectual history went through a revival in the late 1970s, due in no insignificant way to the Wingspread Conference of 1977, a gathering of historians including Paul Conkin, John Higham, Gordon Wood, David Hollinger, Dorothy Ross, Henry May, and Thomas Bender. Wingspread played an important role in joining older approaches to intellectual history with new creative discoveries within the humanities, breathing new life into this mode of historical writing.

Distinct from the history of ideas and the history of philosophy, intellectual historians, according to Peter Gordon, see ideas as "historically conditioned" and thereby "best understood within some larger context, whether it be the context of social struggle and institutional change, intellectual biography (individual or collective), or some larger context of cultural or linguistic dispositions (now often called 'discourses')."[1] Aware of the historical conditions from which ideas emerge—not to mention, as Daniel Wickberg does in *American Labyrinth* (2018), the contingency of contexts—intellectual historians are also cognizant of how such contingencies shape the way that they understand the methods of their own craft. Disciplines across the intellectual spectrum have been influenced by developments in cultural studies. Scholars—not just those in the humanities or social sciences, but also in the hard sciences—have demonstrated greater historical awareness, becoming increasingly wary of presenting ideas as normative or static. Social history steeped in the turbid currents of the 1960s, emphasizing long-ignored marginalized groups, was followed almost immediately by cultural history, which considered at a deeper philosophical level the social identities created through textual discourse. The

attendees at Wingspread, as well as those who helped author the collection of essays in *New Directions in Intellectual History* (1979), engaged the messiness of ideas, especially those articulated by iconoclastic intellectuals like Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, and Clifford Geertz.

The cultural presupposes the social and thus edges ever closer to the philosophical. Cultural historians are often reluctant to attribute causation to ideas, but Ratner-Rosenhagen and others would argue that causation can be the result of ideas, including cultural ones related to identity. Consequently, the cultural, especially in regard to ideas, has provided fodder for intellectual historians, since both are "invested in decoding meaning," write Raymond Haberski and Andrew Hartman in *American Labyrinth* (2018), and thus "interested in language as a historical source."[2] For James Livingston, cultural change "is the groundwork of intellectual innovation."[3] Benjamin Alpers likewise suggests that cultural history has had an important impact on "intellectual historical practice" and that cultural and intellectual history should be viewed "as a single subfield."[4] Since the 1980s, cultural history has emphasized the pluralistic and unintended happenings from below and from the periphery, challenging first-principles foundationalism, eschewing any form of unidirectional history—whether top-down, bottom-up, or side-to-side (core-periphery)—and welcoming the ongoing creations of and negotiations within these spaces. The revolt of cultural scholars against simplistic bifurcations has led to an acceptance of ideas as contingent, inherently unstable, yet rich with possibilities, revitalizing in turn a dialectical method without a rigid teleology. Since Wingspread, contemporary intellectual historians have come to appreciate such dynamism, expanding interpretive boundaries and injecting the field with new and relevant insights.

Following the success of *American Nietzsche* (2011), Ratner-Rosenhagen's *The Ideas that Made America* embraces the creative possibilities of intellectual history, making the multiple worlds of ideas more palatable for readers. Daniel Rodgers, a leading figure among contemporary intellectual historians, identifies movement "as a central motif in intellectual history," comparing it to a kind of "borderlands history."[5] Ratner-Rosenhagen agrees. Movement presupposes points along a trajectory; borders can be strict delimitations but are also porous. America's intellectual development, in the mind of Ratner-Rosenhagen, extends to three types of border crossing: first, that America's intellectual worlds have been the result of "transnational crossings;" second, that ideas move beyond their own time, inspiring "future intellectual movements;" and third, that ideas are not simply the work of "highbrow" culture makers, but crisscross every level of society. The ideas that have shaped America "have achieved their power not because their meanings are absolute but precisely because they are so fluid, so multivalent, and so prone to redefinition when they come into new conditions of possibility" (p. 6).

