

# *America's Revolutionary Heritage*

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## INTRODUCTION

Two hundred years ago the American colonists waged a War of Independence against British tyranny and economic domination—the first victorious national liberation struggle of modern times. Today, when many Americans are reexamining our revolutionary heritage, the publication of this new edition is especially timely and appropriate.

The essays on various aspects of American history collected in this volume appeared over a span of forty years in the *International Socialist Review* and its predecessors, *The New International* and *Fourth International*. They were prompted by special occasions or written in response to particular problems. Yet all have been motivated by a comprehensive conception of the rise of American civilization that differs in essentials from the views taught in the schools and universities and accepted as gospel by most scholars and students.

### **Is there a pattern in American history?**

The most popular nineteenth-century historians of the United States, such as George Bancroft and John Fiske, had no doubts about the significance of our history. They were convinced, along with most of their contemporaries, that the ascendancy of the Yankee republic exhibited, above all, the triumph of the spirit of liberty and the institutions of democracy peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon genius—achievements that were god-guided and god-given.

The liberal scholars of our own day are far less certain than the older patriotic nationalist historians that any definite or dominant pattern can be discerned in the era extending from the European discovery of the New World to the revelation that capitalist America had a special mission to defend "freedom" against the aggressions of communist totalitarianism.

In *America as a Civilization* Max Lerner, the New York Post syndicated columnist who teaches at Brandeis University, lists twenty efforts by other authors to capture the uniqueness of the American experience. One picks out the lack of a feudal past, another the refusal to accept authority, a third the multiplicity of ethnic groups, and so on. None of their answers satisfy him. What comes forth when he seeks an explanation of his own?

Let another authority, Daniel Bell, former *Fortune* editor and now professor of sociology at Harvard, tell us. In a review reprinted in *The End of Ideology* he points out that Lerner's treatment of American civilization lacks any coherence or unifying vision. Bell writes: In the end, like a mountain climber unable to gain a foothold on the slippery rock face, he suddenly lets go, and says: "There is no single talisman to the secret of American civilization."

Bell himself does not intend to remedy the deficiency he accurately spots in Lerner. Instead he agrees that it is fruitless to try to find any underlying organizing principle in the development of our nation. "To ask, What is the Secret of America? is to pose a metaphysical question whose purpose is either ideological or mythopoetic."

According to him, scholars can determine why and how certain particular "configurations of character and institutions have emerged in the United States." That is all. They cannot go beyond that point. There is no explanation available for the general course of American history.

This is like saying: it is possible to chart the lifeline of a specific corporation, like General Motors, but not the fundamental tendency toward the dominance of monopolies in our economy or the role such a tendency plays in the development of American and world capitalism in our

century. Such a patchwork procedure deprives historical knowledge of any internal causation, regular sequence, and consistency.

In 1963 Oscar Handlin published *The Americans: A New History of the People of the United States*. In its last section the Harvard professor asked what was the sum and substance of his review of 355 years of American life. He concluded that experts like himself can only tell what happened but cannot explain it. Let us listen to his musings:

. . . at the typing machine, a man wonders: meaning? How fond his predecessors were of geometric analogies—progress, a straight line up; decay, a straight line down; a spiral upward; a wavy, wavy cycle. How fond they were of purpose—the hand of God, the Over-soul, the evolutionary first cause, the dialectic of the class struggle. Perhaps.

It is not his task to subject the complex drama the words tap out to any such enfolding figures. If he can explain *how*, let others believe each their own why. There is meaning enough in the story itself.

Such a purely descriptive way of writing history is as unsatisfying and unscientific as its agnostic conclusion. All genuine science, including the science of history, seeks to find out not only the how but the why, the causes of what happened. Empiricism, pragmatism, positivism can rest content with a surface description of the course of development. But a straight narration of events is only the first step in scientific inquiry about the historical process, not its end or major purpose. The next stage is to ascertain why, under the given circumstances, things turned out as they did and not otherwise.

