

TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

by Jesse Lemisch

For some time now, American social scientists have been telling us that America is and has been a land of equality and mobility, a land of consensus — liberal consensus. The common man, we are told, came into his own in America long before the presidency of Andrew Jackson; a redistribution of wealth in the twentieth century has produced a “people’s capitalism”; a pluralistic society has achieved a happy equilibrium. Those who dissented from the consensus have been few, these studies tell us, and those few have been unrealistic, their rationality open to serious question; there has never been much wisdom in rocking the American boat.¹

Quite recently these ideas have come under attack by a group of younger scholars. One of them reminds us of a horror in our heritage: is it not *grotesque*, he asks, that historians should be so obtuse to the role of slavery in American history as to see equality as a central theme in that history?² Others have discovered that there are poor people today,³ just as there were in 1910,⁴ 1880,⁵ 1850,⁶ 1789,⁷ 1771,⁸ 1687.⁹ Some of these studies have detected a rigid class structure and have concluded that we have exaggerated mobility, that dreams of success have often been tragic delusions.¹⁰ We have been less unlike the rest of the world than we thought,¹¹ and sometimes when we have been different we have been worse, not better.¹² Finally, the possibility has been raised that the common man

has in fact had an ideology, that that ideology has been radical, and that conditions have been objectively bad enough so that a radical critique has been a sound one.¹³

These recent studies present a serious challenge to some sacred myths. Perhaps of equal importance to this substantive challenge are the *techniques* which these men have used in their re-examination of society. If their challenge were merely substantive and *ad hoc*, it could end tomorrow. If, on the other hand, they are looking at America in a different way, their assault might well continue and extend itself from one end to another of our history. There are many indications that these men *are* looking at America in a distinctive way and that others may apply the same techniques to new areas.

Most of these writers have in common a dislike of history written with a bias favorable to an elite on the basis of an insufficiently critical consideration of elite sources. They are all interested in the common man. In England, Edward P. Thompson has in many ways shown the way with his attention to workers, “harlots and publicans and thieves.”¹⁴ Gabriel Kolko, an economic historian, has investigated the twentieth-century poor;¹⁵ Norman Pollack has looked at agrarian populists in the late nineteenth century¹⁶ while Stephan Thernstrom has examined the urban workingman in the same period.¹⁷ Staughton Lynd and Alfred Young have

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looked at the mechanic in the late eighteenth century.¹⁸

These historians have not only been interested in the common man; they have also been sympathetic to him. Together, they are radically opposed to the way in which history has been and is being written. From them we can learn a good deal about how history might be written and also something about how it should not be written.

If the lower class has been poorly treated and mistreated by most historians, that is in part because it is difficult to track the common man down: often he has been illiterate; rarely have the sources seemed so full of information about the employed as about the employer. But even when the sources have been available — and all these writers feel that they have been more available than we think — they have been ignored or distorted. Thernstrom quotes Frederick Law Olmsted's explanation:¹⁹

Men of literary taste... are always apt to overlook the working-classes, and to confine the records they make of their own times, in great degree, to the habits and fortunes of their own associates, and to those of people of superior rank to themselves, of whose sayings and doings their vanity, as well as their curiosity, leads them most carefully to inform themselves. The dumb masses have often been so lost in this shadow of egotism, that, in later days, it has been impossible to discern the very real influence their character and condition has had on the fortune and fate of the nation.

Olmsted is speaking of the kind of class bias which, to give one instance, led Patrick Colquhoun to count 5000 harlots in London at the end of the eighteenth century. His prostitutes turn out "on closer inspection [by Thompson, p. 56] to be 'lewd and immoral women,' including 'the prodigious number among the lower classes who cohabit together without marriage' (and this at a time when divorce for the poor was an absolute impossibility)."

What kinds of sources have these men used? Thompson's sources cover a wide range, but with an obvious preference for the voice of the people as expressed directly in contemporary statements

or in songs, poems, reminiscences, and popular tradition. His preference is not uncritical: using the reminiscences of those who rose above their origins and finding them full of breast-beating and moralizing — which adds up to "fudging" (p. 57) — he tells us that such sources "must be held up to a Satanic light and read backwards" if we are to see the real attitudes behind them (p. 58).²⁰

An important distinction must be made among the kinds of sources which Thompson uses: some are genuinely from the bottom up and others are admittedly from the top down. In his hands there is critical use of both kinds, but the distinction is often missed by other historians.