The movement that Rodgers and Ratner-Rosenhagen discuss should also apply to methodology. Historians need to know a little bit about a lot of things; they buzz about as intellectual gadflies, circling conversations among sociologists, economists, religious scholars, and, of course, philosophers. Intellectual historians "traverse disciplines," writes Angus Burgin, considering "intermediary social environments" as well as the "irrational and emotional dimensions of human cognition."[6] Sarah Igo favors a "free-range" methodological approach whereby historians can become "attuned to the shifting, open-ended, multivocal nature" of intellectual history.[7] Likewise, Michael O'Brien has argued that intellectual history should have "porous boundaries." Given the current intellectual ethos, O'Brien encourages historians to acknowledge that "there is no harm in eclecticism, that fragmentation is not a threat, that inconsistencies need not be reconciled, and that history does not have a direction."[8] One could argue that the fracturing of the American mind with its underlying "incredulity toward metanarratives" has helped to revive intellectual history. Over four decades since Wingpsread, intellectual historians have come to accept the gaps, inconsistencies, and ruptures that inspire the creativity within their discipline, as well as the intellectual "worlds" we inhabit and create.

Americans have long imagined themselves and their worlds. Indeed, ideas can seldom be separated from the imagination. Ratner-Rosenhagen begins *Ideas* with the period where the image of "America" was not "discovered" by Europeans but created through European and Native American negotiations. The worlds of both Europeans and Native Americans, emerging from what Richard White referred to as "a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings," became "new" in the process of interaction, not a "New World" that one group discovered, but rather multiple worlds created often between or outside of empires.[9] Arriving "on a continent of sprawling indigenous empires," according to Ratner-Rosenhagen, Europeans sought to bridge different worlds through assimilation and translation—as in the case of groups like some Jesuits or individuals like missionary John Eliot—but failed to create a lasting intellectual tradition (p. 10). Early America "represented more of an intellectual problem to be solved than a term that evoked stability, affinity, or affection" (p. 15). It was not until the coming of the Puritans in the seventeenth century that a formal intellectual tradition, a tradition marked not only by the development of "philosophy as a formal practice" provided by thinkers like John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, and, especially Jonathan Edwards, that the "most comprehensive and formidable intellectual system of prerevolutionary America" (p. 27) developed.

Beyond the Puritans, ideas coming from the Enlightenment and Romanticism shaped what would become an American nation. "In the busy traffic of

the republic of letters flowed new ideas about human intelligence, agency, and self-sovereignty; the ideal form of government; historical progress; and a firm belief that the unknown world was eminently knowable" (p. 33). In North America, thinkers could test such ideas. Yet as late-twentieth-century philosophy has taught us, especially after the linguistic or cultural turn, "testing" and "creating" can often mean the same thing. The testing of Enlightenment of ideas in America was in part also the process of creating an independent nation. These intellectual currents "animated the trinity of late eighteenth-century political revolutions in the British colonies, France, and Haiti" (p. 45).

The relationship between ideas and how they move people is not as clear as we might assume, and leaning too heavily on such a construct, therefore, as Ratner-Rosenhagen writes, is "a bit risky." "But in the case of the American Revolution," she concludes, "it is unassailable" (p. 50). Enlightenment ideas helped to move colonists toward revolution, galvanizing them with the ennobling prose of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense.* But Paine was not merely being theoretical. The Revolution translated into Republican political practices, which eventually were enshrined in a dynamic constitutional system. Republican thinkers revived the classical notion of virtue, commending the pursuit of a "collective welfare" as the source of the young nation's social and political stability (p. 47).

Yet the creation of a nation and a citizenry included the paradoxical inclusion/exclusion of others. America's leading institutions of higher education, for instance, were constructed in part by African American slaves upon confiscated Native American lands. And these institutions were defined not only by who could attend but also who could not. But the habits of exclusion could never prevail over the idea that "human beings did indeed have it within their power to make, remake or even destroy worlds" (p. 52). Such an underlying mood, created by transatlantic Enlightenment thought as well as the violence of the emerging capitalist Atlantic, instilled a kind of long-term posture of skepticism or outright rebellion against first principles, assumptions about the essence of reality, or the hardening of political, social, and cultural boundaries. By the time of the American Revolution, the phrase "All men are created equal" in the country's founding document, *The Declaration of Independence,* became not only a disputed claim, contesting the contours of its language (how "all" rarely meant all and why only "men"), but also the driving force of America's political life.

