

David W Fletcher, March 2005

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STEVEN MINTZ'S *MORALISTS AND MODERNIZERS*:  
*AMERICA'S PRE-CIVIL WAR REFORMERS*<sup>1</sup>

Mintz's *Moralists and Modernizers* argues for the development of "a new moral perspective" in early nineteenth century America, a new sensitivity and sensibility that, while complex in its operative ideologies, can be seen nevertheless as part of the American liberal tradition. Since "the realities of antebellum reform are too complex to fit any one formula," Mintz seeks common ground among traditional, revisionist, New Left, and Marxist historiographies of antebellum reform. Traditionally, antebellum reform marked progress from barbarism, cruelty, ignorance, and brutality toward enlightenment. This was predominately a liberal, progressive, and even Whiggish perspective. After World War II, revisionist historians, reacting to the horrors of the war's political and social upheavals (i.e., the Holocaust, the gulag), criticized the perfectionism, utopianism, and social engineering of antebellum reformers as the work of "psychological deviants and fanatics and sought the basis of the movement in social and economic dislocations and religious upheaval." But in the mid-1960s, the New Left historians applauded these early American reformers as pioneers in the struggle for social change who fought against the evils of society with "uncompromising integrity, high moral idealism, and passionate commitment."

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<sup>1</sup>The American Moment Series, edited by Stanley I. Kutler; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; 179 pages, with forward, acknowledgments, bibliographical essay, and index.

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About that same time, though, historians who leaned toward Marxist interpretations of the past criticized reform as a means used by cultural imperialists to control society by class domination. They viewed the missions, the schools, and the societies that were formed by antebellum reformers as indicative of bourgeois values, capitalistic hegemony, and rank paternalism. In light of these varying historiographies, Mintz tries to chart a “middle-ground between those who regard reform as a means of class-based social control and those who stress reformers’ benevolent intentions.” To do so, he emphasizes the “duality” of reform in antebellum America—its “social and moral uplift” and “the institutions of control.” He adopts consequently “a multicausal approach” that shows a broad basis or foundation for a wide number of reform proposals—his “new sensibility” that includes a “missionary” impulse (to incorporate in the body politic standards of Protestant morality), a “humanitarian” impulse (to establish “crucibles of character” or institutions that nurture “middle-class” behaviors), and a “liberationist” impulse (“to free individuals from corrupt customs and coercive institutions”). Because of this duality—perhaps a better word for Mintz’s approach would be plurality—he believes it is “impossible to categorize [antebellum] reformers simply as humanitarians or social controllers” (xv-xviii).

Mintz nicely balances “the complexity of this extraordinary story” with ample detail on antebellum reform’s pros and cons, its successes and failures, its consistencies and ambiguities. He notes the diversity of the reformers’ backgrounds—their geographical, social, and spiritual roots which “defy simple generalization.” He highlights their divergent motives (i.e., evangelical

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Protestantism, religious or secular liberalism, transcendentalism, or other beliefs) as all aspiring to the same basic goals—“to extend the meaning of the ‘inalienable rights’ with which all Americans are endowed and adopt a more inclusive definition of those who were ‘created equal’ . . . [goals] firmly based in the American liberal tradition” (155). The old elites sought to maintain or bring back hierarchical patterns of social order. The biblicists and revivalists wanted to bring the kingdom of God to earth, beginning in America. The mercantile business class desired to “mute class conflict” with values like the Protestant work ethic. All in all, liberals, conservatives, evangelicals, and moralists worked to stabilize the social order by the incorporation of basic values like “self-control, industriousness, sobriety, deferral of gratification, and self-discipline.”

Mintz sets this story of American reform on center stage against the backdrop of an era of extreme cultural, religious, and social ferment—“the emergence of a market economy, the beginnings of rapid urban and industrial growth, the decline of deference, the spread of democratic politics, an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth, and radical shifts in women’s roles and status” (see Chapter 1: The Specter of Social Breakdown). He analyzes two religious trends—anti-Calvinistic anthropology and grassroots revivalism—which sparked the religious impulse of antebellum reform and gave birth to both religious and secular forms of millenarianism (see Chapter 2: The Promise of the Millennium). Mintz investigates how these reformers reconstructed America’s social environment—morally, via Christian values in missions, revivals, schools, and tracts to enforce the Sabbath, fight prostitution, and prohibit the use of

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alcohol (Chapter 3); humanely, via “crucibles of character” such as asylums, prisons, and schools to educate, nurture, and rehabilitate society’s needy and outcasts (Chapter 4); and radically, via complete overthrow of “the sources of sin and inequality” to abolish slavery, establish equal rights for women, and model utopian communities as an ideal world (Chapter 5). They stubbornly refused to yield to the temptation of complacency, so they vigorously countered the “demons” or evils of the prevalent social order with their version of a newer and better, if not visionary, social order. In this reviewer’s opinion, Mintz tells this fantastically complicated story in a compelling and intelligible fashion (xiii-xv).

