
Fate and Freedom in History: The Two Worlds of Eric Foner

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Fate and Freedom in History

The Two Worlds of Eric Foner

—John Patrick Diggins—

Ideals, conventions, even truth itself, are continually changing things so that the milk of one generation may be the poison of the next. . . . When a generation succeeds . . . in handing down all of its discoveries and none of its delusions, its children shall inherit the earth.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1924

Give a professor a false thesis in early life, and he will teach it till he dies. He has no way of correcting it.

John Jay Chapman, 1900

CAN THE “milk” of one generation become the “poison” of the next? Only if it goes stale and asks to be drunk as fresh. The generation of the Sixties started out with its “discoveries” about the tragedy of the Vietnam War and the deficiencies of America in general. From that dramatic moment, when ideals clashed hard against reality, the generation proceeded to its analysis of the causes of things, and as the Sixties New Left evolved into the Academic Left, it began to hand down to a subsequent generation its delusions about the meaning of America and the

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nature of history, delusions for which there seems to be no means of correction.

We can divide post-World War II American historical scholarship into two categories: pre-Sixties and post-Sixties. An essentially liberal anti-communist outlook that characterized the field for two decades from the late 1940s through the late 1960s was superseded by a post-Sixties revisionism that subjected America to scrutiny while turning to a stance of anti-anti-communism. The Vietnam fiasco gave us that, and it is not hard to see why the older view came under stress and strain. What is hard to understand is why the post-Sixties anti-anti-communist outlook in the academy has itself not been affected by the end of the Cold War, and particularly by the *way* it ended. The post-Sixties school remains dominant now in its fourth decade, and there are scant signs of a subsequent school of thought arising to replace its take on things political and cultural. No doubt a future generation will impose its own delusions onto history, but for now, the staying power of the post-Sixties school defies both Charles Darwin and Andy Warhol: Its thinking seems helpless to adapt to change, and it refuses to relinquish its 15 minutes of fame.

A common impression, however, would have us believe the opposite: that the conservative 1950s complacently rested its case on a consensus that resisted

change, while the radical 1960s uncovered the deeper reality of conflict and demanded profound changes everywhere in American life. But if the 1950s stood for the status quo, why did that generation prove incapable of sustaining it in the academy? Conversely, if the 1960s generation stood for change, why does our present academic Left resist all change in its own views and hold to interpretations of history that history itself has left behind?

There is an embarrassing disparity between the political character of America and the activist historians who interpret it. On the one hand, every opinion poll indicates that Americans hold values that are conservative on economic issues and somewhat liberal on cultural matters, and that poor people believe in the American dream far more than the intellectuals who deride it. On the other hand, many historians, especially labor and social historians, remain convinced that the poor have a higher consciousness by virtue of their sufferings, and that history “from the bottom up” will challenge capitalism and deliver us to one or another form of progressive socialism. Such thinking, as Oscar Wilde once noted, confuses Marx with Jesus: “There is only one class in the community that thinks more about money than the rich, and that is the poor. The poor can think of nothing else. That is the misery of being poor.”

The persistence of the post-Sixties school of historiography in misinterpreting America is unique in the annals of American intellectual history. When previous generations of radicals—the Lyrical Left of New York’s Greenwich Village in the pre-World War I years, the Old Left of the depression years—saw that history had failed to fulfill their expectations, most members reconsidered their misplaced hopes for a better world and sought new interpretations of

America’s consensual social order. In the postwar era, that effort started as early as 1950 with Lionel Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination*. Trilling advised scholars to reconsider the mantra of social realism. It concluded in 1960 with Daniel Bell’s *The End of Ideology*, which demonstrated why Marxism must make room for Weber and Tocqueville. But the post-Sixties academic perspective identifies truth with tenacity and mistakes reiteration for reflection. When history failed to conform to its dreams, many of its members went on to graduate school and became, among other things, professors of history. Within a decade the generation of Sixties radicals progressed from political error to professorial tenure.