For instance, the history of American slavery has been written almost entirely from the point of view of the master. This is partially because of the lack of first-person testimony from those most directly involved — the slaves — but not entirely so. Over ten thousand pages of slave reminiscences, gathered by the Federal Writers' Project in the late 1930's, have been sitting in the Library of Congress largely unused.²¹ Since these sources are extremely rich and sufficiently diverse to form the basis of critical accounts one can only conclude that their extraordinary disuse is a reflection of the kind of elitism which prefers the testimony of the few — in this case, the masters — to the testimony of the many — the slaves.

The important distinction noted here is often missed by historians of the common man, and they would be wise to pay closer attention to it. Pollack is aware of the distinction: he says that he seeks the grass roots, "the despair and yearning of the people themselves" (p. 9). But too often, he must present the views of leaders rather than those of "unlettered farmers and workers" (p. 9). In his article on New York's mechanics in the revolutionary period Staughton Lynd largely misses the distinction, setting out in pursuit of "a distinctive mechanic ideology" (p. 217), he presents us instead with the views of "leading" mechanics in what turns out to be essentially a study of the Committee of Mechanics. This is worthwhile and, given the

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sources, possibly necessary, but it produces somewhat less than is promised.

One of the few places where there is abundant documentation about the common man is in court records, but historians must remember that a man in court is a man in trouble: court records can be rich, but they must be used with care because of this built-in bias. Thompson is aware of this, and his preference is clearly for non-governmental records,²² but his use of informers' reports on the Luddites is liberating for the historian who might be too quick to reject such sources out of sympathy for those who were spied upon and suspicion for the spies. Thompson is suspicious of the spies, but since "Bad men can work usefully in a bad cause," it is wrong "to suppose that the reports of these men are . . . all worthless" (p. 490). With the Luddites gone underground, what records they left are intentionally cloudy (p. 487). The spies might have intentionally sensationalized their reports, but their employers, who were "not all fools," were aware of the bias and wanted accurate information (p. 490). Some of the reports were accurate, and it is the historian's job to find out which of them were. Thompson applies a fine critical intelligence to a pair of very different reports and comments:

Need the contrast be pointed further? The first appears to be as credible as any account by an untrained reporter. Clearly, the informer was impressed, despite himself, by this passage in the speech; and he has recorded, more vividly than the "literary" versions usually published in the radical press, the manner of the democratic orator. The author of the second is the notorious *provocateur*, John Castle . . . whose evidence was torn into shreds at the trial . . . in 1817. But even if we did not know this, his style betrays him in the first line. He is falling over his illiterate pen in an effort to ingratiate himself further with the authorities. This does not mean that every word of his deposition is a lie. It does mean that each word must be critically fumigated before it may be admitted to historical intercourse. (pp. 492-3)

Statistical evidence is Thompson's *bete noire*. Nonetheless, he makes brilliant use of statistics

himself, as when he extends the debate about the Industrial Revolution and the standard of living by presenting child mortality figures which give a very different picture from that given by infant mortality figures alone (p. 326). But Thompson protests against the *dilution* of averages (p. 214)²³: "a substantial decline in infant mortality and increase in life expectation among several millions in the middle classes and aristocracy of labour would mask, in national averages, a worsening position in the working class generally" (p. 331). Basically, Thompson dislikes statistics because they tell us something about standard of life but not enough about way of life (p. 211).

