Purposes and Ends in History: Presentism and the New Left

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PRESENTISM is a fighting word within the historical profession. For over fifty years the battle has raged between the presentists who argue for a "usable, value-laden" history and those historians who defend a "disinterested, neutral, scientific, and objective" scholarship. Each side has its own officer corps, training schools, and grand strategies for annihilating the enemy. To wear the uniform of the presentists, in some periods, was as foolhardy as having a red coat at Bunker Hill; at other times, though less often, to be caught in the white frock of the scientific historians consigned one to Karl Marx's dung-heap of history. In the war over presentism, there are few neutrals.

The most recent phase of this struggle over presentism came in the 1960s with the rise of the New Left historians. The profession has tended to see them as linked to the political movement known as the New Left and to view their historical writing as a reflection of that movement. Yet the widely varying relationship between New Left

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historians and the New Left movement makes it misleading to lump the two together. With a few notable exceptions most of the new radical historians had little direct involvement in the political activism of the 1960s. Many have been severe critics of the New Left movement, and not always sympathetic ones either. New Left historians, therefore, are perhaps better studied through their view of history rather than their call to politics.

For all their differences, New Left historians generally have been avowed presentists. They have searched for a vision of the past that, in the words of Warren Susman, would enable them "to remake the present and the future."[1] They write with the assumption that certain universal values that are basic to human life and proclaimed in the dominant ideologies of our time have been repressed, ignored, or distorted. The most important of these values, perhaps, places the well-being and creativity of the whole human community above all other concerns. But involvement in war and violence, the abuse of national resources, the impact of racism and social injustice impressed New Left historians with the stark disparity between America's realities and its professed ideals. Consequently, they have directed their energy to analyzing the specific kinds of economic mechanisms and political institutions which have discouraged the creation of a better America, and to investigating potential sources of social change. In their view, history becomes a key to reshaping programs and actions in the present.

The New Left historians' faith that history has consequences for the present has impinged on the professional problem of presentism in three ways. First, the revisionists have attempted to demonstrate that their own view of the purposes and ends of history (at least American history) can be traced back to leading Progressive historians. Second, they have argued that much of the historiography of the Old Left, and Progressives as well, provides a warning against presentism tied to a nation, political party, or sect. Finally, and most important, New Left historians have shown that the claims to objectivity or neutrality of leading mainstream historians since World War II are unfounded and dangerously deceptive, that in fact their writing has displayed a subtle and hidden presentism in support of the status quo.

New Left historians share with Progressive historians a common presentist view of the ends of history. In the *Politics of History*, the most recent and systematic attempt by a New Left historian to deal with the problem of presentism, Howard Zinn points out that James Harvey Robinson, Carl Becker, and Charles Beard confronted a generation of "scientific" historians who saw their work largely as an

[1] Warren I. Susman, "History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past," *American Quarterly*, XVI (Summer 1964), 261-62.

end in itself and sought detachment from the political problems of their day. By contrast, the Progressives openly avowed that what they chose to investigate in the past was determined by an interest in the life of the present and that the past must answer to a present interest. In his collection of essays on the *New History,* published in 1912, James Harvey Robinson said, "The present has hitherto been the willing victim of the past; the time has now come when it should turn on the past and exploit it." Carl Becker also challenged his colleagues to write history which confronted rather than avoided contemporary problems. Presentism, as defined by Becker, was "the imperative command that knowledge shall serve a purpose and learning be applied to the solution of the problems of human life."[2]

But of all the Progressive historians, New Left scholars look to Charles Beard as the model of an authentic presentist. In an essay written in 1959 for a volume on American radicals, William Appleman Williams, the most influential figure among the revisionists of the 1960s, noted that Beard always called himself a student of history, not a historian. The crucial difference was that the student of history regards his work as a means whereas the historian considers his work as an end in itself. Beard, Williams concluded, though by no means a socialist, studied "history to equip himself to comprehend and change his own society; to understand the direction and tempo of its movement and to pinpoint the places at which to apply his energy and influence in an effort to modify . . . its development."[3] Another leading New Left historian, Walter LaFeber, also acknowledges his heavy obligation to Charles Beard for "his belief that history can be used to affect social change."[4] In short, the driving force behind the works of Beard, Becker, Robinson, and other Progressive historians parallels that of the New Left historians of the 1960s, namely a conviction that "an intelligent reading of the past might make possible man's intelligent direction over the future course of history."[5]

New Left historians disagree with their early twentieth century predecessors over which view of the past is most useful. In the dualistic framework of the Progressives, America was pictured as a series of clashes between the "people"—farmers, workers, immigrants, blacks—and the "interests"—the commercial, industrial, and financial elites. Progressives interpreted the reform eras of the past as the

[2] Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History* (Boston, 1970), 19-20.