The most impassioned defense of post-Sixties historical scholarship is Lawrence Levine’s *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*, published in 1997. Past president of the Organization of American Historians and winner of a MacArthur Prize, Levine responds to growing criticism of multiculturalism in higher education by listing the ways in which campuses are now more receptive to their increasingly complex ethnic and minority population. An obvious retort to Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, Levine argues that all of American historiography is a study in generational revisionism, and that historians should not imagine that there was ever some mythical age in which the problem of change did not exist. Fair enough. But the irony is that Levine does not apply this insight to the post-Sixties school he seeks to defend. We have been waiting now for close to a half century for the post-Sixties professoriate to express the “opening of the American mind” by opening itself to new interpretations, and to revise its own heralded revisions. We wait in vain.

One thinks (yet again) of Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog and fox. As we know, the "hedgehog" is the monist who sees only one big thing and relates everything else to it, whereas the "fox" is the pluralist who pursues different ends and entertains a variety of thoughts without concern for philosophical foundations. The hedgehog presumes to understand both the movement and the meaning of history, but is often untutored in or unconcerned about practical matters. The fox confesses perplexity in the face of history's inscrutable ways, but accepts the responsibility of coping with events. In American terms, hedgehogs tend to be ideologues, foxes pragmatists. At the height of the Cold War, European intellectuals were presumed to be ideological and American intellectuals pragmatic. Today it often seems the other way around, at least in certain sections of historiography. Consider in that light the careers of François Furet and Eric Foner.

French Fox, American Hedgehog

FURET HAD been a member of the French Communist Party from 1948 to 1956, when he broke away in protest of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. In his career as a historian, he came to realize that his attraction to communism flowed from his personal need for protective illusions. "A great deal of intelligence", he quotes Saul Bellow's epigram, "can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusions is deep." No one had to tell Furet that the personal is the political: "The question I am trying to understand today is therefore inseparable from my own existence."¹

Furet became a leading authority on the French Revolution and, hard into its details like a fox, could not help but illuminate its practical lessons for contemporary scholars and intellectuals. In *Penser*

la Révolution française and elsewhere, he observed French radicals operating under the perilous illusion that they spoke for and represented the will of the people—the very thing John Adams keyed upon in his critique of Rousseau's idea of the "general will." When the Revolution turned toward terror in the 1790s, the competition for control of committees became vital, and those who could manipulate discourse and dominate language, like Robespierre, rose to the top. The Jacobin faction succeeded temporarily not because it was democratic but because it was linguistically adept, and hence sought "to radicalize the Revolution by making it consistent with its discourse."²

Furet's description of France almost succumbing to the most persuasive and devious writers and orators bodes ill for countries willing to trust their future to frustrated intellectuals, particularly those with a will to political correctness. In France the Jacobins fell; in Russia, however, they triumphed, and Furet's *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, offers a comprehensive study of the course of the Bolshevik Revolution in different epochs, and of the illusions held by intellectuals in various countries in each of those epochs.

Few Europeans, Furet notes, had any real idea of what was going on in Russia; there was no equivalent, for example, of New York's *Partisan Review*. After World War II, French communists could barely

¹François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (translated by Deborah Furet) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 117.

²François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), pp. 133–208, 257–316; see also Donald Sutherland, "An Assessment of the Writings of François Furet", *French Historical Studies* (Fall 1990).

stand the thought that their country had been liberated by America, Furet notes, as he describes how the French Left depicted the hopelessly “bourgeois” United States carrying the seeds of “fascism” and “totalitarianism.” All along, the Bolsheviks disdained everything the United States stood for, although such views had to be played down during the period of the Popular Front and the U.S.-Soviet alliance of World War II. Later, however, after he broke with communism, Furet came to see the United States as a “role model”, a country whose religion nourished capitalism and liberal individualism. He became an admirer of Tocqueville, the first Frenchman to see America’s promise and the vision of the future it could offer. In his last few years (he died in 1997), Furet had become something of a cultural hero on French television. Adults of his generation, as well as young students and academics, were shocked to find that they had been misled by their elders about Russia, particularly by writers like Jean-Paul Sartre, who denied the terrors of Stalinism and the existence of slave labor camps. Furet helped them see that what they had been taught about Russia was worse than an illusion; it was a lie.³