Indeed, the effort to restrict the meaning of "all men" galvanized dissent—dissent among those who are not included in its meaning—non-property owners, non-whites, non-males, and others. Dissent, "going against the grain," as Ralph Young defines it, has been America's enduring legacy.[10] Ratner-Rosenhagen could have spent a bit more time exploring the role of dissent in regard to the origin of American ideas. Dissentient democracy, according to

Robert Martin in *Government by Dissent* (2014), seems to be inextricably connected to questions of legitimacy. The status quo regularly fails to legitimize itself. Those in power seek to maintain social ignorance so that society will not activate its democratic voice to question its legitimacy. As Bonnie Honig argues, "The grounds of legitimation are always themselves in need of legitimation, all the way down."[11] This is what, in large part, keeps America alive. Jürgen Habermas sees democracy as "a self-correcting historical process."[12] "At every moment," Martin argues,

> our democratic practices bear the traces of the original and ongoing illegitimacy of imperfect democratic agreements and procedures, such that there is always a burden on the present generation to redeem their democracy…Democracy, by challenging the powerful but *always insufficiently legitimate* status quo, is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for that process of legitimation, that ever-incomplete redemption.[13]

Contesting who can or who cannot be an America is an enduring theme not only of American freedom but of American identity itself, as historians like Eric Foner have demonstrated.[14] And these contests over the meaning of American identity and freedom created multiple worlds, cultural worlds among a variety of marginalized groups.

This dissentient mood, appearing immediately after the Revolution, gave form to America's intellectual ethos throughout the long nineteenth century. Drawing on the intellectual legacy of New England Puritanism, a "diverse group of liberal theologians, Romantic writers, and social reformers," Ratner-Rosenhagen writes, helped develop Transcendentalism, a philosophy "more expressive of the American experience" (p. 61). The Transcendentalists "wanted nothing more than to create an American intellectual voice and vision befitting the experience of the new nation" (p. 63). They confronted the foolish consistencies, to borrow from Emerson, that stymied the individual's pursuit of the "immediate inspiration" and "immanent presence" of the spirit in the world, where reason transcended simple understanding, doing so without having to rely on a systematic philosophical system. For Philip Gura, the Transcendentalists "remain one of the nation's most compelling and influential intellectual coteries."[15] Yet, developing a unique intellectual tradition, as Emerson so ardently tried to do, American thinkers "still sought to keep abreast of intellectual developments in Europe" (p. 56). The Transcendentalists were influenced by the writings of British Romantics like Thomas Carlyle, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Americans also looked to German Romanticism, especially in grappling with the absence of a *volksgeist* to create an American identity. And the connection to Europe would remain throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

Dissent has likewise directed the course of religion in America, especially in its evangelical mode. Yet, like the nation's political rhetoric, evangelicalism has rarely been a friend of democracy or the freedom of religion. David Bebbington's "quadrilateral of priorities"—biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism, and activism—remains the most helpful source for defining Evangelicalism. The strand of Protestantism influenced by German pietism, Wesleyan perfectionism, and the "new methods" of Finneyite revivalism, further developed the Evangelical ethos, especially in the way that ethos eventually drove a wedge between the head and the heart. By the nineteenth century, the scales tipped in favor of the latter over the former.

There is also a different side to evangelicalism that goes beyond Bebbington's doctrinal emphases. Many often miss the social and cultural features—individualism, separatism, and consumerism—that have likewise contributed to the identity of evangelicalism. The hyper-individualism and hyper-democratization created by the Market Revolution are what moved evangelicalism into its current cultural instantiation, which, as Richard Hofstadter noted over a half-century ago, contributed to the anti-intellectual legacy in American culture. Factors enabling a very strong anti-intellectual mood in America—evangelicalism, administrative bureaucracy, consumer capitalism, to name a few—have remained part of the American ethos.[16] It is not my intent to detract from Ratner-Rosenhagen's excellent book, but she could have said more about the place of American anti-intellectualism, especially in the age of Trump.

Part of the anti-intellectualism endemic to American evangelicalism has come by way of its often uneasy relationship with the Bible, despite the fact that the Bible was—and perhaps still is—"the single most printed, distributed, and read (extensively and intensively) text in American society" (p. 59). But in a nation undergirded by a dissentient mood as well as a hyper-individualism shaping an enduring market culture, the Bible has been read in diverse ways according to consumer preferences. By the antebellum period, evangelicals created a constricting, chapter-and-verse biblicism, where emotionally charged "private interpretations" became the authority that confirmed true conversion. The Bible could be cited as the authoritative source of true religion, but the individual recipient's understanding confirmed true faith. And this assurance of the veracity of the scriptures often demanded a relegation of the intellect. The emotionalism related to religious revivalism, the emphasis on morality as the litmus test of orthodoxy, which helped in generating the reformist impulse in America, and a Bible-only hermeneutic grew stronger in part because of the developments of biblical criticism in Europe, around the time of David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835), and in America beginning with the hermeneutical polemics of the Unitarians. Eventually, the rise of biblical criticism widened the chasm between the head and the heart, between a more intellectual encounter

with faith and an emotional one. Since true faith was not necessarily a matter of rigid dogma but the ineffable encounter with the divine, the veracity of the Bible's history could be challenged. It was not the letter but the spirit. Biblical criticism "was not to undermine the authority of scripture but to use science to distinguish what Unitarian minister Theodore Parker in 1841 referred to as 'the transient and permanent in Christianity'" (p. 59).