Mintz validates the proclivity of Jacksonian America toward violence and vice, as increased mobility and urbanization heightened the ascendancy of egalitarianism. Social relationships suffered profound changes, and even language itself “underscored the growing sense of social disintegration” (10). Neither self-seeking materialism nor derogated authority (i.e., in church, family, and state) appeared capable to mend the wounds inflicted by the country’s ethical and moral weaknesses. An ideological shift, from God-controlled Calvinistic passivity (theological) to man-directed enlightenment activity (anthropological), prodded the movers and shakers of reform toward intense concern for moral character formation, i.e., “personal integrity, high ideals, moral courage, a sense of duty, a capacity for hard work, and self-control” (13). In other words, an individual’s moral character was not innate; it needed to be nurtured and shaped. To quell the country’s besetting problems and to answer the nagging criticism by Europeans that

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“democracy inevitably led to anarchy and lawlessness” (15), antebellum reformers presented vibrant solutions through religion, education, and social reform.

From the evangelical revivalism of the Second Great Awakening and the religious unrest of primitive, millennial, and holiness movements, Mintz illuminates the multifaceted “inputs” and “outputs” of the reform imperative. He even illustrates the commitment to social reform among “religious outsiders” such as Mormons, Catholics, Jews, and African-Americans. Ultimately, however, this variegated religious tapestry “shared a millennialist faith that America was destined to lead the world to a new epoch of human virtue and improvement” (48). Mintz correctly notes the sectarian feuding that existed among the religious and even the benevolent organizations. But he just as rightly captures the concerted efforts of voluntary societies to propagate Christian values in order to uplift the nation’s morals and to “sacralize” its pastimes. Near mid-century, Mintz identifies among reformers a change in emphasis from “moral uplift” to “social activism” especially in their battles against prostitution, for laws to sanctify the sabbath, and concerning temperance. He also observes before the Civil War a shift from moral reform to secular humanitarianism. He remarks, “In their emphasis on professional organization, rules, efficiency, and scientific analysis of social problems, . . . [philanthropic organizations] clearly pointed to the future of American benevolence. Moral reform was gradually giving way to secular, bureaucratic humanitarianism” (78). This development marked what Mintz calls “a pointed historical irony” in that a time of increasing laissez-faire witnessed the rise of “new public paternalism, in which public institutions took on the moral prerogatives, presumed

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benevolence, and good will previously invested in kinship and local communities” (82).

Consequently, the proliferation of these institutional “crucibles of moral character” (i.e., asylums, schools, and prisons) anticipated, and in some measure accelerated, the expansion of a professional state apparatus to actively and sufficiently deal with crucial issues of civic equality and social justice.

After mid-century, the pangs of the nation forced a radical turn among some reformers, especially in regards to abolition, equal rights for women, and utopian socialism. Experiments in both religious and secular communal living largely failed, and the struggle for political and social equality by resolute feminists achieved limited gains and had to await the twentieth century for greater realization. Abolitionists, though, attained the preeminent victory in radical social reform with the overthrow of slavery and the reordering of the American nation, both the North and the South. In superb but succinct style, Mintz traces the formation of the American Peace Society, the varieties of thought and approaches among pacifists, the growth of antislavery sentiment, the role and failure of the American Colonization Society, early antislavery efforts and the emergence of immediatism, the work of William Lloyd Garrison, abolitionist arguments and illusions, division in the abolition movement, radical and black abolitionists, the sectional crisis, and the incendiary role of self-appointed emancipator John Brown. Mintz defends the abolitionists against historical criticism: “[they] expressed the moral passion necessary to awaken Americans to the moral evil of slavery and begin the process of eroding racial prejudice” (140). Further, while conceding the taint of “paternalistic and condescending” attitudes among some

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abolitionists, he lauds their efforts even in the post-Civil War era as a meritorious campaign for civil rights and racial justice. In this respect, Mintz's concluding chapter to a turbulent but exciting era of American reform merits a careful and thoughtful reading.

Mintz no doubt strains to fit such complex ideologies and institutions, persons and processes, motivations and movements into an overall "American liberal tradition" rubric. In order to do this, he must use the proverbial "semantic slide" with words like "liberal" or "reform" (see xix-xx, 154-155). He even admits, "Certainly, not all antebellum reformers were liberals, at least as that term is usually defined" (155). But rather than a weakness, this can be dismissed as Mintz's attempt to synthesize a widely divergent group of reformers under one label, that proves to be difficult if not impossible to do. Even so, in no way does this distract from the quality of Mintz's work. For any student who wants to get a feel for the dynamic forces that shaped and modernized the nation, *Moralists and Modernizers* is an excellent book which provides a concise overview, yet with significant depth and insight, of antebellum reform.