[3] William A. Williams, "Charles Austin Beard: The Intellectual as Tory-Radical," in Harvey Goldberg (ed.), *American Radicals* (New York, 1957), 303.

[4] Walter LaFeber, "War: Cold," in James V. Compton (ed.), *America and the Origins of the Cold War* (Boston, 1972), 180.

[5] Susman, "History and the American Intellectual," 256.

triumph of the good forces of the Jeffersonian tradition over the villainous Hamiltonian tradition. During the crisis years of the 1930s and 1940s this perspective led many Progressive intellectuals such as Van Wyck Brooks (who had coined the phrase "usable past" in 1918), Lewis Mumford, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Carl Sandburg, into a history of hero-worship or an uncritical rendering of the traditions of the people. The Progressives, who had earlier exploded the patriotic history of a George Bancroft, carried within their historical framework a profound nationalism of their own.[6] As Louis Hartz ably expressed it: "There was amid all the smoke and flame of Progressive historical scholarship a continuous and most complacent note of reassurance. A new Jefferson would arise as he had always arisen before. The 'reactionaries' would be laid low again."[7] With the important exception of Charles Beard's foreign policy writings, the once critical thrust of Progressive history became blunted by the effort of later Progressives to use the past to strengthen rather than to fundamentally change the present society. In the face of depression and war, fascism and communism, many Progressives were tempted into an easy but misguided belief that the New Deal was the only path to an America more humane and more just.

On the surface it seems rather puzzling that New Left historians would not turn to American Marxists for models of critical historiography and authentic presentism. Most revisionists still regard Marx as centrally relevant to the dialogue about America's past, present, and future. And many New Left historians were involved in Old Left politics in the late 1940s and 1950s. The problem has been that New Left historians found that American Marxist historiography provided no stable critique of American life or institutions, was ill-developed and overly formalistic, and under the conditions of the Popular Front, for example, led to a distorted presentism that paralleled that of Progressive intellectuals. Official Communist party historical views mirrored its overcommitment to Franklin Roosevelt after 1934 and its rigid devotion to Stalinist foreign policy. Party chief Earl Browder attempted to identify radical causes with an alleged tradition of Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln as "friends of the common man." Of course, he overlooked, to take just one example, Jefferson's key role in synthesizing the ideology of Negro inferiority in the *Notes on Virginia* or his defense of Southern sectional interests and by implication of slavery as well. Browder's exact influence on Marxist historiography is difficult to measure and, in all likelihood, academic

[6] Christopher Lasch, "On Richard Hofstadter," *New York Review of Books*, XX (March 8, 1973), 7.

[7] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955), 32.

historians friendly to Popular Front Communism were embarrassed by his excesses and those of the cruder Communist historians. Yet when such academic historians as Broadus Mitchell, Fulmer Mood, Curtis Nettels, Paul Birdsall and others attempted to develop in *Science & Society* a nondoctrinaire, Left historiography which acknowledged the insights of Progressive historians but sought to go beyond them, they were quickly attacked by Party ideologues. The chief polemicist in the *Communist* blasted the new journal late in 1937 for not taking responsibility for attacking the enemies of the Popular Front, including the "fascist-linked Trotskyites and Bukharinites," or not stressing the centrality of the American Communist party as the "guardian, guide, and rallying force of all the exploited and oppressed."[8] Against such demands from the party and the rising repression on campuses after the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, the academic Left in *Science & Society* withered away. By 1940 all of the non-Communist historians had been dropped from the journal's editorial board and its columns. As numerous New Left historians have critically observed, Left historiography flattened to the distorted presentism of the Communist world view.[9]

Knowing that commitments to the Communist party or the New Deal created powerful pressures to hide or distort historical events did not lead New Left historians of the 1960s to reject presentism. On the contrary, to them the far greater danger has been the dominant trend in the historical profession since World War II, namely the avoidance of a commitment to search for a past useful to the solution of vital contemporary problems. On one level such disengagement has led to "thousands of volumes of 'objective' trivia which has become the trademark of academic history."[10] On a more important level, the retreat to detached and pure history reflected a view of the past perhaps best stated by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in 1949.

> History is not a redeemer, promising to solve all human problems in time; nor is man capable of transcending the limitation of his being. Man generally is entangled in insoluble problems; history is a constant tragedy in which we are all involved, whose keynote is anxiety and frustration, not progress and fulfillment.[11]

[8] Paul Buhle, "American Marxist Historiography, 1900-1940," *Radical America*, IV (November 1970), 22-23.