A scientific method ought to distinguish the mainstream of progress from the minor eddies and crosscurrents in the flux of American events. This may not have been what its participants or its chief protagonists thought it was at the time they helped make that history. They may well have been mistaken about the real nature and direction of their collective efforts, however much of the truth they grasped. But a historical method which probes the dynamics of the whole process should be able to disclose the essential unity of the constituent stages which resulted in its present state and will shape the next one.

However, the wisdom of Brandeis, Columbia, and Harvard as conveyed by these learned liberals coincides in a common skepticism that admits no master key to unlock the secrets of our development as a nation.

Is the situation really so hopeless? These Marxist essays on American history attempt to show that meaningful insights into the motive forces of our national life—its main line of march and eventual outcome—are much more possible than these skeptics make out. It is possible to make sense out of the overall course of American history and assess its fundamental meaning. The mysteries that so baffle the liberal schools of historians and sociologists can be deciphered with the aid of a correct method of investigation: the theory of historical materialism which guided the production of these articles.

### **American history in world history**

American history has first of all to be approached as part of something much greater than itself. It is both a subordinate segment and a continuing product of world history. In the evolution of its social organization, humanity has ascended by successive steps from savagery through barbarism to civilization. Civilization itself, which originated in the Middle East, is less than ten thousand years old. During that time humanity has gone through various forms of society ranging from slavery to modern capitalism. Having reached its peak, this final embodiment of

class society is cracking up and beginning to be supplanted by the rudiments of a higher order, the world system of socialism.

This, in brief, has been the main route of the human race as it has climbed from animality to the atomic age. Where do the American people fit into this world-historical procession, what place does our national history occupy in this evolutionary order?

From this universal standpoint the history of humanity in North America breaks into two major divisions marked by qualitatively different types of social structure. Humanity has lived in the Eastern Hemisphere for over a million years; the Americas have been inhabited for only about thirty thousand years. The first comers migrated from Siberia over the Bering Strait, which was then connected with the Alaskan mainland. Their descendants thereafter fanned out slowly, down to the tip of South America and over to the Atlantic Coast. This epoch of tribal life, when the Indians had exclusive possession of the Americas, evolved apart from the Old World. By their own efforts the aborigines attained the heights of the Mayan, Toltec, Aztec, and Inca cultures. However, despite many remarkable achievements, they did not pass beyond the Stone Age or quite reach the threshold of a well-defined class society, whatever aristocratic features they possessed.

Civilization, private property, and other institutions and customs of a highly advanced class-divided system were first brought to America through the West Europeans who landed here from the sixteenth century on. Modern American history opens at this juncture. The coming of the white invaders marked a decisive sociological turn because they brought something basically novel with them. Along with many things belonging to the more ancient past, they imported a particular mode of civilized life and culture, the highest then attained. This was the capitalist type of social relation. Primitive collectivism was succeeded by the bourgeois individualism which has been gathering strength in North America for the past five hundred years.

### **American and world capitalism**

The self-contained, purely internal evolution of America was ended once it was drawn into the mainstream of civilization. Thenceforth the key to American history is to be found in the impact and influence of events in the maritime countries of Western Europe upon this hemisphere, in the interactions and relations of the Old World and the New. The settlement of North America was occasioned by the unsettlement of Europe, which was undergoing what was the most profound social transformation before the anti-capitalist upheavals of our own century. This was the overcoming of feudalism by the forces of the bourgeois order.

The economic processes which brought about this revolution began in the field of exchange and subsequently passed over into the domain of production. The creation and extension of a world market based upon an international division of labor for the first time supplied the impetus and incentives for an unprecedented growth of commerce along capitalist lines. The leading discoverers, explorers, and settlers of Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Dutch, and English origin sailed across the Atlantic for very material, even transparently mercenary, motives. They aimed to grab wealth by opening new trade routes; plundering the natives of precious metals; selling and exploiting slave and indentured labor; growing cheap crops of staples like sugar, tobacco, and indigo for the world market; and planting colonies to produce other articles of value for the European economy (furs, hides, lumber, fish, etc.). The coastal colonies were outposts of business enterprise, branches of the budding, bustling commercial capitalism which flourished under monarchical regimes as in France, or under republican auspices as in Holland and Cromwellian England.