Stephan Thernstrom's work on the workingmen of Newburyport is almost entirely statistical, basing a study of mobility almost entirely on such sources as census records, tax records, city directories, and high school registrations. From such sources as these he is able to construct brief biographies of several workers, men otherwise entirely unknown to history. Certainly this is a *tour de force*, a feat which would please Thompson. But Thernstrom dismisses the sketches: "a handful of instances cannot reveal what *proportion* of the laboring population of Newburyport reaped the benefits of social mobility, nor can it indicate what *avenues* of social advances were of particular significance to the working class" (p. 83). As if in direct response to Thompson, Thernstrom concludes that only "a statistical analysis" can answer these questions (p. 83), and Thernstrom performs such an analysis with extremely useful results.²⁴

Kolko's work is largely statistical and is perhaps weakest when he allows a few anecdotes about conspicuous consumption to "demonstrate" that such conduct continues to thrive (p. 124). This minor error contradicts the spirit of Kolko's sound attack on Lipset and Bendix for optimistic conclusions about income distribution based on impressionistic evidence and against Simon Kuznets for drawing conclusions about the income of the entire population from a study of the top five per cent (p. 24). Thernstrom is similarly critical of conclusions about

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social mobility drawn from studies of the business elite: a society of ten million paupers which allowed five of them to become millionaires on their merit is not an open society (p. 2).²⁵

Thompson, Thernstrom, Kolko, and Pollack are all sympathetic to the working class: all are writing from the bottom up. Thompson's complaint against statistical evidence seems irrelevant: a technique antithetical to his does not necessarily lead to antithetical conclusions. If the technique has been abused, that is no reason for throwing it out; those who are sympathetic to the common man and who also believe that history must be made more precise will find Thernstrom's study a model of historical investigation.

This brief examination of the sources used in these diverse studies of the common man seems to suggest that all kinds of sources are useful and that some, like popular tradition, reminiscences, and the first-person testimony of the common man, deserve more use than they have been given. But the examination also suggests that the question is not so much *which* sources as much as *how* the sources are used.

Ways of looking at sources are inseparable from assumptions about how man, society, and history work. Thompson's bias against the use of statistical evidence is a reflection of a deeper assumption. Statistics are bad because they "obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they have contributed, by conscious efforts, to the making of history" (p. 12). In this sense statistics are no more misleading than the "Fabian orthodoxy in which the great majority of working people are seen as passive victims of *laissez faire*" (p. 12). He protests against empirical studies which disassemble reality and then put it together again in such a mechanistic fashion that "The dimension of human agency is lost" (p. 205). American historians, even those sympathetic to Charles A. Beard, can see the sort of distortions which trouble Thompson in Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* where the Founding Fathers appear as mechanistic puppets to their holdings of public

securities.²⁶ But the point here is not so much the limited one of whether Thompson is right or wrong about statistics but rather his assumptions, his focus on the question of human agency. This is the same problem which concerns Olmsted when he sees a class bias concealing the "very real influence" which the working classes have had in history.²⁷ To deny human agency is to say that history happens from the top down.

Sometimes, very often, history *does* happen from the top down. Thompson sees manipulation behind the Wilkes riots (p. 68). In my work on merchant seamen in the politics of the American colonies I have found similar instances, as in a seamen's riot at a Philadelphia election in 1742, when all the evidence indicates that seamen were bought to break up an election in which they had absolutely no interest.²⁸

But I have also found many more instances where seamen's activities which have been universally interpreted as mere mindless plundering express a genuine political position, often one of great selectivity and sophistication.²⁹

The historian must treat with skepticism the blatantly class-biased statements of an earlier age, just as he should those of his contemporaries. A Boston merchant explained that the Tea Party was conducted so efficiently that there must have been "People of more sense and discernment than the vulgar among the Actors."³⁰ Common sense would suggest that the skills useful in raising several hundred chests of tea out of the holds of ships and emptying them into Boston harbor would be more those of stevedores than of lawyers or merchants. Whether this is in fact the case is not known, and that is just the point: historians have been too receptive to class bias, too little willing to deal critically with the snobs of the past.³¹

A bias which says that history can happen from the bottom up, that the people often act for good reasons, expressing genuine grievances, helps us to better understand both past and present. What was thought to be aimless violence in Harlem in the

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summer of 1964 is later seen by even the Mayor of New York as "a social revolution — a demand by a minority for equal rights"³²; the same could be said of Watts. If one is willing to look for the real grievances which may underlie such action, then one can see the action as some sort of rational expression. By the same count, the participation of eighteenth-century American seamen in riots against British authority takes on more meaning after one has studied the horrors of impressment.³³ Thompson finds great selectivity and self-discipline in the English mob (p. 64) and sees in crime and riot the fighting out of a class war (p. 60). The Luddites are not simply dissatisfied workers; they are insurrectionary, perhaps revolutionary (p. 589).