WITH ERIC FONER we are in a different world entirely. Like Furet, Foner came of political age under the influence of communism, although for him it was more a family than a party affair, with

Foner’s father and uncle imbuing him with Marxism and the mystique of class struggle. But unlike Furet, Foner saw, and continues to see, no reason why events in the Soviet Union should cause one to reconsider communism as an ideological system, or why anyone could possibly consider America a positive “role model.” In 1990, shortly after communist regimes had collapsed throughout Eastern Europe, Foner returned from teaching in Russia anxious to explain to Americans how the Russian people were being misled into thinking that life under Lenin and Stalin may not have been the best, or even the only, of all possible worlds. He also strove to explain why Russian students and scholars misunderstood American history and society:



University of Chicago News Office
François Furet

I delivered a talk at the Institute of World History on blacks and the American Constitution. I discussed how the Founding Fathers had written protections for slavery, such as the obligation to

return fugitives, into the document; how even free blacks had enjoyed few legal rights before the Civil War; and how it had taken almost a century for the promise of emancipation and Reconstruction to begin to be fulfilled.

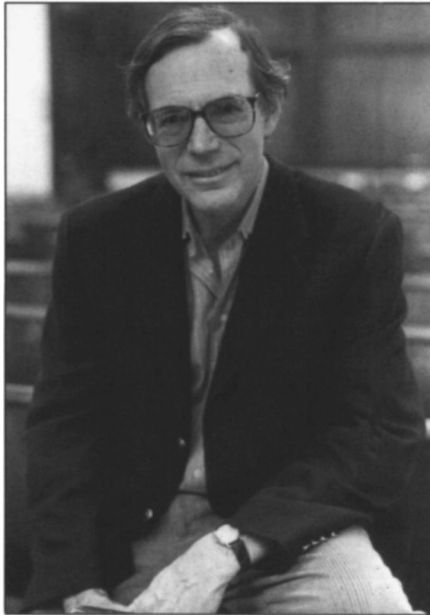
Nothing I said would have seemed particularly controversial to American historians. But my talk was not, shall we say, greeted with enthusiasm. Listeners praised my research but seemed puzzled by my ‘oppositional’ stance. One historian commented that although he did not agree with my interpretation, it was good for Soviet scholars to hear such views—as if my ‘take’ on the subject were hopelessly eccentric. Another remarked that my rather

³See Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, pp. 440–514.

bleak account of the economic condition of black America in the 1980s seemed at odds with the current Soviet interpretation of the Reagan years, which sees the lot of all Americans, including blacks, as having improved markedly.⁴

So the American historian wonders why Russians are not sufficiently appreciative of having lived under communism, and the Russians wonder why the American historian cannot appreciate a country that affords him and other “eccentrics” the freedom to speak and write as they wish.

Foner wonders why his Russian “students shared the current obsession with locating missed opportunities and roads not taken in the Soviet past.” Where Furet saw the tragic consequences of the Bolshevik Revolution, Foner could think of no reason for Russians to reconsider their history at all. He wondered why the Russian “press and public officials now paint the history of the Soviet era in the blackest hues” and he lamented the loss of Marxism as an interpretive paradigm. An analysis that assumes history is “evolving in a predetermined direction, that capitalism is declining and socialism on the rise, that class struggle is the motive force of historical change”—these useful perspectives, he complains, have been replaced by a new “study of the role of ‘great men’ in historical change”, with “civilization” the new focus instead of class formation. Instead of economics, historians now pay “far greater attention to culture, religion, and other noneconomic aspects of historical development.”



Eric Foner

Joseph Piniere

Foner’s complaint grows more bitter the closer Russia comes to emulating America. The “concept of ‘revolution’ is being rethought—turned on its head, really.” The new view is that “revolutions (like the French and the Russian) that attempt to abolish the existing order entirely should be deemed less radical than ‘organic revolution’ (like the American) which build on existing institutions rather than destroying them” and thereby respect property and “create more favorable conditions for economic growth.” At the same time, the “traditional Marxist distinction between ‘bourgeois’ and ‘socialist’ ideologies has given way to a search for ‘universal human values.’” In this account, the great tragedy of Russian history was not the prison of Bolshevik tyranny but the promise of American democracy.