[9] *Ibid.* See also Staughton Lynd, *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (New York, 1968), 7.

[10] Zinn, *The Politics of History*, 17.

[11] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Causes of the American Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review*, XVI (October 1949), 981.

Such a view of history is evident in Schlesinger's own superbly written *Age of Roosevelt,* as well as in the brilliant biographies of Allan Nevins and the literary masterpieces of Samuel Eliot Morison. But these leading historians, so hostile to the analyses of earlier Progressive history, offered no new theory of the operation of the historical process in their work. Rather they rejected theories and ideology and suggested that one must either surrender to the essential tragedy of the human condition or carry on precisely as in the past. The effect was to reinforce the current moral values and to bolster those with power in the existing social order. In the pithy phrase of Warren Susman, history became useful "only if it pointed up the mythic tragedy of our inability to solve our problems in any meaningful sense."[12]

In the context of the rediscovery of poverty in America, the civil rights explosion, and the burgeoning peace movement, New Left historians of the 1960s found such a view of the purposes of history lacking. They sought to challenge and transcend the limitations of two decades of debate between Progressive and consensus historians and show how postwar historiography had come to buttress an American society from which they were deeply alienated. In so doing the young radicals hoped, through their own reading of the past, to clarify the obstacles to radical social change in the present and future.

The immediate backdrop for the rise of New Left historians within the profession was the ascendancy of the consensus historians of the 1950s. Daniel Boorstin, Robert E. Brown, Louis Hartz, Clinton Rossiter, and others emphatically rejected the dualism of the Progressive historians. With the waning of New Deal reform zeal and the collapse of radicalism after the war, they saw in America's past a relatively homogeneous society in which social conflict was minimized. What differences there were took place within a single culture and stable institutions, and they were pragmatic rather than ideological. In fact it was the very rejection of theories and ideologies that was the peculiar and beneficent genius of the American experience.[13]

The work of the new radical historians of the 1960s impinged on this debate between consensus and progressive historians in two different and partly contradictory ways. Many were impressed by the successful demonstration that there was more consensus than conflict in the American past. But they were skeptical that this consensus was the virtuous source of stability described by their colleagues. Through dialogue with William A. Williams and under the influence of his *Contours of American History,* a group of historians connected with

[12] Susman, "History and the American Intellectual," 261-63.

[13] John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," *American Historical Review,* LXVII (April 1962), 613-15.

Studies on the Left attempted to develop a conceptual framework that would meet their criticisms of the consensus and progressive historians alike. For the history of twentieth century America, to take perhaps the most important example, the key concept was "corporate liberalism." In the works of Martin Sklar, James Weinstein, and Gabriel Kolko the development of our present political economy, dominated by giant multinational corporations, was traced back to a sophisticated group of Big Business reformers—Mark Hanna, Elbert Gary, Bernard Baruch, Andrew Carnegie—who sought to insure social peace, to further economic growth, stability, and efficiency, and in general to adapt liberal ideology to the needs of the new large corporations. From the Progressive period to the present, corporate liberals have increased business and government cooperation and regulation, social welfare legislation, and the integration of the labor movement into the corporate order.[14]

Thus, to the revisionist of the 1960s the liberal consensus existed and had no serious challengers from either the Right or the Left after World War I. But the consensus was mainly the reflection of the hegemony of an industrial and financial elite over the rest of society and not the unfolding of a natural, unique, or virtuous tradition exemplified in the ideas and programs of party leaders or political publicists. New Left historians broadened the focus of research and discussion of the liberal tradition to the "imperatives of modern capitalism." They brought to the foreground the attitudes of large corporate leaders, their links to domestic and foreign policies, and their ideological hegemony.

In developing the notion of "corporate liberalism" the New Left historians also challenged the assumptions of Progressive historiography. The leadership of the New Freedom, the New Deal, the Fair Deal, and the New Frontier was not anti-business nor did it represent a popular movement seeking to curb the one-sided power of corporate business, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the leading disciple of Progressive history after the war, argued. Rather, for New Left historians reform in this century has been a fundamentally conservative effort by the business aristocracy itself to develop the Federal government as a primary instrument for regulating and cartelizing business activities and creating an harmonious social order. The Interstate Commerce Commission, Pure Food and Drug Act, the Federal Trade Commission, the poverty programs, and so on were not simply victories of "the people" over the "interests," but had the active or tacit support of representatives of the large corporations. Thus, the