The people, then, can make their own history. What determines the direction in which the people try to make history move? Pollack tells us that the Populists tried to change society in accord with an ideology, a coherent and penetrating critique derived from their own experience and far more relevant to actual conditions than the views of the Social Darwinists. Lynd seeks out and defines a mechanic ideology and finds it coherent and radical. Thompson finds a "sub-political consciousness," a tradition which condemned some laws and condoned others (p. 60). Thompson's English mobs, the Populists, the Negro rioters, the eighteenth-century seamen: it is both condescending and inaccurate to dismiss these as non-ideological.

What scientists know of the nature of man by no means suggests that he is inherently evil and irrational. The evidence is quite persuasive in the other direction: man is born rational and a proper social system can promote rather than pervert that

rationality. Just as the physicist cannot hope to understand the conduct of groups of bodies without understanding the properties of individual bodies, so the historian cannot explain the conduct of groups of men without some knowledge of the properties of men as individuals. This does not mean that the group is simply the individual on a larger scale, but it is not true, as historians so often assume, that once a group of individuals reaches some critical mass it goes insane. If men can be rational, the historian's working assumption must be that groups of men act rationally; often they do not, but he will find a surer key to understanding in the assumption of rationality than of irrationality. The first question which the historian should ask of any human conduct is, Could this possibly make any sense?

The assumptions which guide the historians dealt with in this paper should have a familiar ring, for what these men have done is to convert traditional liberal democratic values into a methodology. Franklin, Paine and others also believed that man is largely rational, that he could make a better society and, if properly informed, govern himself. History, the democrat believes, can happen from the bottom up, and the democrat as historian will write it from the bottom up. This suggests that the democratic ideology is not only a faith but also a rationally justifiable method. If respect and sympathy for the majority of men makes sense, then a value-laden approach — a love of mankind — becomes not simply a mystique but actually a sounder approach than the approach of moral complacency. If the historian works within a structure of commitment to man, a structure of democratic values, then his intuitions will be more reasonable and more fruitful than they are if he is anti-man.

