prepared the ground for the 1959 Bad Godesberg Programme, which would break completely with Marxism.

In his book, Owetschkin gives us a good analysis and paints an honest picture of Schmidt’s position in pre-1914 German social democracy. He stresses Schmidt’s role as an opponent of the orthodox views defended by Kautsky, Mehring, and Rosa Luxemburg in matters of socialist tactics and Marxist analysis. One-third of the book is devoted to the “Bernsteiniaide” concerning the so-called problem of “emancipation from theory”. As a neo-Kantian “Marxist” Schmidt remained a well-respected party intellectual, who could rely on the sympathy of all reformist party officials – who clearly understood that his theoretical analysis could provide some respectability to their day-to-day activities and reformist practices.

Owetschkin’s carefully written analysis owes much to the study by Dieter Groh,¹ who coined the concepts of negative integration and revolutionary attentism. In addition, Owetschkin’s biography should be regarded as a useful companion to Bo Gustafsson’s Marxismus und Revisionismus.²

Andre´ Mommen


Richard Rorty cracked a whip at the “cultural Left” in a recent and (for Rorty) little known book, Achieving Our Country (Cambridge, MA, 1998). He shocked some friends. Rorty had been a prime mover of the rhetorical, the linguistic, the pragmatic, and the relativistic “turns” in the human sciences. After Rorty, after all, it was safe to speak “rhetorically” about truth and nature, history and economy.

Achieving Our Country complained about leftist academics whom, Rorty believes, waste considerable time and resources “theorizing” and “problemetizing”, naming and articulating “plays of differential subjectivity”, “thematic appropriations”, “ambiguities” of “identity” and the like (p. 93). To what end, asks Rorty? To find elites – especially elite, white males – producing “stigma”. In recent decades the Left was satisfied to expose cultural productions of stigma or sadism, Rorty says, showing elites engaging in prejudicial speech with or about a marginalized people. He begs leftists to return to the ideals and strategies of the long eclipsed “reformist Left”. “Ban philosophy”, says Rorty. Bring back the public intellectualism of the period 1920 to 1960 – its applied economics, its practical sociology (p. 49). Bring back, he says, the work of historically oriented Progressives, such as the economist Richard T. Ely and the social worker Jane Addams, whose ideas in scholarship were motivated and often realized by their own direct, public action in the name of social and economic betterment for the poor and oppressed.

Rorty is no historian. He omits any mention of Ely’s cheerful involvement with the

charity organization societies. More seriously, he fails to mention Ely’s involvement with
the eugenics movement, a dreadful though necessary omission one supposes if he is to
remake Ely a hero for the next generation. Still, Rorty’s question is a good one: what do we
contribute to scholarship or the world if our main goal is to show, using a bit of literary
criticism, that elites in history anxiously chose to produce stigma and sadism in human
speech?

Books like Jonathan Glickstein’s American Exceptionalism, American Anxiety would,
one guesses, fall under Rorty’s purview. It’s the latest of a small stream of books on
antebellum America furthering this goal of the cultural Left. (Readers of American
Exceptionalism will also take an interest in Jeffrey Sklansky’s The Soul’s Economy: Market
Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820–1920 (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002).) Glickstein’s purpose is to name the “ambiguities” and “anxieties” in the social and
economic thought of elite white males of the antebellum period, who drew from the myth
of American exceptionalism, he argues, an unusual competitive pressure “from below”. Low-cost, and allegedly socially “inferior”, workers served, he argues, as the pressure-
cookers: slave labor, convict labor, and pauper labor, both home and abroad.