Ultimately, it was not solely some esoteric intellectual development transported from the continent that led to the decline of Biblical authority. The debates over slavery cultivated a kind of higher literary criticism unique to the American context that pushed many theologians either toward a more liberal or more literal reading of the Bible. The "early antislavery movement," David Brion Davis writes in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (1975), "coincided in time with the beginnings of serious Biblical criticism on historical as well as philological grounds."[17] The sectional crisis complicated the Bible's message concerning slavery and race and created contradictory interpretations between advocates and opponents of abolition, thus stimulating hermeneutical engagements that helped structure a unique form of textual analysis in nineteenth-century America. Slavery challenged the authority of the scriptures. It was the theological crisis related to understanding what the Bible said about slavery that underwrote, as Mark Noll has argued, the Civil War.[17] Determining the plain meaning of the Bible was eventually settled not by the decision of an ecclesiastical council but by the movement of armies.

The Civil War not only weakened confidence in America's evangelical establishment, it also dealt a heavy blow, as Louis Menand discusses in *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), to all forms of philosophical or scientific certainty. Yet the collapse of the old world—in this case antebellum America—opened up new possibilities for the postbellum world. The actions of John Brown and the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), both coming on the eve of the war, challenged a fixed anthropology especially in relation to race and compelled American intellectuals to consider the role of humans in meaning-making in an indeterminate cosmos.

No other postbellum ideology had more of an impact on Americans than that of Darwinism, a new paradigm-shifting theory that fell "in line with the dramatic changes in American life due to industrial capitalism, urbanization, and mass immigration" (p. 84). In dealing with rapid industrialization, overseas expansion, and the coming of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and China—what historians refer to as the new immigration— many intellectuals, including theologians and emerging social scientists, sought to accommodate such considerable social changes by using Darwin's theory. The intensification of industrial capitalism, spurred on by the expansion of the railroad, cultivated America's rapid growth to the status of an empire,

epitomized in the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, held in Chicago. Organizers of the expo "wanted to pay tribute to American imperialistic origins while also announcing its own grand entrance onto the world stage as a global economic power" (p. 99). It also came to represent a "scientific apology for civilizing, imperial missions abroad and virulent ethnocentrism and racism at home" (p. 100).

The expansion of America's empire coincided with a new social pluralism. There were those who feared the influx of non-white and poorer immigrants. Others reacted against such developments, thereby inaugurating the cultural contest over American identity. Americans in the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth witnessed the rise and response to a greater social pluralism that, among other things, challenged traditional beliefs. Nativist citizens, like those associated with what would become "100% Americanism" in the early decades of the twentieth century—sharing a striking resemblance to the hyper-nationalism of today's MAGA culture—reacted sharply against rising diversity, which also came at a time of America's imperial expansion. (Historians are slow to make facile comparisons, but it is interesting to note that the expansion in the modes of capitalism, along with the periodic crises inherent to capitalism in whatever form, that create xenophobic sentiments in given periods.) Not all Americans reacted so sharply against the new pluralism. Intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and Randolph Bourne challenged prevailing nationalist and imperialist assumptions in order to embrace and advocate for American diversity.

The profit-driven culture of unfettered capitalism suffusing much of American life compelled many writers and thinkers in the late nineteenth century to adopt the title "intellectual" as an "anti-institutional badge of honor," demonstrating, yet again, the thread of dissent (p. 98). A current among America's intellectual elite began to echo what Karl Marx said in his theses on Feuerbach: prioritizing a change of the world rather than a passive and detached description of it. By the late nineteenth century, pragmatism offered a school of thought that incorporated the latent possibilities of Darwinism that also valued democratic pluralism vis-à-vis the pursuit of truth. Pragmatism was a distinctly American philosophy that "abandoned the search for universal, timeless truth and emphasized instead that a proposition is true if the practical consequences it implies or predicts do in fact follow in experience." Pragmatists "believed that notions of mind and morals could no longer be based on timeless foundations, because, as they learned from Darwin, no such things existed" (p. 103). One method of reaching or attaining what pragmatists would have referred to as "truth," which was also provisional, was through the embrace of pluralism. People had a better chance of arriving at truth when more voices took up space in the public sphere.