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— NOTES —

1. A partial list of historians who have taken some of these positions would include Robert E. Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1769-1780* (Ithaca, 1955), Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955), Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958), Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1956). For suggestive discussions of this trend and a fuller bibliography, see John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," *American Historical Review*, LXVII (April, 1962), 609-625 and Norman Pollack, "Fear of Man: Populism, Authoritarianism, and the Historian," *Agricultural History*, XXXIX, no. 2, pp. 59-67.
- Studies by non-historians along similar lines include Daniel Bell *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, 1960), Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, 1960) and *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1963), Simon Kuznets, *Shares of Upper Income Groups in Income and Savings* (New York, 1953). For a discussion of the role of some of the "New Conservatives" in a contemporary social conflict see James F. Petras and Michael Shute, "Berkeley 65," *Partisan Review*, XXXII (Spring, 1965), 314-323.
2. Staughton Lynd, "On Turner, Beard and Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, XLVIII (October, 1963), 250. (It might be added that historians have been equally insensitive to the fact of genocide in our treatment of the Indians.)
3. Gabriel Kolko, *Wealth and Power in America: An Analysis of Social Class and Income Distribution* (New York, 1962). Paperback available.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, (1964).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Staughton Lynd and Alfred Young, "After Carl Becker: The Mechanics and New York City Politics, 1774-1801," *Labor History*, V (Fall, 1964), 220n.
8. James A. Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XXII (January, 1965), 75-92.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Kolko, *op. cit.*, *passim* and Thernstrom, *op. cit.*, pp. 161, 164-165.
11. For a suggestion that "capitalist development assumed the same pattern in the United States and Western Europe," see Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 82-83 (paperback available); for the existence in America of a group "whose depressed position . . . resembled the classic European proletariat" see Thernstrom, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
12. For America's "higher infant-mortality rate and shorter life expectancy than those of at least ten other nations" see Kolko, *op. cit.*, pp. viii-ix; for the American "creation," in slavery, of a genuinely peculiar institution, crueller than slavery in Latin America, see Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (New York, 1963), pp. 37-80.
13. Pollack, *Populist Response*, *passim*; Staughton Lynd, "The Mechanics in New York Politics, 1774-1788," *Labor History*, V (Fall, 1964), 225-246.
14. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963), p. 55. Paperback available. Although his book does not deal with America, what Thompson says about writing the history of the common man is bound to have great influence outside England; in addition, his work has more in common with recent American studies of the common man than these works have in common with previous American work in the field.
15. Kolko, *op. cit.*
16. Pollack, *Populist Response*.
17. Thernstrom, *op. cit.*
18. Lynd and Young, *op. cit.*
19. Thernstrom, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
20. The same technique must be applied to the great numbers of Revolutionary War prison memoirs published by American seamen in the nineteenth century; they usually created a partly fictional and very Christian past for themselves. For a few of the more sanctimonious memoirs, see Thomas Andros, *The Old Jersey Captive . . .* (Boston, 1833), Albert G. Greene, *Recollections of the Jersey Prison-Ship . . . from the Original Manuscript of the late Captain Thomas Dring . . .* (Providence, 1829), Ebenezer Fox, *The Adventures of Ebenezer Fox in the Revolutionary War . . .* (Boston, 1847), the latter in part plagiarized from Dring.
21. B. A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago, 1945 (paperback available) is a skimming of the collection; the Project is described on pp. vii-viii.
22. See especially p. 18.

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23. For a sophisticated approach to the question of the extent of the suffrage in New York in the 1780's and 1790's, one which avoids such dilution, see Lynd and Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-223.
24. Henretta, *op. cit.*, is a similar study for an earlier period; he concludes (p. 85) that the propertyless proportion of the adult male population in Boston rose from 14% in 1687 to 29% in 1771.
25. Thomas C. Cochran's landmark essay, "The Social Sciences and the Problem of Historical Synthesis," in *The Social Sciences in Historical Study*, Social Science Research Council, Bulletin 64 (1954), pp. 157-171 which seems to be a plea for a history written from the bottom up and an ambitious attempt to integrate history and the other social sciences, finally reduces to such exhortations as one "to assemble the large number of career lines of different types of social leaders, essential for a picture of who succeeded in the society and how" (p. 164, italics mine). In urging more studies of the business elite, Cochran opens himself to the sort of criticism which Kolko and Thernstrom have levelled at others.
26. Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (2nd ed., New York, 1935).
27. See above, p. 3.
28. *Pennsylvania Archives*, Eighth Series, IV (Philadelphia, 1931), 2971-2995-2998.
29. See my article on merchant seamen in colonial America, forthcoming in *William and Mary Quarterly*.
30. Henry Bromfield, quoted in Benjamin Woods Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party* (New York, 1964), p. 144.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-145. Thompson, *op. cit.*, is more critical, as when he sees through the bias in an account of the Luddites which deals with the opinion that they were revolutionary by saying "but this opinion seems to have been supported by no satisfactory evidence; and it is admitted on all hands, that the leaders of the riots, although possessed of considerable influence, were all of the laboring classes" (p. 600). The conclusion that they could not, therefore, be revolutionary seems about as sound as the contention that "the vulgar" did not have the intelligence to carry off the Boston Tea Party.
32. *New York Times*, July 7, 1965.
33. Lemisch, *William and Mary Quarterly*. For a conflicting view, based on English sources and sympathetic to the Royal Navy, see Neil R. Stout, "Manning the Royal Navy in North America, 1763-1775," *American Neptune*, XXII (July, 1963), 174-185.

When he wrote this paper, Jesse Lemische was on the history faculty at the University of Chicago and active in the movement. Since then he has continued to be active in the movement but has been fired (not rehired) from the UC faculty and has been unable to obtain appointment at other universities in Chicago.

