

A radical critique of academia

Notes by Chris Wright

Reading Jesse Lemisch's little book *On Active Service in War and Peace: Politics and Ideology in the American Historical Profession*, presented as an essay at the lively 1969 convention of the American Historical Association but published later (by an obscure left press because it wasn't mainstream enough to make it into establishment journals). In his introduction, Thomas Schofield explains that in 1969 Lemisch was "a historian who had been dismissed from the University of Chicago because 'his political concerns interfered with his scholarship.'" In what may [have been] the most telling and fundamental critique presented before the AHA he proposed that the supposedly unpolitical stars of the profession (Allan Nevins, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Samuel Eliot Morison, Oscar Handlin, Daniel Boorstin and others) were implicit cold warriors who sought to use history as a vehicle in the fight against communism. Lemisch's paper....argued persuasively that what so many object to is not that a scholar should take a political position but that he should hold views contrary to establishment shibboleths." Duh. To argue that mainstream scholarship is "free from bias" is and was so wildly naïve as to be laughable. The guardians of every mainstream institution in history have been certain they're right and "unbiased"; it's one of the most predictable things in human existence, and one of the most ridiculous. *Everything*—or *nearly everything*—is political and "biased"; there are political and social relations, and political and social value-judgments, implicit in every (or nearly every) act. When you ignore a homeless person on the street, that's implicitly a political act. When you write scholarship that is sympathetic toward the powerful and ignores the powerless, that's political. When you spend your evening drinking with your friends rather than volunteering at a shelter for battered women, that's political. The way a man treats his wife is political, as is the way she treats him. Society is saturated with power relations; there is no escaping them. And such relations are always at least indirectly political.

So it is impossible to be unbiased or unpolitical. It's possible, though, to be *less* "biased," *more* objective, namely by being more "radical." As long as you accept such broad values as individual self-determination, democracy, the non-killing of innocents, and so forth, a consideration of facts in the light of these values will lead you to what are called "radical left" positions.

Lemisch's writing is, at times, delightfully inflammatory. No compromising with complacent liberalism.

Discussing the anti-radical ideology of respectable "politically neutral" liberal historians and social scientists such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Daniel Bell, Lemisch easily refutes Bell's 1960 "end of ideology" thesis by pointing out that, umm, the 1960s weren't very "un-ideological." In fact, Bell's little hypothesis, like Francis Fukuyama's little "end of history" hypothesis thirty years later, was nothing but the ideology of a few self-satisfied technocratic circles in the American elite at a specific point in time.

More interestingly, Lemisch puts short work to the 1950s' "Liberal Consensus" idea that McCarthyism was the product of an earlier populist tradition (the implication of which claim is that populism, hence the "vulgar mass," is irrational, paranoid, undemocratic, because McCarthyism was). In fact, so-called "McCarthyism" obviously began several years before the rise of McCarthy, in the late 1940s, with all the Truman-imposed loyalty oaths and the purging of the labor movement and all that rabid anti-radical bullshit. In other words, it was the elite that was paranoid, undemocratic, and irrational, not the people. But even regarding McCarthy himself, the smug liberal hypothesis is false:

[In *The Intellectuals and McCarthy*, Paul Rogin] has tested the pluralists' contention that there was continuity between McCarthy and earlier agrarian radicalism [e.g., that of the 1890s] and found it invalid. Testing the contention in the Senator's home state, Wisconsin, Rogin finds entirely different social bases for McCarthy and [Progressive Senator Robert] LaFollette. McCarthy rose on a conservative constituency, the traditional source of Republican strength. Progressivism in Wisconsin "mobilized poor Scandinavian farmers against the richer areas of the state"; McCarthy "rose to power with the votes of the richer German inhabitants of the farms and small cities in southern and eastern Wisconsin...." Those counties which had been Progressive "tended to oppose McCarthy more than other counties in the state."McCarthy did not represent any "new" American right—just the "old one with new enthusiasm and new power."

In Rogin's analysis, McCarthy emerged from conservative rural politics—which is far from mass politics, but rather the politics of local elites. Thus, for instance, Leslie Fiedler's contention that McCarthy's support by small-town

newspapers was an indication that McCarthyism was another movement toward “direct democracy,” continuous with Populism, is practically reversed when examined more carefully. Small-town newspapers in fact had an enduring record of opposition to agrarian radicalism; such newspapers are generally the voice of conservative local business interests, and it was these small-town business people who formed a part of McCarthy’s base. Thus, Rogin notes, McCarthyism was a movement by a “conservative elite—from precinct workers to national politicians....” It “flourished within the normal workings of American politics, not radically outside of them” and was “sustained not by a revolt of the masses so much as by the actions and inactions of various elites.”

