

David W Fletcher, September 1999

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ANTHONY MOLHO & GORDON S. WOOD'S *IMAGINED HISTORIES:
AMERICAN HISTORIANS INTERPRET THE PAST*¹

Responding to what they perceive to be an exceptional “historiographic moment” (p. 17), editors Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood pool a “highly selective” and “partial” (p. viii) collection of essays on American history-writing in their book *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). The tangent essays focus on topics of social history, the three centuries of American history, important epochs for western civilization, and a few chapters on other nations, mostly European. The threefold axis for spinning such disjointed historiographies into the same volume might possible be defined as follows: (1) a revisionist debunking of Americanism as a teleological historic apex, namely “exceptionalism”; (2) a concerted shift to rewriting history from the viewpoint of the “marginal” and “forgotten” people (p. 11), or the new social history; and (3) an emerging “transoceanic cosmopolitanism” (p. viii), i.e., a growing international perspective among American historians. These three themes as developed by the different contributors to the book and a few brief comments on each will delineate the parameters of this review.

¹As I reflect some fourteen years later on what I was trying to criticize about Molho and Wood’s *Imagined Histories*, I think the key point is that the editors and their contributors act very exceptional in their own views of American historiography and in their critique of American exceptionalism in historical studies—quite the contradiction. To be historians in the community of world scholars, we must get away from seeing all things through the eyes of our own limited experiences. [DWF, August 2013].

Just say nay to exceptionalism. Rodgers' chapter is the keynote for this major theme of the book. "Is America different?" he begins (p. 21). But then he wrestles with the semantic slide from "difference" to "uniqueness" to "provincialism" to "newness" to "providentialism" to finally "exceptionalism." For him, "exceptionalism differs from difference. Difference requires contrast; exceptionalism requires a rule" (p. 22). This Russian epithet, a "Stalinist coinage of the 1920s" (p. 23) albeit *anachronistic* according to Rodgers' historical construct (cf. *irrelevant* colonial "language of eschatology and millennialism"), somehow stuck as witness of American historians' ready adaptation of Marx's "general laws of historical motion" (pp. 25, 27, 28) and the Augustinian "teleological arrow" (p. 31), the content of such "laws" and "arrow" Rodgers does not specify but only assumes, i.e., "general laws" (p. 29; cf. "imagined rules," p. 30). Pejoratives of this exceptionalism abound—"storybook truth" (p. 29), "thin line between history and faith" (p. 26), "exhortation" replacing "analysis" (p. 24)—and, according to the text's contributors, this type of thinking has left its marks on just about every American historiography. Countries like Spain, Japan, and Russia and their "systems" are seen as "antithesis," "Other," "rival," and "challenge" (pp. 329, 340, 416, 417, 450; cf. the absence of America's medieval past, its "alterity" or "otherness," pp. 239, 253), while America is portrayed as the consummation of important westernizing forces, i.e., the Romans as "antecedents of American liberalism" (p. 224), the "nexus between the Renaissance and modernity" in the American *Bildung* (pp. 264, 267), and the Reformation as *the* "historical self-definition of so many Protestant churches" (p. 299). Compare the American role in the development of "Western Civilization" (pp. 207ff.), but

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contrast the difficulty of the revisionists in integrating the French revolution into any exceptionalist framework due to what Baker and Zizek call the constraints of “observational perspective” and “ethnographic distance” (pp. 350ff.). Correspondingly, historians of the colonial period, the nineteenth, and the twentieth centuries contest issues of relevance (p. 157), participation (p. 168), and fragmentation (p. 185), respectively, while others have given a voice to those who have been excluded by exceptionalism, “especially blacks, Indians, and women” contra “white males” (p. 164), under the themes of race (see p. 108), gender (see p. 47), economics, immigration (see pp. 120, 131), etc. According to the naysayers, the tentacles of exceptionalism are to be found everywhere.

The proletariat gets a face. The postmodern undoing of residual exceptionalism falls to the champions of what is dubbed the “*new* social and cultural history” (pp. 12, 30; cf. the effects on cliometrics, pp. 63-69, and particularly the debate about *Time on the Cross*, pp. 72-75) or “history from the bottom up” (p. 11, like the Annales school; cf. p. 443), which is supposedly “authentic history” (p. 30). It is really a story about the masses, in contrast to the story of the elite, which is nothing really *new* (contra Ross, pp. 91ff.; cf. the work of the Russians Kliuchevskii, Kareev, Luchitskii, Rostovtseff, p. 421, the work of Reformation scholars, pp. 299ff., and the consistent trend of people’s history in Medieval studies, p. 249), only that more people are writing about it, and American historians think that they have discovered it (see Wood’s exaggerations, p. 156), an excellent example of provincial mentality (*a la* self-contradiction)! According to the new social engineers, it is a story about reversing those

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“hidden structures of power” (p. 53) in such realms as race, gender, class, and money, an attempt to break down the old scaffolds in order to radically reconstruct modern societal relationships (i.e., Kerber’s gender analysis; cf. the excellent assessment by Ross, p. 98). The historical “resurrection” of the proletariat, better a Russian than American accomplishment, spells the deathknoll of American exceptionalism as the teleologically caricatured and eurocentrically warped enterprise is rendered invalid by the mass of voices in protest to the contrary.

There really is a world, Horace. The inferred omnipresence (p. 13) of a concatenation of international historiographic voices toward globalization completes the tightening of the hangman’s noose on the “old-fashioned unified sense of American identity” (p. 14). Most noteworthy are American collaborations with the French (pp. 361ff.), with Russians, i.e., important gap-filling (p. 431), with the Japanese, i.e., critique of “nationalizing” (p. 445), and especially concerning nagging questions of cosmopolitan moment, predominately from the twentieth century (see pp. 397ff.). This worldwide revisionist overthrow of exceptionalism, though, does not at all explain the already existing and quite lengthy cooperation of international scholars in precisely the historical fields upon which exceptionalist thought was founded (see p. 207), namely the classics which are “transnational in character” (p. 222), Renaissance studies, transformed as early as the 1930s by Jewish immigrants from Germany (p. 270), and the Reformation which has always been primary domain for European scholars (pp. 295ff.). Furthermore, the question of identity bashing does not appear to be fully established. Resisters abound, notably in the areas of western civilization (“they flee Eurocentrism only to meet Europe

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in Samarra,” p. 218) and about Spain (which “remains something of an Other,” p. 340). The evidence toward global solidarity and a worldwide multiculturalism is not so ubiquitous after all.

All in all, *Imagined Histories* is a good attempt to give momentum to the postmodern debunking of Americanism on the basis of social reconstructionism and multiculturalism. In the final analysis, these subtle shifts might be described accurately as vacillations not in substance but only in kind, and the overall thrust is best seen as merely straining out the gnat.