Many intellectuals inaugurated what would become America's progressive legacy when they sought to initiate constructive changes that would lead to

the flourishing of the American public on a wider scale by identifying the dangers of rapacious industrial capitalism, imperialism, and the corporate state, along with the publicly aloof politicians who supported such realities, Changes in America's social, economic, and political life could not be made based on rigid ideology; rather, those who sought change had to appreciate the dynamic movement of the human experience and the need for political experimentation. The reformism at the heart of progressivism influenced the experimental policies in the first decade of the 1900s that continued well into the 1930s. Ideas like "rugged individualism" and the 1930s-born "American dream" came under attack during the Great Depression. Intellectuals were interested in tackling the collapse of capitalism directly. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt seemed to proceed with a pragmatist approach to breathing life into the American economy with "bold, persistent experimentation" (p. 127). Writers and artists gave much needed aid to experimental New Deal programs.

Since the late nineteenth century, American capitalism and nationalism developed a hostility toward democratic populism—specifically the kind of populism (e.g., the Grange) that came in response to the negative social, economic, and political consequences of monopolistic capitalism. From this point on, America came to be forever situated along a Gilded Age-Progressive Era pendulum, swinging from periods of expansive wealth, accompanied by a strong pro-capitalist ideology (consider the 1880s, 1920s, 1950s, 1980s, 2000s), to a progressive one where the majority of ordinary citizens and state and federal government officials worked to recover a democracy erstwhile held hostage by the plutocratic elite (1890s, 1910s, 1930s, 1970s, 1990s, and post-2008).

Progressivists were "largely reformist," Ratner-Rosenhagen writes; they "did not seek to reject capitalism and industrial democracy but rather to root out its excesses and weaknesses" (p. 108). But one wing of progressives tapped into the long history of American radicalism to address the conditions that inspired the various moments in American history that localized the deep-rooted problems in American society to capitalism itself. A reform of capitalism, as in the case of political progressives like Theodore Roosevelt and later Franklin Roosevelt, was not enough.

The radicals who appeared in the various progressive movements throughout much of the twentieth century drew on much earlier ideas. The term radical is used in a variety of ways today. This may stem not only from the historical difficulty of defining such a term, but also from a penchant among pundits to utilize certain words to gain the political high ground. Yet, despite the term's etymological origins in the Latin *radix*, meaning "root" and thus referring to the ability to "grasp the root of the matter," Christopher Hill claims, "one should arguably go beyond merely claiming that the absence of a word to describe phenomena does not mean that these phenomena are nothing but a figment of the observers' imagination."[19]

Many scholars argue that for the purposes of implementing a living American radicalism—grasping the root in question, according to Marx—finds its intellectual origin in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence: "the single most concentrated expression of the revolutionary intellectual tradition."[20] For over two hundred years, "American radicals have traced their intellectual origins to the Declaration of Independence and to the revolution it justified,"[21] including its use by David Walker and other radical abolitionists, Native Americans in their long civil rights history, speakers at Seneca Falls, socialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "I have a dream" speech prophetically proclaiming that one day American citizens would consistently live out the truth that "all men are created equal," to the gay rights movement, and beyond. For Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian, writing in their anthology *Protest Nation* (2010), "American radicalism has drawn its inspiration from the nation's revolutionary founding claims of liberty, equality, and the rights of citizenship…Radicals are those who decry the status quo, who demand fundamental change, who seek transformation. These kinds of people almost always make others nervous, especially those in power."[22]

Radicalism has been typically associated with the Left. As Michael Kazin reminds us, the term "Left" was first introduced in 1789 but did not come into general use in the United States until the 1930s, arguably the most radical period in U.S. history as it related to capital and labor. Those associated with the Left, Kazin continues, "often preferred 'radical' or 'revolutionary' or 'progressive'—or a narrower term like 'socialist,' 'anarchist,' or 'communist' which proclaimed their membership in one of the ideological families that populated the tumultuous village of the left."[23] Kazin himself adheres to a classical definition of the Left in his understanding of radicalism: "The left is that social movement, or congeries of mutually sympathetic movements, that are dedicated to a *radically egalitarian transformation of society.*"[24] The ideology of individualism and the newly articulated notion of the "American dream" could not over allay the anxieties surrounding the failures inherent to capitalism. According to Eric Foner, "radicals have always sprung from American culture and appealed to some of its deepest values." They have incorporated, he continues, "the language of American society to their own ends. In so doing, they have not only extended the benefits of American liberty to previously excluded groups, but have given American values new meanings."[25]