[14] James O'Brien *et al.*, "New Left Historians of the 1960s," *Radical America*, IV (November 1970), 82-83.

portrayal of liberal reform as anti-business only masked the manner in which large corporations exercised control over American politics.[15]

As Christopher Lasch has recently shown, the outline of the New Left's critique of both Progressive and consensus historians derives from the literary and cultural wars of the 1930s that took place around the *Partisan Review,* an independent socialist journal, and which so influenced and informed Richard Hofstadter's early work. In his brilliant *The American Political Tradition,* published in 1948, Hofstadter sought to deflate the hero-worshipping and nationalistic history of the Progressives by stressing the lack of any serious ideological conflict in American society—as when the Jacksonians became aspiring capitalists chafing under centralized restraint instead of sturdy sons of the soil confronting the money power. But as Hofstadter himself commented twenty years later, this assertion of consensus history in 1948 had its source in the Marxism of the 1930s. For Hofstadter, then a yearning radical, the consensus he found in the American past was not a healthy pragmatism but was intellectually bankrupt and opportunistic, reflecting the domination of American political thought by popular mythologies—the frontier, the sturdy yeoman, self help, God, and motherhood. While Hofstadter's ambiguous relations with the conservative historians of the 1950s made him a target of the revisionists, nevertheless his early insights into popular political culture were applied and extended in the 1960s into the arena of political economy.[16]

In their criticism of earlier historiography, New Left historians have also searched the American past for those who might have been outside the liberal consensus. Jesse Lemisch, Herbert Gutman, Stephen Thernstrom, Gerda Lerner, and Staughton Lynd, for example, have attempted to locate them in the inarticulate segments of society, heretofore ignored even by the Progressive historians. By use of statistics, artifacts, and oral interviews, as well as traditional documents, these historians have focused on how ordinary people lived and thought. Jesse Lemisch, a leading spokesman for this "history from the bottom up," has chosen to study seamen in the colonial and revolutionary periods as one inarticulate group which has not previously received attention on its own terms. He finds that seamen exhibited self-conscious expressions of their place in the community, had their own needs and values, and above all were not simply

[15] James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State: 1900-1918* (Boston, 1968), xii.

[16] Lasch, "On Richard Hofstadter," 8-9.

manipulated by educated men, Tory or Whig.[17] Staughton Lynd, in probably the most self-consciously presentist work being done, is compiling an oral history of rank-and-file CIO members of the late 1930s. By the oral history technique, as well as a revision of the standard labor histories, Lynd hopes to encourage a re-emergence of the spontaneous militancy of the rank-and-file workers which he argues was absorbed by conservative labor leaders like John L. Lewis and Communist labor bureaucrats.[18]

In countless articles, conferences, and book reviews, New Left history has been criticized not only on traditional scholarly grounds of logic, use of evidence, style, and so on, but for its presentist orientation. In a lengthy review of New Left historiography which appeared in the *American Historical Review* in 1967, Irwin Unger probably best articulated the objections of the majority of professional historians to their New Left colleagues. "The young radicals' efforts are generally governed not by the natural dialogue of the discipline," Unger complained, "but by the concerns of the outside cultural and political world." In its foreign policy writings, Unger argues, "the New Left is obviously projecting onto history its present cold war fears and frustrations." In short, Unger finds that the "most disturbing" aspect of New Left history is its "exaggerated present-mindedness. It suggests a contempt for pure history, history that has not enlisted in the good fight."[19]

The criticisms by Unger touch sensitive nerves within the ranks of the New Left. Most take strong exception to his views. But in the last few years Eugene Genovese and Christopher Lasch, two leading radical historians, have denounced their ideological colleagues in much the same terms as Unger. Genovese is troubled that Staughton Lynd's *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism,* for example, is "plainly meant to serve political ends" and that Lynd "denies the usefulness of history except for purposes of moral exhortation." Lasch, in a recent sweeping indictment of other New Left historians, charges them with committing the same presentist distortions they have condemned in the Old Left and Progressive historians of the 1930s. New Left historiography, states Lasch, is replete with "drastic simplification of

[17] Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly,* XXV (July 1968), 371-407.

[18] Staughton Lynd, "Personal Histories of the Early CIO," *Radical America,* V (May-June 1971) and "The Possibility of Radicalism in the Early 1930s: The Case of Steel," *Radical America,* VI (November-December 1972).

[19] Irwin Unger, "The 'New Left' and American History," *American Historical Review,* LXXII (July 1967), 1249, 1262.