“This love affair with America can lead to some remarkable conclusions”, writes Foner, noting a post-Soviet Russian view he regards as preposterous: “Since a socialist society is one that fully embodies ‘universal values’, one scholar has proposed, the United States is actually more socialist than the Soviet Union.” At the very cusp of the Soviet collapse, Foner found it a pity that so many Russians looked upon America with curiosity and even envy. Once upon a time, he waxed nostalgically, Stalinist Russia had played up “America’s

⁴Eric Foner, “Restructuring Yesterday’s News: The Russians Write a New History”, *Harper’s* (December 1990).

ills: poverty, homelessness, racism, unemployment. Today, criticism is out of the question. America has become the land of liberty and prosperity of our imagination.”⁵

THE VIEWS of Eric Foner require our attention because of the eminence and influence of a mind that cannot rethink what it had been taught. Foner has had the distinction of serving as president of the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association, presiding as the Harmsworth Professor at Oxford University, and of holding the Dewitt Clinton Chair of History at Columbia University. All the while he has prided himself in being associated with such publications as the short-lived *Marxist Perspectives* and the long-lived *Radical History Review*. Foner’s views parallel quite nicely those of the first version of the National History Standards (NHS) released in the early 1990s. Here, too, one encounters historical writing without any reference to what actually went on in Russia under Lenin and Stalin: nothing about the police terror, party purges, or the loss of more than 10 million lives in the forced collectivization policies of the Five Year Plans and in the avoidable Ukrainian famine. The original NHS draft emphasized class and social conflict, ridiculed the idea that “great men” shaped history, oozed with implicit anti-Americanism and explicit anti-capitalism, and scorned “organic” revolution for its conservative continuity with political and social traditions.⁶

Ever vigilant, for decades Foner has attacked any historian who unearthed evidence critical of the Rosenbergs, Alger Hiss and Paul Robeson. Robeson was a brilliant actor and singer and by no means either a spy or a card-carrying communist. But he was a tragic figure (a

cultural hero to me, whatever his misguided politics) so taken in by Stalin’s Russia that he assumed American blacks could identify with the Russian masses because former slaves felt a common bond with peasants. For pointing out, in a review of a biography of Robeson, that the actor was hailing peasant culture at the very time Stalin was killing it with collectivization, I was denounced in *The Village Voice* as a “McCarthyite” by Eric Foner. (McCarthyism was the best thing that ever happened to American communism. It provided a ready-made therapy of denial, saving the denier from the sobering shock of skepticism. “By exposing the absurdities of other systems”, wrote David Hume, “every voter of every superstition could give sufficient reason for his blind and bigoted attachments to the principles in which he had been educated.” With Joseph McCarthy ranting and raving, the mind of the pro-communist Left remained as closed as a lock without a key.)

But if the reality of the old Soviet Union could not be faced for fear of acknowledging a doctrinaire theory that failed, the reality of the United States cannot be faced for fear of acknowledging an “experiment” in the “new science of politics” that succeeded. Why does Foner claim that American liberty and prosperity are not real but part of “our imagination”? His answer is telling:

Writing in *Moscow News*, one [Russian] historian declared that since Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, Americans have valued ‘freedom of the individual over

⁵Foner, “Restructuring Yesterday’s News.”

⁶John Patrick Diggins, “The National History Standards”, *The American Scholar* (Autumn 1996); Walter McDougall, “What Johnny Still Won’t Know About History”, *Commentary* (July 1996) and “Whose History? Whose Standards?”, *Commentary* (May 1995).

everything else'—a statement that certainly would have surprised Jefferson's hundred slaves, to say nothing of the millions freed only by the Civil War.