This fact holds the chief clue to American history after 1492. Its quintessence consists in the introduction, establishment, and expansion of capitalist relations on American soil. The three

million Europeans and Africans who inhabited the colonies at the time of the First Revolution had come for a variety of reasons: the Blacks as slaves, the white indentured servants under direct economic compulsion, the Puritans and others for religious motives, and many of the pioneer immigrants to improve their living conditions and prospects. Irrespective of their motivations or compulsions, they all had to fit into a social structure increasingly shaped by private property, profiteering, and a network of bourgeois institutions.

The ordinary citizen has a quite different picture of America's rise to eminence. The popular image of our national greatness is patterned after Horatio Alger's success stories. Sturdy pioneers, rugged individualists on the frontier, shook off foreign influences, giving birth to an unalloyed American spirit, going forward to conquer a continent and making the most spectacular progress of all time. This oversimplified version has bits of fact in it. But it leaves out the most important of all the factors which directed and determined the course of American civilization.

That factor is the special relation the North Americans have had with the development of the rest of the world capitalist system. This is, indeed, the prime peculiarity of our national history.

The history of the American people has above all recorded the formation and the transformation through successive stages of its bourgeois society, not simply within the changing national boundaries but on the world arena. This distinguishes our history from that of all the great nations of Europe and Asia. England, France, Russia, Germany, Japan, and China all had long precapitalist pasts and sturdy feudal institutions which have powerfully marked their social evolution to this day. Unlike them, North American civilization has from its beginnings been raised upon the commercial, financial, industrial and property relations characteristic of the bourgeois way of life and labor.

Since capitalism is international by its very nature, it is impossible to understand the central developments in any period of American history since the end of the sixteenth century without considering its connections with what was happening in the whole of the capitalist system at that juncture. This is the central thesis of the article entitled: "Historians and the Belated Rise of American Imperialism."

The New World was opened up by the Old as part of its leap from feudalism to capitalism, and the North American colonies were the transatlantic offspring of the European money-makers. As the Scottish historian Edmund Wright has written in his study of colonial America entitled *Fabric of Freedom*: "The colonies had been founded expressly for profit, either for those who settled the land, for the proprietor to whom a charter was granted, or for the company under whose direction the whole venture was risked." (p. 34.)

The main paths of colonial history from the first overseas expeditions to the last musket fired at Yorktown were marked out by the impulses and requirements emanating from the capitalist world market headquartered in Western Europe. Independence did not remove the dependence of the American economy upon Europe. This was not fully overcome until the war of 1914-18, when the relations between the Old World and the New underwent a sharp reversal.

### **The uprooting of precapitalist forces**

While capitalist conditions, both international and national, have been paramount, other, older kinds of social formations have also participated in the making of American history. But their roles were not decisive in shaping its main direction and destination. None of the precapitalist forces could maintain predominance on this continent. All were subordinated by the operations of bourgeois society and finally subjugated and eliminated by its agents.

The three most important powers based on precapitalist forms of labor were the Indian tribes, the semifeudal proprietors, and the slaveholding planters. All contributed to the building of the

bourgeois order in its formative stages: the Indians through the fur trade; the landed proprietors by importing capital, labor, tools, and provisions into the new settlements; the planters through the crops they grew and the wilderness areas their forced laborers cleared and cultivated. But, after performing useful services, they were themselves cleared away as they became obstacles to the further expansion of bourgeois property, production, and power.

The fate of the Indians, pushed back and slaughtered over four centuries, is well known. As the articles on the destruction of Indian tribalism aim to prove, this war to the knife was not simply a racial conflict between white and red as it is usually depicted. It was a clash between two antagonistic and irreconcilable types of socioeconomic organization: one rooted in Stone Age hunting, food gathering, and gardening, marked by collective customs; the other based upon private property and the profiteering individualism of an aggressive bourgeoisie, from rich merchants to small farmers.