The corporate juggernaut was given new life during the Cold War, dealing a significant blow not only to labor radicalism and New Deal progressivism but also pragmatism. Chapters 7 and 8 take readers into the Cold War and post-Cold War era, a period of an oppressive conformism. Not only did the country witness the golden age of capitalism, a new Gilded Age, but also the apogee of American empire, stimulated by a fear of communism abroad.

The heightened anxiety over the growth of communism in other parts of the world compelled Americans to abandon the acceptance of the openness of ideas as well as that of great social diversity, which often challenged social, economic, and cultural hegemony. Citizens had to be contained in order to protect capitalism and battle communism. "Intellectuals and educators wanted more assurances about moral universal than pragmatism could give" (p. 137). Post-war America, many believed, demanded security. The nation has gone through periods in which jingoism reaches a high point, coming to predominate—even relegate—the individual freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution. (From the Great War to the War on Terror after 9/11, American leaders have been in the habit of appealing to a propagandistic patriotism during times of war that runs roughshod over the rights of citizens.) At a time of heightened fears over the realities of nuclear war, many intellectuals abandoned the practical experimental nature of pragmatism in order to search for universal metaphysical truths, much of which came in the form of liberal and neoliberal religious beliefs and advances in Jungian psychology.

"Feeling exasperated with what they considered to be a smugness and complacency in mid-century liberals' worldview, a growing number of political and cultural critics identified themselves as 'conservatives' offering an alternative" (p. 138). New conservatives sought to revive a "lost tradition." Three books stood out to give shape to this new sentiment: Peter Viereck's *Conservatism Revisited* (1949), William Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* (1951), and Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953). The radicalism of the Old Left, with a brief moment of success in the activities of the New Left in the 1960s, faded. At the heart of American conservatism, was a fear of expanding communism or anything that came near to resembling it, which, for many, included the aggressive legislation to deal with the legacy of racial inequality and, by the 1970s, the environmental consequences of nuclear production. The neo-progressive legislation of Lyndon Johnson, including his involvement with civil rights, and later Jimmy Carter's administration extended the reach of the federal government. For many conservatives, the expansion of the federal government represented the creeping steps of statism, of communism.

What gave strength to conservatism—and, to a degree, the liberal establishment—was not only the human rights violations committed by so-called Marxist countries, which dismantled the Old Left, but also a wariness of the legacy of the Enlightenment itself, especially the spiritual disenchantment that many believed it engendered, and the notion that "ideology in any form was an enemy of democracy" (p. 140). By the late 1950s, Daniel Bell announced the "bankruptcy of revolutionary worldviews and chiliastic dreams" in his *The End of Ideology* (1960). The revolt against ideology began around the time of World War II and a good portion of it came from outside the United States. Intellectual refugees fleeing fascist Europe, thinkers like Albert Einstein, Ernst

Cassirer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Paul Tillich, to name a few, had "brought with them their erudition, training, and, in some cases, international reputations in the arts and sciences," securing a lasting "influence on American academic and cultural institutions" (p. 130).

For these intellectuals—and we should include Hannah Arendt—the war offered the opportunity to reexamine the promises of the Enlightenment and the universal depravity of humanity. A specter of intellectual skepticism descended upon western civilization after World War II. The war inaugurated the postmodern condition, an "incredulity toward metanarratives."[26] Enlightenment ideals, philosophical positivism, scientism, and an overconfidence in ideology were in part responsible for the violence of the twentieth century. Eventually, hostility toward ideology often spilled over into a wariness of ideas themselves—ideas that only could be expressed in a society that cherished democratic discourse. Ironically, the battle against ideology often became a battle against democracy. But a handful of courageous intellectuals who confronted 1950s conformity—conformity to a pro-corporate and socially discriminatory order—helped pave the way for a new progressive era. This, of course, did not silence the many intellectuals—J.D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, David Reisman, C. Wright Mills, Theodor Adorno, Richard Wright, and Martin Luther King, Jr., to name a few—who feared that the anxiety driving the efforts to stem and later stamp out communism in all its forms was, in reality, a push to contain the American mind.

