

WHO OWNS HISTORY?

RETHINKING THE PAST IN

A CHANGING WORLD



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NEW YORK

PREFACE



History," writes James Baldwin, an unusually astute observer of twentieth-century American life, "does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do."

Rarely has Baldwin's insight been more forcefully confirmed than during the past decade. To the surprise of historians themselves, in the final years of the twentieth century and opening moments of the twenty-first, history seemed to enter into Americans' public and private consciousness more powerfully than at any time in recent memory. Our equivalent of what the British call the "heritage industry" reached unprecedented levels of popularity and profitability. Works focused on history regularly appeared on both fiction and nonfiction best-seller lists. Hollywood, for better or worse, churned out any number of historically oriented films, including *Amistad*, *Gladiator*, *The Patriot*, and *Pearl Harbor*. There was a spate of efforts to

designate historic buildings like New York's Grand Central Terminal as landmarks, saving them from demolition, and to restore their architectural beauty. The History Channel emerged as one of the most successful enterprises on cable television. Attendance at historical museums and other venues for the public presentation of the past reached new heights. Corporations moved to cash in on Americans' fascination with history. Primedia, the magazine, video, and Internet conglomerate, began sponsoring reenactments of Civil War battles. "First and foremost we're trying to extend our brand into the Civil War category," a company spokesman told a reporter for *The Washington Post*.

This expanding popular fascination with the past coincided, sometimes uneasily, with a profound reorientation of historical scholarship. It has become almost a truism that the past thirty years have witnessed a remarkable expansion of the cast of characters included in historical narratives and the methods employed in historical analysis. Groups neglected by earlier scholars—African-Americans, women, working people, and others—have moved to center stage in accounts of the past, and the professoriat itself has changed so that it more fully reflects the composition of American society. In eight years of undergraduate and graduate study at Columbia University during the 1960s, I never once was taught by a woman or non-white historian. Such an experience would be virtually impossible today.

The new scholarship began to produce a long-overdue diversification of public history. The Freedom Trail, a walking tour of monuments, buildings, and historical markers that has long been Boston's premier tourist attraction, has now been supplemented by a Women's History Trail, a Black Heritage

Trail, and a guide to the city's gay and lesbian history. Civil rights tourism is a growing business in the South. North Carolina officials urge Americans to visit Greensboro, where the sit-ins began in 1960, to see where "four brave people refused to move" and thereby "moved an entire nation." The new Trail of Tears National Historic Trail (commemorating the forced removal of the Cherokee nation from their homes in the 1830s) has been warmly embraced by tourism-conscious town fathers in out-of-the-way places from Georgia to Oklahoma.

On the other hand, the rise of what used to be called the "new social history" has also produced expressions of concern about a fragmentation of scholarship and the difficulty of constructing coherent narratives of the past when historians focus on various groups' distinctive experiences. Practitioners of more traditional fields such as diplomatic, political, and business history have complained repeatedly of feeling marginalized in a profession where social and cultural studies are in the ascendancy. More interesting, in a way, is the gap between the thrust of contemporary scholarship and the hold that "conventional" subjects retain on the broad public interested in history. History best-sellers today deal with topics that would have been familiar decades ago: the founding fathers, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Civil War, World War II. The History Channel devotes infinitely more time to military history than to runaway slaves or fighters for women's suffrage. The two most popular exhibitions at the National Museum of American History in Washington are those on the presidency and first ladies.

There is nothing unusual or sinister in the fact that each generation rewrites history to suit its own needs, or about disagreements within the profession and among the public at large about how history should best be taught and studied. What was

different in the 1990s was history's sudden emergence as a "wedge issue" in the so-called culture wars. During that decade, it sometimes seemed, one could scarcely open a newspaper without encountering bitter controversy over the teaching and presentation of the American past. One series of acrimonious disputes centered on whether the "new history" was producing an insufficiently uplifting version of the nation's development. The Columbus quincentennial of 1992 was all but ruined by debates over whether the anniversary of his "discovery" should be recalled as a source of national pride (the birth of a New World) or shame (the decimation of native populations and introduction of slavery). A planned exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of the first atomic bomb was denounced by veterans' groups for alleged pro-Japanese bias and for suggesting that the use of the weapon may not have been necessary. In the end, the museum was forced to remove virtually all historical material that was to have accompanied the display of the *Enola Gay*, the plane that bombed Hiroshima. Proposed national standards for the teaching of history were denounced by critics like Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, for devoting too much attention to obscure members of minority groups, slighting more prominent American leaders, and offering a "depressing" account of the nation's development. These debates achieved a remarkable level of vituperation and oversimplification. One letter to the editor likened the National History Standards to distortions of the past "developed in the councils of the Bolshevik and Nazi parties."