The next group to collide with the native bourgeois forces was the landed proprietors and the crown retinue, which administered the colonies largely for the benefit of the ten thousand merchants, manufacturers, and landlords ruling Britain. These semifeudal and foreign oppressors and exploiters were driven out by the War of Independence. This First American Revolution culminated in a partial and temporary victory for the northern moneyed interests, which had to share supreme power in the young republic with the southern planters.

Then the rise of the Cotton Kingdom imparted an ironic twist to our national development. This agricultural anachronism based on slave labor was the product of two interlinked innovations: the invention of the cotton gin, and the industrial revolution of the steam engine and the factory. The insatiable demands of England and New England's textile manufacturers for cotton lifted the southern slaveholders to the heights. They dominated this country for decades, just as the monopolists do today.

In order to dislodge these rivals from sovereignty and consummate their conquest of power, the northern industrial interests had to wait until the further development of American and world capitalism created a regroupment of social forces strong and resolute enough to overwhelm the slaveholders. This was brought into being by the middle of the nineteenth century. If the first phase of the industrial revolution (centered in England) exalted the cotton planters, its second phase (centered in the United States) led to their downfall, dispossession, and destruction at the hands of the newly enriched captains of industry and their allies, the small farmers of the Northwest, the insurgent slaves, and the urban wageworkers.

The Civil War was the Second American Revolution, or more precisely the concluding stage of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in this country. This irrepressible conflict between the slave-owners and the northern industrialists was the last of the death grapples for supremacy between the precapitalist and the procapitalist elements, which cleared the ground for the fullest and freest expansion of capitalist enterprise. Viewed in this light, the first 350 years of American history provided a battleground from which the masters of capital emerged in secure possession of the major sources of wealth and means of power. When more primitive and less productive systems of labor stood in the way of oncoming capitalism, they were ultimately overcome and eradicated, no matter how powerful they appeared at any given time, no matter how hard they fought to survive or what alliances they had. The Indians were wiped out; the British overlords and their feudal dependents were expelled; the insurrectionary slaveholders were "gone with the wind" of the Civil War.

## **The supremacy of big business**

American history demonstrates that the capitalists of the United States have not been averse to all revolutions but only to those which bring them no benefit. In past centuries they got rid of whatever antagonists blocked their advancement and rulership by the most forceful means.

Having crushed the Confederacy on the battlefield, abolished four billion dollars' worth of property in slaves, and shattered the political hegemony of the planters, the northern captains of industry and finance proceeded to fortify their economic, political, and cultural control. From the end of Reconstruction to the First World War, they made the most of their unexampled opportunities. The Robber Barons feasted at what Vernon Parrington called "The Great Barbecue" as the trusts came to dominate the economy. The reconstituted two-party system served big business well. So did the Supreme Court, which ruled in 1886 that the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution protected corporate as well as civil rights. (In practice, it shielded the first much better than the second.)

Time and again the hosts of the Populist and Progressive crusades endeavored to resist the piracies of the plutocrats and reverse the concentration of power in their hands. Like the fabled Irish warriors, "they went forth to battle but always fell." Although the antimonopolist reformers did succeed in gaining some minor concessions, they proved incapable of dislodging big money from its dominion. The futility of their efforts to curb the monopolists was best exemplified by what happened in the oil industry. In 1909 the federal government ordered the Standard Oil octopus severed into a number of parts. But as soon as it was dismembered, it was recombined behind the scenes by the Rockefeller banking interests.

Nowadays the oil magnates exert greater influence on national and international affairs than ever before. They have demonstrated their unchecked power by manufacturing a worldwide energy crisis, which succeeded in boosting profits in the oil industry to record heights. Professor Robert Engler, in his study *The Politics of Oil*, maintains that the oil industry in its dependence on huge financial benefits from the government, its privileged tax position, and its influence on domestic and foreign politics "virtually has organized a government within a government—an entity with tremendous power and insufficient responsibility." Together with the "military-industrial complex" the oil magnates function as prime decision-makers on the commanding heights of the United States.