In short, McCarthyism was not so much populist as “faux populist”—if even that. “McCarthy,” says Lemisch, “is evidence for the evils of too little democracy, not too much.” It’s the same with the Tea Party movement nowadays. And even with the old racist George Wallace, to an extent. “Rogin has found the early support for George Wallace stronger among the middle and upper class than among the working class. ‘Is “middle-class authoritarianism” a more fruitful concept than working-class authoritarianism?’ he asks.” Public attitudes on the Vietnam War were another example of how the masses are often less conservative than the elite.

In fact, Lemisch argues convincingly that postwar liberal pluralism (“legitimate” groups competing against each other in the political arena, “countervailing powers” balancing each other) was a kind of Burkean conservatism transplanted to modern conditions. Many Consensus historians and social scientists admired Edmund Burke and disdained Thomas Paine and the French Revolution, indeed all radicals and even the abolitionists, as having fallen victim to the naïve and dangerous faith that men could make their own history, could remake society in the light of reason and reject old traditions. Like Burke, these postwar liberals found “wisdom” in traditions and institutions, and insisted that the essential flaws of “human nature” would always vitiate radicalism. Their polemic, of course, which shaped their understanding of history, was against Communism, but they broadened it to apply to all radicals of the past and present, to everyone who was discontented with mere technocratic management of society. Schlesinger Jr. and his ilk were basically anti-democrats who, like Burke—as well as nearly all of America’s founding fathers, and nearly all intellectuals and elites in history—radically distrusted the people. But because they

lived in a society that exalted democracy, they had to pay lip-service to it while rejecting its substance. What they really valued were “stability and equilibrium.” For these people, says Lemisch, “stability and equilibrium were the goals of society, and since the society called itself democratic, then stability and equilibrium must *be* democracy.”¹

Lemisch savages all these smug, lazy liberals, exposing their ideas as establishmentarian tripe. It’s fun reading.

In spite of themselves, they indirectly grasped a truth: national politics in the U.S. has, with rare exceptions, always been more or less a matter of “consensus.” The U.S. has been basically a one-party state for a long time. Arguably since the beginning. As Chomsky says, variation and disagreement are permitted within fairly rigidly defined boundaries, which have always excluded the radical left. These facts result from many circumstances, including the electoral system and the elitist framework of the Constitution.

Later in the essay he turns his attention from ideas to actions, specifically actions taken by all the liberal historians and social scientists in the heady days of 1968 and 1969. The revelations aren’t surprising, but they expose these intellectuals as contemptible hypocrites. Celebrating democracy and freedom while justifying and participating in violent repression against students and radical professors, who were “threatening the foundations of democratic order.” Hofstadter, Handlin, Boorstin, Bernard Bailyn, Schlesinger Jr., Seymour Martin Lipset, Bell, Leuchtenburg, Eric Hoffer, Nathan Glazer, Lewis Feuer, Bruno Bettelheim, and many other big names: conservative establishmentarians obsessed with relatively small disruptions of their ordered little worlds at the same time that bombs and napalm were killing and mutilating millions in Indochina. *That* was not wrong (at worst “imprudent”); *student dissent*, on the other hand, was morally horrifying, the very death-knell of civilization, a resurgence of something like Nazism.

One of the less egregious examples is Schlesinger writing in 1969 on police violence against Harvard students. While “invoking the police may on occasion be necessary to preserve academic freedom,” at Harvard it was wrong. Or, to quote Lemisch’s paraphrasing of Schlesinger, it was “not precisely wrong, but rather, imprudent; it was not the fact of ‘cops clubbing Harvard and Radcliffe students’ that offended him [Schlesinger] but the ‘spectacle’ of it, which ‘obliged the S.D.S. and illustrated its

¹ As a result, student dissenters in the 1960s were denounced—paradoxically—as “undemocratic,” in that they upset stability and equilibrium.

favorite thesis of the hidden violence of American society.'" And we all know how absurd that thesis is. It would be ridiculous to deny that America is a fundamentally peaceful place. (Peaceful for Harvard professors, at least.)

—Excellent, impassioned essay. Well done, Jesse. *Écrasez l'infâme!*