Liberal America, it seems, must remain forever corrupted by slavery while Bolshevik Russia remains, even in the historical past tense, forever free of tyranny. Foner as hedgehog is both an unabashed apologist for the Soviet system and an unforgiving historian of America. Foner applies to the plight of African-Americans in the United States an analysis he refuses to apply to the plight of Russians and others in the USSR. In both countries workers were subjected to conditions of forced labor. But while those conditions are made manifestly clear in regard to the plantation South in both the Antebellum and Reconstruction eras, they disappear when post-Sixties historians write about Soviet Russia.

America's "Unfinished Revolution"

FONER'S prize-winning 1988 book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, is a magisterial narrative of the precarious status of African-Americans in a period of history that could have been a turning point, if history had only turned in the right direction. A political ideal appears most tragically in history when it is struggling to be born and suffers an early death. Foner offers a moving account of what should have happened but did not. The failure of America to allow an entire race to make the full transition from slavery to freedom meant that the "house divided" still stood. In *Reconstruction* Foner emphasizes repeatedly that freed blacks "failed to achieve economic independence" even with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and, after the end of the Civil War and the onset of Reconstruction, the political

restoration of old southern ruling elites "forced them to return to plantation labor."⁷

Foner describes with passion how African-Americans hungered for their own plots of land and for the animals and tools with which they could work the earth in the new spirit of freedom, but he seems entirely insouciant when it comes to such issues in Russia. The Soviet Union pioneered, as Max Nomad put it, "a new form of slavery for the working class" and, one might add, an old form of tyranny for the masses, who were denied political rights by the Bolsheviks just as they had been denied the citizen's right to participate in government by the czars.⁸ Foner describes the "violence" and "terror" from which African-Americans suffered in Reconstruction America, but such policies go unmentioned in his accounts of Soviet Russia. If Reconstruction was an "unfinished revolution" because it denied blacks economic opportunities and political freedoms, can the Bolshevik Revolution ever have been described in a positive light when it denied the Russian people the same thing?

The stench of double standards often makes us think with our nostrils. In a 1997 *New York Times* op-ed, Foner called for nothing less than a rewriting of American history to demonstrate that there are things in the South more honorable than the Confederate flag. Specifically, he advocated histories of slave uprisings and of the 200,000 African-Americans, mainly freed slaves, who fought in the Union Army during the Civil War.⁹ More recent-

⁷Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. xiii, 602.

⁸Max Nomad, *Aspects of Revolt: A Study in Revolutionary Theories and Techniques* (New York: Noonday, 1959).

⁹Eric Foner, "The South's Hidden Heritage", *New York Times*, February 22, 1997.

ly, Foner has become an enthusiastic advocate of reparations for blacks whose ancestors suffered slavery. This advice, however—some of which bears merit, no doubt—comes from the same historian who earlier wondered why Russians would wish to know the untold story of those who fought in their own Civil War of 1918–20. Apparently, in Russia those who won, won; to quarrel with that inevitability is absurd. The enslaved, but not the defeated, may argue with the course of events. For Foner, the world of historical experience falls into two spheres: in America, the contingent struggle for freedom; in Russia, a satisfaction with determinism. In the first case history is *made* or should be made to happen; in the second it simply is, with no revenge or reparations possible or necessary.

Historians on the Left tend to assume that the existence of slavery and the residues of racism contradict the idea of America as a country animated by Lockean liberalism. Thus, according to Foner, a “search for ‘universal human values’” represents “another Gorbachev by-word, which seems oddly ahistorical, since it denies the significance of time and place in establishing moral standards.” By relativizing moral standards, as did John C. Calhoun, one can defend slavery and Stalinism alike. What makes a value universal is that it transcends all particulars of time and place, and it was “universal human ideals” that came to be incorporated in the amendments to the Constitution as a result of the Civil War, amendments which, had they not been betrayed, would have granted black Americans citizenship and entitled them to all its rights, privileges and immunities. But Foner himself is the one who is “oddly ahistorical”, a historian who assumes there can be freedom without opposition, liberty without property, justice without rights, revolution without representation.