Yet in many ways conservatism, hoping to provide an alternative not only to the supposed global threat of communism as well as the failure of the liberal establishment to protect America's place in the world, failed to address the deep anxieties related to the uncertainties of the modern (or postmodern) world. Those looking to circumvent the reactionism endemic in contemporary conservatism sought out deep spiritual and existential meaning, though explorations in these areas often kicked against traditionalism, making many aspiring conservative fearful that breaking out of established belief was one step closer to communism. Marxist-turned-existentialist social critic and writer Richard Wright, standing as an alternative voice to the African American experience; religious thinkers like Joseph Campbell and Shunryu Suzuki, both of whom provided alternative religious visions to dominant western ones; Carl Jung, a psychoanalyst who "found common cause with a variety of midcentury spiritual seekers"; and Michael Murphy and Dick Price of the Esalen Institute believed that if they could open America's "mental and moral horizons," Ratner-Rosenhagen writes, "they might just find that 'vital center' they were after, whether it be between political stability and individual freedom, a vibrant sense of the 'social' and an autonomous self, or the rigors of science, and the consolations of religions" (p. 151).

Despite the ascendancy of conservatism, with its reactionary nature and accompanying anti-intellectualism, all was not lost, especially when it came to ideas. The hyper-nationalism and blind allegiance to capitalism characteristic of conservatism did not go unchallenged. The 1960s, Ratner-Rosenhagen reminds readers, "started in *ideas*" (p. 153). Stimulated in part by the jazzy intellectuals of the 1950s, the courageous efforts of those involved in the civil rights movement to challenge the nation's domestic and foreign imperialism, the increasing bureaucratization of American society, and the immoral hubris behind a failed war in Vietnam, many young people coming of age in the sixties began to question not only the rightness of the American way but also the very concept of truth itself. Claims to absolute, universal, and unchanging truths—truths about the physical, spiritual, and cultural worlds—seemed too imperialistic.

In a period when empire came under increasing fire, so too did the empire of ideas. Numerous intellectual publications and events, especially in 1962, "realigned the paths of American thought and culture that lead up to today's America" (p. 154). And the arrival of what later would be called "postmodernism," with its growing hostility to essentialism, stimulated a revival of Pragmatism (or neo-Pragmatism), represented particularly in the works of Cornel West, Hilary Putnam, and, most obviously, Richard Rorty. Wherever postmodern, "antifoundatioanlist thinkers found a category of analysis, a concept, or a truth claiming to be absolute," Ratner-Rosenhagen concludes, "they called it out as an artifact of human quests for power as opposed to a window into reality" (p. 171). "Professional philosophers had by and large dispensed with questions about ethics, aesthetics, and, most especially, the 'meaning of life'" (p. 176).

Ratner-Rosenhagen presents her narrative along a familiar American chronology, but not within a restrictively nationalistic frame. Ideas created not one but multiple Americas, and this she, along with a host of contemporary intellectual historians, celebrates. Such worlds included the various and regularly competing interpretations. American ideas have traversed these various worlds; they have also been appropriated in a variety of ways by the inhabitants of such worlds.

Ratner-Rosenhagen is also mindful of the degree to which ideas have been negotiated from without—that is, beyond geopolitical borders. In his *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (2006), Thomas Bender offered an "American history in a context larger than the nation."[27] "The history of the United States," Bender continues, "is but one history among histories."[28] Appreciating the dialectical emergence of ideas widens the historian's conceptual scope toward a larger global paradigm. The meaning of *global*, "a meta-analytic category" wherein "cultural, social, linguistic, civilizational, or geographical boundaries are always occupied by mediators and go-betweens

who establish connections and traces that defy any preordained closure," takes the historian beyond mere spatial boundaries, say Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori in *Global Intellectual History* (2013).[29] This does not necessarily restrict "global" to regions of the world, though there is always a need for histories of America, Europe, or Asia. A particular nation, society, or culture can never be studied as an isolated subject. Indeed, James Kloppenberg, Daniel Rodgers, and Thomas Bender, to name a few, have been at the forefront of these transnational comparative studies.[30] Thus, the current state of intellectual history is one that embraces the dynamism of historically conditioned ideas—their movement, conceptual inclusion, and comparative expansion. Ratner-Rosenhagen has done an exceptional job of positioning America in the history of ideas.

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