A second set of debates centered on the legacy of slavery and the Civil War. In an essay on historical consciousness, Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of "creative forgetfulness"—how the

memory of some aspects of the past is predicated on amnesia about others. Slavery is a case in point. Nowhere is the gap between scholarly inquiry and public perceptions of history more stark. It is probably safe to say that the finest body of American historical writing to appear during the past thirty years has been produced by scholars of slavery and emancipation. This literature has not only established beyond question the centrality of slavery to the history of the United States but has refashioned our understanding of subjects ranging from colonial settlement to the American Revolution and the origins and consequences of the Civil War.

In public history, however, a large void still exists when it comes to slavery. To be sure, communities throughout the North have taken steps to identify and commemorate sites associated with the Underground Railroad, and a museum devoted to slavery and emancipation is being planned for Cincinnati. Visitors to the nation's capital, however, will find a national museum devoted to the Holocaust, funded annually with millions of taxpayer dollars, but almost nothing related to slavery. Tours of historic plantations in the South still largely sugarcoat the slave experience. Of the hundreds of Civil War monuments North and South, only a handful depict the 200,000 African-Americans who fought for the Union. Liverpool and Nantes, two European ports whose wealth derived from the slave trade, have hosted museum exhibits candidly depicting the role of slavery in their growth. No such exhibition has ever been mounted in New York City, which grew rich in the early nineteenth century marketing the products of slave labor.

Nonetheless, slavery has played a prominent role in recent disputes about history. The public display of the Confederate battle flag in the South inspired demonstrations, economic

boycotts, and one statewide referendum. The movement for reparations for slavery gained increasing support among black politicians and intellectuals. Pro-Confederate statements by Gale Norton and John Ashcroft, members of George W. Bush's cabinet, spurred public controversy, as did a decision by the New Orleans school board to rechristen public schools that were named for slaveholders, including Confederate generals and some of the nation's founders.

Buffeted by conflicting tides of public sentiment, politicians leaped into the fray, with varied results. President Bill Clinton more or less "apologized" for slavery while on a visit to Africa. The New York state legislature mandated that school history curricula include slavery, the Holocaust, and the Irish famine (and New Jersey added the Armenian genocide)—as if historical identity were defined by separate and equal victimizations. More productively, Congress directed the National Park Service to devote increased attention to slavery at its Civil War sites—recognition that popular venues like Gettysburg presently offer no account of why men actually went to war.

Nietzsche distinguished three approaches to history: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical (the first two being history that is celebratory and nostalgic, the third history "that judges and condemns"). Among other things, the 1990s debates revealed that the desire for a history of celebration is widespread and knows no political boundaries. It thrives among minorities hoping to foster a sense of group pride and patriots seeking to encourage love of country. Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with young people either developing from history a sense of identity or taking pride in their nation's accomplishments. But when history locates supposedly primordial characteristics shared with members of one's own

group and no one else, it negates the interpenetration of cultures that is so much a part of our nation's past. And when it seeks to return to an earlier narrative emphasizing the glories of American development, it ignores the fact that thanks to the broadened canvas of the "new" histories, it is no longer possible to treat American history as an unalloyed saga of national progress toward liberty and equality.

In every country, versions of the past provide the raw material for nationalist ideologies and patriotic sentiments. The scholarly writing of history—in Europe, where it originated, and in newly independent nations of Asia and Africa in the past generations—has always been tied to the nation-state. In the United States, calls for a more patriotic history have mounted at times of nation building (such as the first half of the nineteenth century), perceived national fragmentation (such as the 1890s or 1990s, decades of widespread concern over mass immigration), and wars. American historians, like their counterparts elsewhere, have often sought to construct an intellectually plausible lineage for the nation, while, until recently, excluding those, such as Indian tribes, African-Americans, or the Spanish- and French-derived cultures of the Mississippi Valley and the trans-Mississippi West, who seemed little more than obstacles to the expansion of Anglo-Saxon liberty and national greatness. The problem with these histories was not simply that they were incomplete, but that they left students utterly unprepared to confront American reality. The civil rights revolution, divisions over Vietnam, Watergate—these seemed to spring from nowhere, without discernible roots in the American past.