“The Crimes of Communism”

THE POST-SIXTIES professoriate in history has not gone entirely unchallenged, especially since the end of the Cold War. But the challenge is posed not so much within the core institutions of academe, but on its “public intellectual” fringes. In the summer of 1994, *Dissent* published Eugene Genovese’s provocative article, “The Crimes of Communism: What Did You Know and When Did You Know It?” The ironies were rich, for *Dissent* was first published by Irving Howe and Michael Harrington, whose political legacies reached back to *The New Internationalist*—a Trotskyist journal of the late 1930s and 1940s. The New York Trotskyists, who included the cerebral James Burnham and the legendary Max Shachtman, knew about the crimes of Stalin half a century before Genovese, a former communist, saw the light.

Foner’s response to Genovese’s interrogating query is revealing. Foner insisted that a “balanced reassessment” of the history of communism will show that the “silence in the face of unspeakable crimes” came from an understanding of the “communists’ contribution to some of the country’s most important struggles for social betterment.” To Foner, Stalinism is not and never was the problem; the greater danger is the anti-Stalinist, particularly one who, like Genovese, has reconverted to Catholicism:

The political stance with which Genovese proposes to replace socialism is not presented in anything resembling a coherent manner, but it can be inferred from his random remarks. Human nature is immutable, hierarchy inevitable, equality impossible, the desire for personal autonomy pernicious, socialism equivalent to tyranny, religion the foundation of morality (somehow, religious believers are not held culpable for the Inquisition or the

millions killed in wars of religious intolerance). Although Genovese, for reasons difficult to understand from his article, refers to himself as part of the left, his current outlook has far more in common with a long tradition of elitist antiliberalism, including Tory romanticism and Old South criticism of capitalism in the nineteenth century, and with various expressions of right-wing ideology in the twentieth. The principles he enumerates offer no guidance whatever to those desiring to rethink the history of socialism while retaining a commitment to social change. Had they prevailed throughout American history, there would have been no antislavery movement, no feminism, labor movement, or civil rights struggle.¹⁰

Think again. If abolitionism, the cause of American labor, feminism and the civil rights movement had to wait for socialism before making their respective moves in the course of American history, they would still be waiting for Lefty to come through the door. Whatever success these causes have had in America is due to the Constitution and to a flexible rights-based political culture ultimately working within that Constitution. It is due to procedural liberalism, not social radicalism; to the New Deal and not the “New Man.” It is due, as well—and this fact goes far too often unappreciated—to a productive economy that puts successive strivings for economic justice within reach, if not realization. It is also absurd to claim, as did some respondents to the *Dissent* symposium, that the American Communist Party was always in the forefront of causes such as racial equality and feminism. Ever since the 1930s, the CP made sure the class question always came before the race question; as to modern women, they finally made their move by breaking with the “chauvinistic” Students for a Democratic Society—in the early 1970s.

Foner also mischaracterized Genovese. His “elitist antiliberalism” is not of recent

vintage but was much in presence when he was a full-blooded communist. I once dined with Gene and his wife Betsy at Stanford in the late 1960s. I was feebly trying to express sympathy toward the counterculture rocking loudly nearby on the streets of San Francisco, expressing a view that the hippies and “flower children” were something new under the sun, when suddenly there came a mailed fist upon the table and a deep voice growled: “Stalin would have known what to do with these types!”

The truth is that radical pro-communists and conservative anti-communists share a common scorn for liberalism. In his 1999 book, *The Story of American Freedom*, and in his AHA presidential address, “American Freedom in a Global Age”, Foner is not so much scornful as reticent, or perhaps reluctant, to equate freedom with liberalism.¹¹ He is certainly hesitant to give up his life-long delusions about communism, or to acknowledge that in an established liberal political culture such as America enjoys, radicalism must rethink its premises. Thus he implies that the Cold War was due to the threat Soviet Russia posed to America’s political culture: “Whatever Moscow stood for was by definition the opposite of freedom—and not merely one-party rule, suppression of free expression, and the like, but public housing, universal health insurance, full employment and other claims that required strong and persistent government intervention in the economy.” The Cold War, he said, resulted from “McCarthyism at home”, which “propelled liberal thinkers toward a wholesale repudiation of mass politics. In its place emerged a pragmatic, managerial liberalism meant to protect democratic institutions against the excesses of the

¹⁰“Reply”, *Dissent* (Summer 1994).

