

BOOKS & THE ARTS.

Who Decides What is History?

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If history is the interpreting of the past, then everyone who has a hand in making the past or shaping its interpretations decides what history is. Most people influence history by generating primary sources. They give their ages and incomes to the census taker, correspond with their creditors, write in their diaries and make their wills. Heirs decide what history is when they deposit the letters of a Confederate great-aunt in the state archives (perhaps ignoring the scrapbook of her half-brother, the barber). Historians read in the archives and fashion their interpretations of the past.

Then comes the winnowing process of publication, reception and incorporation. Editors decide which manuscripts to publish; reviewers accept this book or that and recommend it to readers; readers favor some interpretations over others; then, textbook writers incorporate these acceptable interpretations into their syntheses, which may or may not be adopted by school boards. The steps are many and varied. Without belittling any part of the complicated process of deciding what history is, I'm going to look closely at the part that follows upon publication and begin with the two groups of people Herbert Gutman mentioned in *The Nation* last November 21: historians and ordinary readers.

Gutman asked, "Whatever happened to history?" and he noted that historians and nonhistorians have very different conceptions of American history. Characterizing the failure of recent historical scholarship to affect the way ordinary citizens view American history, Gutman observed, "It was as if the American history written in the 1960s and 1970s had been penned in a foreign language and had probed the national experiences of Albania, New Zealand and Zambia."

While historians have come to see a plural of American pasts that include

the separate histories of blacks, workers and women, nonhistorians seem still to carry around a chronicle of campaigns and administrations of great white men. This chronicle is part of the older synthesis traditionally taught in schools—a synthesis which stresses consensus and assimilation, notions by now discredited among professional historians. But textbooks haven't caught up with the new historical writing. And textbooks teach most Americans what they know and believe about American history. For most nonhistorians, textbooks decide what history is and is not.

At the same time that textbooks decide what history is, they also provide a powerful version of the collective past and usually end by validating the present. Many historians would like textbook history to reflect the varied experiences of different races, classes and sexes in America, but the difficulty of doing so is as much ideological and economic as it is historiographical. The more textbooks speak of blacks, the more likely they are to mention the great American failing, racism. The more they mention failings, the less attractive they are to school boards. What publisher would commission a textbook that no school board would buy? If new historical interpretations, no matter how accurate, are to change how large numbers of Americans think about their history, they must gain acceptance and incorporation.

Although what I'm about to say also applies, to some extent, to both women's history and labor history, I am going to concentrate on the issue of Afro-American history.

The field of Afro-American history has grown at a tremendous rate in the last two decades, and the writing has altered the way most professional historians think about American history. Blacks are no longer the invisible people of American history, and even white undergraduates are likely by now to have heard the name of Frederick Douglass.

Yet most nonhistorians still have little idea of what blacks thought in the past or that they thought at all. Knowing nothing, for instance, of the debate that took place among free blacks in the 1850s about appropriate responses to slavery and their own deteriorating situation, white nonhistorians are likely

to assume that it never took place. In fact, the questions that these discussions posed reappeared later in the nineteenth century and again in the early twentieth. The issues are fundamental to Afro-American political thought. In its simplest terms, the 1850s debate matched Frederick Douglass against Martin Delany. Douglass leaned toward forging coalitions with well-meaning yet prejudiced whites. Delany favored self-reliant action, even though blacks were terribly poor. He explored the possibility of voluntary expatriation, a solution to the race problem that has had several vagues despite its impracticality.

In *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), a recent book on the history of Afro-Americans, Vincent Harding rightfully gives a good deal of attention to this debate. His treatment of both positions is accurate and sensitive. By probing the debate in depth, Harding makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of Afro-American intellectual history and politics. On this issue and throughout this book, Harding puts black people at the center of his attention and discusses their concerns fairly and completely. It is this focusing squarely on blacks, I suspect, that has thrown white readers and reviewers off balance.

Harding's narrative begins in Africa, with a second-person-plural evocation of the African homeland, "where the verdant forests and tropical bush gave way gradually to the sandy stretches of the Guinea coast." Chapter names resonate with mythic phrases: "Beyond the North Star," "On Jordan's Stormy Banks," and they divide according to a black-centered periodization. Ending on a hopeful note in 1865, the last chapter closes with newly free blacks thanking the God "who had made it possible for them, and all who lived before them, to come so far and stand so firm in the deep red flooding of Jordan."