Capitalist competition, resulting in the takeover of smaller enterprises by larger concerns, fosters the inevitable growth of monopoly and the increasing concentration of the ownership and power of the American ruling class, which with each passing year becomes smaller, more entrenched, more wealthy, and more dominant in the economy and the state apparatus. This has been well documented by Morton Mintz and Jerry Cohen in *America, Inc.* (New York: Dell, 1971): In 1968 the one hundred largest corporations had a greater share of manufacturing assets than the two hundred largest had in 1950, and the two hundred largest in 1968 controlled a share equal to that held by the thousand largest in 1941?" (p. 61.) In 1969, they also report, the top two hundred manufacturing corporations controlled two-thirds of all assets held by corporate manufacturers. This gigantic concentration of power is further consolidated through the control exercised by banks at the pinnacle of the economic pyramid.

## **Guidelines for analyzing America's evolution**

No set of summary assertions can encompass the diversity, deviations, and complexities of five hundred years in the life of a colossal nation like the United States. Nevertheless, the principal landmarks and turning points in the road traveled by the American people can be mapped. The essential can be separated from the incidental, the durable from the episodic and ephemeral, the preponderant from the less effective factors in the making of events.

The following propositions can be useful guidelines for analyzing American history to date; they can also serve as guideposts to the next stage of our national progress.

1. From the standpoint of universal human development, American history is divided into two opposing parts. These are the thirty thousand years of preclass social life based upon Indian tribal collectivism, and the five hundred years of class society ushered in by the Europeans.

2. American civilization is above all the product of the growth of the bourgeois system both on an international and on a national scale.

3. The process of building capitalism on this continent has passed through three main phases, each bound up with a corresponding stage of world economic development from commercial through industrial to monopolist capitalism. The colonial period from 1492 to 1789 witnessed the origin and formation of its social structure and political superstructure; the decades between the beginning of the Republic and the end of the Civil War saw the strengthening of industrial capitalism and its victory over the slave power; the century since has seen the supremacy of big business and high finance.

4. All the precapitalist forms and forces—the Indians, the landed proprietors, and the slaveholders—were caught up, swept along, and ultimately submerged by the omnipotent trend toward the construction and consolidation of the most highly developed of all national capitalisms.

5. The struggles of these hostile social formations supplied the main internal driving forces for forward movement in the first two stages of American civilization. The contests for supremacy between the precapitalist and procapitalist forces culminated in two great social and political revolutions, which represented the high points in the activity of the bourgeois-democratic elements in our national life.

6. In the past, capitalism has made immense contributions to human advancement and brought many benefits to the American people. But American civilization is not preordained to remain encased indefinitely within the bourgeois framework in which it has taken shape and operated up to now. The historical function of capitalism has been to prepare the preconditions and the forces for its own replacement by a new and superior way of living and working together.

7. Contemporary capitalism has become the source and sustainer of the most malignant evils at home and abroad. The deepening world crisis of imperialism, the consequences of Washington's foreign policies and the menace of nuclear warfare, coupled with the incapacity of U.S. capitalism to provide adequate solutions to the problems of poverty, inflation, unemployment, discrimination, and other scourges, have prepared the ground for a resurgence of social struggles in this country.

8. Since the Republican-Democratic compromise of 1876 restored white supremacy in the South, the development of the United States has been marked by three major processes. These are the conversion of industrial into monopolist and imperialist capitalism, the growth of organized labor, and the awakening of the Black masses. The most important social struggles of this period have been the contest between the plutocrats and plebeians, which ended in defeat for the reformism of the middle class Progressives; the conflict between the big employers and wageworkers, which culminated in the industrial union organizing drive of the 1930s; and the rise of the Black liberation struggle, which initiated a new wave of radicalization in the United States.

9. The demands of the American people for a better life and a secure future can be realized only through changes of greater magnitude than those achieved by the War of Independence and the Civil War. Like the crown rulers and the Cotton Kings before them, the monopolists will have to be deposed and expropriated by the revolutionary action of the insurgent masses.

10. The specific features of capitalist oppression in the U.S. have made it clear that the third American revolution will have a combined character. It will be a revolution by the oppressed nationalities for self-determination together with a working-class revolution to take power, which will open the road to the destruction of capitalist exploitation, alienation, oppression, racism, and sexism—and the construction of socialism, the first truly human social order.

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