¹¹New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999; *American Historical Review* (February 2001), respectively.

popular will.” That the Soviet Union threatened the United States because it represented the American “popular will” and enjoyed a full welfare state, and “not merely” because of its denial of freedom, is a belief that can only be held in the American academy—certainly not anywhere in Russia or eastern Europe.

“The Exclusionary Dimensions of American Freedom”?

FREEDOM IS a curious subject for an historian more comfortable writing about slavery. “American freedom”, Foner declares in *The Story of American Freedom*, “was born in revolution.” Surely this is a stretch. The Declaration of Independence did not claim to give birth to freedom; rather, its author protested that the pre-existing freedoms and rights of the colonists had been abused by the mother country. And such “natural rights”, the Founders believed, endowed to the human species prior to political organizations, had been carried over from England, where freedom itself was not so much a result of radical rebellion as the slow growth of institutions. But Thomas Paine, a hero of Foner’s and the subject of one of his books, rushed off to Paris with the storming of the Bastille, hailing both the American and the French revolutions as radically innovative and transformative.

But no modern non-“organic” revolution has resulted in freedom, which is more a matter of evolution, or more exactly, social devolution from the top down. First the nobility challenges the crown and then the ascendent bourgeoisie challenges the aristocracy and later the working class confronts the bourgeoisie, with power moving from monarchy to oligarchy to democracy. (“Ours”, John Adams reminded the *Francophiles*, “was a revolution against innovation.”) But Foner’s ringing sentence about America’s

being born in revolution echoes the sentiments of the National History Standards, where students are asked to “compare” America’s Revolution with those that took place in the 20th century in Russia, Cuba, China and Vietnam. One would think American students need to be asked another question: Can there be a true revolution without a civil war or counter-revolution? And if America had neither, what happened between 1776 and 1787 that made a revolution unique in not devouring its own children?

In *Who Owns History?*, Foner’s most recent book, that question goes unanswered.¹² The longest essay deals with the age-old question: “Why Is There No Socialism in America?” The flip-side of the question could be: “Why was there no freedom in the Soviet Union?” Had Foner dealt with Weber, Tocqueville, and Marx himself, he might begin to work out an answer to both questions. But he spends all his effort discussing the work of fellow historians who also shy away from listening to what the master thinkers had to say. While Marx warned that Russia could not make the transition to socialism before going through the liberal capitalist stage of development, he recognized that America had moved through that stage and that the question then was whether there would be a stage beyond it. Tocqueville observed that America was “born” free and especially equal, having skipped feudalism, and, in a country where commerce arises with democracy, the value of freedom is established in a “*consensus universalis*”, a point that Marx and Engels confirmed when they said of Americans: “the bourgeois conditions look like a *beau ideal* to them.” What the post-Sixties radical scholars cannot face is that there is no “stage” beyond an America in which liberal democracy has been firmly established.

¹²New York: Hill & Wang, 2002.

Unwilling to accept the wisdom of Marx or Tocqueville, Foner cites the work of newer scholars showing past workers, feminists and various ethnic groups supposedly challenging the liberal consensus by protesting against it. But do they challenge it to overturn it or to become part of it? After all, consider not what the Sixties-era students said but what they did. After denouncing the university as a monstrous bureaucratic “system without a face”—indeed, after shouting with Mario Savio that they would “put their bodies against the machine and make the machine stop until we’re free”—the Sixties generation got their Ph.D.s and meekly entered into the university without so much as a blush, becoming the very tenured professors they once abominated.