Glickstein examines in imaginative detail the social and economic thought of common
and uncommon elites. He ponders, for example, the social thought of Frederick Law
Olmstead, the great planner of American parks and cities, and of Joseph Tuckerman, one
of America’s leading Unitarian clergymen and, more importantly for Glickstein, a crusader
against “public outdoor relief” – against, that is, a public dole for paupers. (Glickstein’s
decision to study these particular men over other elites is valuable but not transparent.)
American Exceptionalism has remarkable interdisciplinary reach, of interest to scholars
in many fields. It engages bravely and often coherently the heterogeneous methods and
motives of social historians, cultural historians, quantitative economic historians, Marxists,
literary theorists, and poststructuralists (any loss of coherence derives from a sustained
stylistic preference for lengthy abstraction and its excessive supply of “Gresham’s Law-
like” analogies).

At bottom, however, the thesis of American Exceptionalism is weakly defended. Says
Glickstein, “I am particularly impressed with the power of an exceptionalist mythology
that, whatever the material patterns may have been, stimulated not merely optimism and
complacency in elite and other quarters but also deep-seated economic and cultural
anxieties throughout antebellum society” (p. 9).

The problem with Glickstein’s thesis – the myth of American exceptionalism stimulated
antebellum cultural anxieties – was first formalized by statisticians in the 1920s. Speaking
informally, statisticians showed that any decision to accept a test of a hypothesis involves
two types of errors: Type 1, an error of excessive skepticism, and Type 2, an error of
excessive gullibility. A goal of science, then, is to design an experiment that will allow the
evidence to reveal the “power of the test”. Power is the ability to reject a hypothesis (such
as “antebellum anxiety was stimulated by the myth of American exceptionalism”) when
some other hypothesis is true (say, “anxiety is caused by numerous myths and human
habits, propensities, and levels of economic performance”). What we, of course, want in
science, including human sciences like history, is more power.
American Exceptionalism has, by this standard, little power. The problem is in the way
the evidence was constructed: if there is anything exceptional to be learned about
exceptionalism and anxiety in antebellum American elites it would be found in comparison
with elites in other periods of American history, or in comparison with non-elite social
groups in the same period, or with elites from other nations in the same or in different periods.

Take, for example, the poor laws. From paupers to presidents, Americans have been anxious about the contradiction of compassion and self-reliance created by pauper labor ever since the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 was first adopted by the colonies. We still are. Look, for example, at the anxious discourse surrounding the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Consider, moreover, sweated histories of British, or German, or Scottish, or French, or Russian poor laws, Elberfeld to the crèche. Though lacking in explicit comparison, well-known examples from other eras and nations show Glickstein’s thesis to have low power against the alternatives. If, on the other hand, antebellum America was a ubiquitous “Age of Anxiety”, Glickstein doesn’t say.

Rorty is probably too depressed about the cultural Left. Books like American Exceptionalism can function for today’s Left as Bellamy’s Looking Backward did for the older, reformist Left: inspiring in others, through his re-imaginations of economic myth and metaphor, a progressive reform direction and spirit. Or anyway, more scholarship in that neighborhood. Some building blocks of reform, in historiography and policy, can be found in Glickstein’s new book.

Stephen T. Ziliak


Wilma A. Dunaway’s two books on African-American slavery in the mountain South contribute to longstanding scholarly debates over the nature of North American slavery during the nineteenth century. Both works demonstrate substantial research in quantitative and qualitative sources while at the same time actively engaging the secondary scholarship on slavery in the fields of sociology, history, and related academic disciplines.

Dunaway writes with a passion that stems from her nativity in the mountain South and her strong belief that the region, an area of “215 mountainous and hilly counties in nine states” (Slavery, p. 4), played a central rather than a marginal role in the evolution of slavery and the African-American family. She takes issue with scholars who contend that geographical location, soil conditions, and climate differentiated the mountain South from the rest of the slaveholding South. While acknowledging that European-American yeoman farmers – most of whom held few if any slaves – contributed mightily to the economic and cultural life of the region, she affirms the significant presence and impact of African Americans both during and after slavery. Employing the methodological tools and theoretical insights of historical sociology, she contends that the capitalist world economy exerted a profound influence on the region. Far from seeking to escape capitalist development, mountain masters embraced it. And, by virtue of their proximity to significant waterways and overland transportation routes, they took active part in the