Despite its impeccable scholarship, *There Is a River* has failed to gain approval in important reviews. Books win acceptance in a variety of ways, but easily the most visible of these is by means of positive and well-placed reviews. The reviewers are usually senior historians at major universities whose views on the past are accepted by large numbers of readers and incorporated into textbooks. These histo-

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rians enjoy access to the influential book pages such as *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New York Review of Books*. (In the case of Harding's book, however, *NYRB* is not a good example, for few reviews of books about blacks and no black historians—not even the few dazzling exceptions who are over 50, productive and otherwise suited to grace its pages—ever appear there.) In the scholarly journals where younger historians have more of a say, black historians will doubtless review *There Is a River*. But the big time remains beyond the reach of most black historians, if only because of their relative youth.

This means that the important early reviewers of *There Is a River* have not been black, and they have found the book hard to take. Its celebratory tone is not to their taste, and they dislike what they call its lack of objectivity. They fault it for down-playing differences among blacks, for favoring racial separation and for relegating whites to a shadowy backdrop. They see the book as a call to arms and its author as a relic of the 1960s. They want Harding to speak less about widespread resistance among blacks and more about why there were so few slave revolts in the antebellum South. Their criticisms point not only to their troubles with this particular book but to a basic problem in black history: black and white historians sometimes differ as to what is important.

Here I wish my vocabulary contained more nuanced terms to describe shades of opinion, for "black" and "white" are far too simplistic to be accurate. Not all blacks, most notably the neoconservatives, share the orientation that I'm calling "black." And not all whites hold what I'm calling "white" views; Lawrence Levine and Herbert Gutman, for instance, are able to think about history in what I'd call "black" ways. With that caveat, I'm going to say that black historians and white historians are receiving *There Is a River* in different ways, and that these differences are instructive.

The black historians I have spoken with seem fairly comfortable with Harding's interpretation. They accept his central metaphor, the river of struggle that unites all black Americans and makes them a people. They agree that blacks generally resisted rather than acquiesced in slavery and inferiority. Black historians quibble little with Harding's virtual identification of the black

experience with the black struggle or with his use of the singular in both phrases. Pleased with Harding's preoccupation with blacks, they seem not to mind the absence of detailed discussions of contemporary whites in his book. They have reservations about the book's heroic tone, but those are reservations, not fundamental objections. By and large they are pleased with the book because it speaks of what blacks were doing and saying instead of picking away at supposed shortcomings and deviations.

For the last several years, black scholars, and not just historians, have felt that whites tend to concentrate on three aspects of black life: inferiority, deviance and dependence on whites. Whether or not this is a fair charge to level at historians, it is most certainly an accurate reading of the way blacks appear in American history as most nonhistorians know it, and Harding's white reviewers definitely seem to share such estimations about black people. They are uncomfortable with Harding's book because his interpretation of the river of black struggle runs counter to what they and most Americans take for granted about race.

That is why I doubt that Harding's explanation of black life will gain currency or be incorporated into textbooks. Even if Harding's interpretation were to appear miraculously overnight in textbooks, school boards steeped in traditional assumptions about blacks would reject the texts. If the great majority decides what history is, then *There Is a River* is not history, at least not in the short run.

But the state of race relations and the writing of textbooks are not static, or *There Is a River* would be history only for black readers and the saving remnant of whites. Things do change and so do textbooks. Already, recent efforts such as *A People and a Nation** have incorporated new historical writing, including Afro-American history (but not yet Vincent Harding). If such textbooks reach wide audiences, the present generation of high school students and undergraduates may well take the next step and decide that history includes Harding's autonomous and resisting black people. But as much as I would like white assumptions about race to more nearly ap-

* *A People and a Nation*, Houghton Mifflin, 1982, edited by Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson and William M. Tuttle Jr.

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proximate blacks', I'm afraid that the present political climate tends in the opposite direction. Historians and nonhistorians are likely to continue to decide that history is vastly different things, at least until the political mood changes and pluralism comes back into favor. □