Foner is interested in freedom less as the philosophical riddle of liberalism than as the political program of radicalism, and thus he protests that the idea of freedom “has been largely appropriated by libertarians and conservatives of one kind or another, from advocates of unimpeded market economics to armed militia groups, insisting that the right to bear arms is the centerpiece of American liberty.” The more legitimate idea of freedom, he argues, would have students join with African-Americans to march for civil rights, or going into the factories to support the ranks of labor, or taking a stand on women’s rights and gender equality. Foner rightly emphasizes America’s failure to live up to its egalitarian ideals and the struggles of those trying to realize such ideals. But he is struck by the thought that as America expanded and developed, it engaged in what he calls “the exclusionary dimensions of American freedom.” Wrongly put. Since freedom enjoyed in a democracy is by definition inclusionary, freedom itself cannot engage in acts of exclusion. The story of American freedom is also the story of American power, and power seldom

moves with democracy but more often against it. Democracy seeks to expand, absorb, encompass, and, above all, include; power aims to restrict, confine, limit, and, above all, exclude. Freedom and power may be antithetical but they are also inseparable. For example, one faction’s freedom to undertake an action curbs another faction’s freedom to oppose it. Why, then, does the historian not see the dialectic of freedom and power?

The answer is that the academic Left prefers to use the language of democracy and freedom to avoid looking at what is really going on in the culture wars today. The phenomenon of multiculturalism that Foner and Levine celebrate has little to do with freedom in the proper sense of the term, but much to do with power and those who seek it without mentioning it by name. On the university campus, various minority programs and affirmative action mandates are nothing less than exercises in power that include some groups at the expense of others. That the post-Sixties generation of scholars continues to hire only its own ideological kind is another expression of academic power that has witnessed the establishment of social history and other radical fields and the falling off of traditional political, diplomatic and intellectual history.

Professor Foner himself, I happily hasten to add, has been willing to hire and support teachers of differing ideological loyalties, and in his remarkable academic career he has been more professional than political, a gentleman scholar rather than an academic apparatchik. My critique concerns only the claim, made by Lawrence Levine and others, that the post-Sixties generation is more open to new ideas and has a better capacity for change than any prior generation of American historians, and the opposite claim, made by Foner, that progressive political causes have depended upon the maintenance of an unchanging radicalism.

In addition, there remains an unchanging and predictable complaint: In dealing with American history, slavery is Foner's only trump card. Without it, he's a fish out of water. Yet if America has yet to resolve the race question, presumably the Soviet Union had solved the class problem, and thus the American historian returns from Moscow completely bewildered by a people who, instead of accepting their fate, would give up despotic communism for Western liberalism. The denials to freedom trouble the historian of American historiography who would have us feel guilt in the country's having betrayed the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. But of the democratic ideals of Karl Marx, which Sidney Hook went to his grave believing in, the historian remains coldly

indifferent. Thus he is seemingly oblivious to the disappearance of freedom's possibility in early 20th-century Russian history after the Constituent Assembly had been crushed by the Bolsheviks directed by Lenin, the Kronstadt uprising massacred at the orders of Trotsky, and the intelligentsia liquidated in the Moscow show trials arranged by Stalin. Foner sees the "silence" surrounding such crimes as explainable, and thus justifiable, by communism's "contribution" to humanity. Is this hopelessly stale reasoning the acclaimed "opening of the American mind" on the part of a generation that relishes change? Or is it the reflex of an historian identifying himself as a radical revisionist who cannot, when it comes to his own undying delusions, revise? □

Minds Wide Shut

Men's thoughts, are much according to their inclination; their discourse and speeches, according to their learning and infused opinions; but their deeds, are after as they have been accustomed. . . .

Therefore, since custom is the principal magistrate of man's life, let men by all means endeavor, to obtain good customs. Certainly custom is most perfect, when it beginneth in young years: this we call education; which is, in effect, but an early custom. So we see, in languages, the tongue is more pliant to all expressions and sounds, the joints are more supple, to all feats of activity and motions, in youth than afterwards. For it is true, that late learners cannot so well take the ply; except it be in some minds, that have not suffered themselves to fix, but have kept themselves open, and prepared to receive continual amendment, which is exceeding rare.

—Francis Bacon,
"Of Custom and Education" (1611)