[20] Eugene Genovese, "Abolitionist," *New York Review of Books,* XI (September 26, 1968), 72-74; and Lasch, "On Richard Hofstadter," 12.

issues, synthetic contrivance of political and intellectual traditions by reading present concerns back into the past, strident partisanship," and demands that history be subordinated to the "movement."[20]

The criticisms of Unger, Genovese, Lasch, and others are important and powerful, yet I believe essentially unfair. Unger's exhortation for a pure history and one defined by the natural dialogue of the discipline is unobtainable and undesirable. It ignores the point that there is no "natural dialogue" of the discipline, but only a dialogue imposed by the concerns of the outside world. The historian cannot avoid, and therefore it is better that he or she be openly committed to, some philosophy, some code of ethics, and some set of explicit values. "The writer who thinks he has no philosophy of history," Louis Gottschalk wrote over twenty years ago, "or who believes he is detached is self-deceived, and therefore more likely to deceive others than if he were deliberately lying." In reality the defense of pure or scientific history can be no more than the ability to prove single facts or sequence of facts. It tells us little about the correctness, utility, or relevance of the interpretation.[21]

Whatever the sources of Lasch's and Genovese's disillusionment with New Left historiography, their own selfconsciously presentist (and I would add brilliant) history makes one uncomfortable with their indiscriminate attacks on strident partisanship and the subordination of history to political ends. In the introduction to his *Agony of the American Left,* Lasch provides a view of the purposes and ends of history with which the entire New Left might agree. "Those who wish to change America," he wrote in 1966, "must now pick up the thread of radical thought and action where it was broken [in the early part of this century]. Many young people today see no use in the past, perhaps because the immediate past has had so little to teach them. . . . [True,] radicalism in the United States has no great triumphs to record; but the sooner we begin to understand why this should be so, the sooner we will be able to change it."[22]

Lasch did more than defend the search for a usable past in *Agony of the Left;* he reminded us of the double standard with which the charge of present-mindedness is usually made. In a brilliant essay on the Congress of Cultural Freedom, he showed how so many intellectuals in the 1950s, including historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., became ideologues of the status quo and instruments of the CIA—all in the name of value free investigations and intellectual purity. Jesse Lemisch, who was dismissed from the University of Chicago supposedly because his political concerns interfered with his scholarship, developed

[21] Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (New York, 1950), 9-10.

[22] Christopher Lasch, *Agony of the American Left* (New York, 1966), viii-ix.

Lasch's insights into a full-blown critique of politically neutral and objective historians. In a paper entitled, "Present-Mindedness Revisited: Anti-Radicalism as a Goal of American Historical Writing Since World War II," Lemisch persuasively demonstrated that such highly regarded historians as Allan Nevins, Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, and others were implicit Cold Warriors who saw history, in part, as a vehicle in the fight against radicalism at home and abroad.[23] Thus, Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America* stated that the "Bolshevik Revolution represents the most serious threat in modern history to the future of free institutions," while Daniel Boorstin in *The Americans; The Colonial Experience* found ample evidence in support of the Cold War thesis that Americans had a dangerous tradition of isolationism and wished to "retain a strong and often disorganizing hand on their nation's foreign policy."[24] In short, Lasch and Lemisch revealed the hidden and subtle present-mindedness of those who regard themselves as detached, disinterested, and objective historians. The pejorative charge of presentism, when applied to New Left historians, becomes a political weapon against views contrary to the ideological presuppositions of the mainstream historians.

For New Left historians the issue of pure and scientific history as against presentist history is no longer of much interest. It is past the time for an admission that history begins and ends with ideology. All historians, by their writing, have some effect on the present social situation whether they choose to be called presentists or not. Perhaps New Left historians have not avoided the pitfalls of writing their history through the prism of the "movement" instead of the fundamental human values which they say rule their lives and guide their consciences. Perhaps the New Left historians have not provided adequate models for understanding the horror of the Vietnam War, racism, domestic violence, and sundry economic ills which have so shaken the foundations of American liberal capitalism in the 1960s. But whether they are proven wrong, right, or somewhere in-between, they certainly have stirred up the historical profession to good purpose. New Left historians have, if nothing else, reaffirmed the faith of the Progressive historians that the study of history is a means through which the promise of the past can be transformed into a better present and a happier future.

[23] *Ibid.*, 63-114; and Ronald Radosh, "Annual Set-to: The Bare-Knuckled Historians," in Blanche W. Cook, Alice K. Harris, and Ronald Radosh (eds.), *Past Imperfect* (New York, 1973).

[24] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 302-303; and Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1968), 362.