Of course, there is nothing distinctively American about controversy over how history should be conceptualized. In

recent years, countries around the globe have been roiled by debates over history similar in many ways to our own. Critics condemned a proposed new history curriculum for British schools for not being “British enough”—meaning that it neglected a number of monarchs while requiring students to study non-European societies such as Aztec Mexico or Benin. New official textbooks in Mexico stirred complaints that, in keeping with current government policies, the regime of Porfirio Díaz was praised for promoting economic modernization while the dictatorial aspects of his rule were slighted. In Japan, demonstrators protested the introduction of new texts said to sanitize the country’s aggression in World War II and its maltreatment of occupied peoples such as the Koreans and Chinese. In Israel, new scholarship and a public television series that challenged reigning orthodoxies about the nation’s founding (for example, that most Arabs who fled the country in the wake of the 1948 war left voluntarily) stirred enormous controversy.

Although they generated far more heat than light, the history wars did underscore the basic differences between historians’ understanding of their task and what much of the broader public thinks the writing of history entails. Historians view the constant search for new perspectives as the lifeblood of historical understanding. Outside the academy, however, the act of reinterpretation is often viewed with suspicion, and “revisionist” is invoked as a term of abuse. At a Senate hearing on the Smithsonian controversy, Senator Dianne Feinstein of California remarked that when she studied history as a Stanford undergraduate, her professors confined themselves to presenting facts. Now, she complained, historians are engaged in interpretation. Surely her Stanford classes must have introduced Senator Feinstein to the writings of giants of scholarship like

Carl Becker and Charles Beard, who nearly a century ago demolished the notion that historical truth is fixed and permanent and that fact and interpretation can be sealed off from each other. The very selection and ordering of some “facts” while ignoring others is itself an act of interpretation. I am reminded of my conversation during the history standards debate with an eager young reporter from *Newsweek*. “Professor,” she asked, “when did historians stop relating facts and start all this revising of interpretations of the past?” Around the time of Thucydides, I told her.

History always has been and always will be regularly rewritten, in response to new questions, new information, new methodologies, and new political, social, and cultural imperatives. But that each generation can and must rewrite history does not mean that history is simply a series of myths and inventions. There are commonly accepted professional standards that enable us to distinguish good history from falsehoods like the denial of the Holocaust. Historical truth does exist, not in the scientific sense but as a reasonable approximation of the past. But the most difficult truth for those outside the ranks of professional historians to accept is that there often exists more than one legitimate way of recounting past events.

Thankfully, the history wars appear to have subsided. But these controversies raised a set of questions relating to the politics and purposes of historical understanding central to the essays in this book. As my graduate school mentor Richard Hofstadter once observed, the best rationale for collections such as this may be the simple one of accessibility—bringing together in a single volume pieces originally published in obscure corners of the academic world. But, he added, such a collection also possesses value in illustrating a common cast of

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mind, for whatever their subject matter, the essays are “unified by some underlying intellectual intent [and] a set of related concerns.”

Written between 1983 and 2001, the essays that follow all deal, in one way or another, with the relationship between the historian and his or her own world. The first two look back on my own career and that of Hofstadter himself. They suggest how the context within which a historian lives and writes affects one’s choice of subject and approach to the past. The next four essays look at broad international changes of the past two decades—the accelerating pace of globalization, the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the apartheid state in South Africa, and the decline of socialism—to consider their effect on historical consciousness. The final three examine the enduring but often misunderstood legacy of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction for contemporary American society. In these essays, the Reconstruction era that followed the war plays a major role, not only because I have devoted much of my scholarly career to its study but also because it illustrates most forcefully the interconnections of past and present.

Given the partisan exaggerations and intellectual distortions so evident in the historical controversies of the 1990s, it would be perfectly understandable if historians retreated altogether from engagement with the larger public. This, I believe, would be a serious mistake. A century ago, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association, Charles Francis Adams called on historians to step outside the ivory tower and engage forthrightly in public discourse. The study of history, he insisted, had a “public function,” and historians had an obligation to contribute to debates in which history was frequently invoked with little genuine understanding or knowledge. “The

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standard of American political discussion,” Adams pointedly remarked, “is not now so high as not to admit of elevation,” and invocations of history should not be left to “the journalist and the politician.” These observations are as relevant today as in 1900, when Adams spoke.

Who owns history? Everyone and no one—which is why the study of the past is a constantly evolving, never-ending journey of discovery.