

Using Philosophical Liberalism and Philosophical Conservatism as an Organizing Theme in the First Half of the American History Survey

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SINCE APPROXIMATELY 1970, many historians have been seeking a unifying theme for the American History Survey. Early in the twentieth century, Progressive historians identified class conflict as the main theme in American History, but during the 1950s and 1960s, this view was challenged by the Consensus Schools' assertion that Americans have always agreed on certain fundamental principles such as popular government and the sanctity of private property. Yet the Consensus approach was stillborn when the New Social History's emphasis on minorities, and a changing social environment, revealed the limitations of the Consensus interpretation. Ultimately, many texts embodied elements of all three schools, which highlighted as a central theme a long-term movement to make American society more equal and inclusive.¹

Interestingly, discussions on teaching American history indicate that, while historians assign texts that develop this new approach, few make this the focal point of their courses. Instead, instructors often emphasize other central themes in the classroom. Some do focus on the attempt to provide full acceptance and universal rights to all Americans; some focus on the nature of history; others highlight the value of history in understanding the present; still others emphasize the utility of historical methodology

in solving contemporary problems; and some integrate all of these while providing an overview of the structure of historical development. None of these are mutually exclusive and most instructors consciously or unconsciously integrate these and other themes into their courses. Among these approaches to the past, the attempt to provide full acceptance and universal rights to all Americans is closest to earlier traditions that sought to follow a central theme of historical development. Yet many believe that the attempt to impose any single pattern of development oversimplifies the past and others find the multicultural approach too value laden. Still, a unifying theme has its advantages. It provides direction and unity to a course, and it often helps make the past more understandable. History, after all is a process and not a series of random events.²

I would like to suggest an alternate theme that seems particularly useful today during an era of intense culture wars. I am also attracted to this approach because I teach in a college where the curriculum is organized on the unit system, which seeks to provide greater depth in a smaller number of courses. Inevitably, a curriculum that requires fewer courses eliminates or reduces student contact with several disciplines and, as a result, some of the thinkers and concepts that had long formed a common currency of intellectual discourse among college graduates. Some colleges have created freshman seminars that focus on the great books or the seminal ideas of the past to fill the inevitable gaps brought on by the new curriculum; my school does not.

In search of a unifying theme, convinced that it was important to broaden the intellectual horizons of students who were not taking the breadth of courses that I favored, and hoping to help students engage the culture wars at an intellectual rather than an emotional level, I placed the themes of philosophical liberalism and philosophical conservatism at the center of the first semester of the survey. Let me provide a brief overview of the course.

The main theme is introduced in its simplest form on the first day of class. Philosophical conservatism is defined as the belief that people are evil or selfish by nature, while philosophical liberalism is described as the belief that people are good or have great moral potential. Then, students are asked to link the two philosophical views of human nature with contemporary liberal and conservative political views of the criminal justice system—focusing on sentencing and the death penalty; military spending; and welfare programs. Students are then asked to explain the consistency and the unifying principle at work. They find it easy to understand why philosophical conservatives embrace long criminal sentences, a large military, and narrow welfare spending, and why philosophical liberals are generally attracted to the opposite. The logic is obvious. Next, I explain

that while the course will not address this theme on a daily basis, it will identify various times and places where one view of humanity prevailed and played a central role in shaping the cultural traditions of a time and place.

In describing the colonial era, special emphasis is given to the Puritans, and the Quakers. The Puritans are identified as philosophical conservatives who believed that Original Sin rendered humans evil by nature, though the Creator bestowed saving grace on a small group of “Saints,” who, as a result of this gift, were able to live upright lives. Understanding this reveals the logic behind rule by the Saints, the Puritan tendency to monitor closely their neighbors’ actions, the harsh Puritan approach to crime and punishment, and their forceful approach to child-raising. The Quaker belief in the Inner Light, or the presence of the divinity in all people, is identified as the idea that led the Quakers, also known as the Friends, to develop great faith in human moral potential. This rendered Pennsylvania society more open, tolerant, and democratic, and it encouraged Quakers to take leadership roles in Abolitionism, Women’s Rights, and other social reform movements.

The Framers of the Constitution are linked to that group of Enlightenment thinkers who believed that people naturally pursue their selfish interests. I open this topic with an excerpt from a letter by George Washington, written in 1786, in which the future president states, “We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation.”³ This outlook helps explain the Framers’ adoption of a Constitution that created a strong central government *with* a system of checks and balances, and it gives insight into the Founders’ attraction to the republican belief that wealthy people, who were above need and thus greed, were society’s best leaders. In examining the origins of the First Party System, both Hamilton’s rather extreme philosophical conservatism and Jefferson’s moderate philosophical liberalism are identified as forces that helped shape early party programs.

The Jacksonian Era is characterized as philosophically liberal, which explains the age’s attraction to democratic political values and social reform. The old adage, of course, is that Jefferson believed that people could govern themselves, *if they were educated*, but Jackson believed they had the *innate* capacity to do so. Similarly, Jacksonian social reformers felt that people had great moral capacity, but were corrupted by external influences such as alcohol, profit motive, and the like.

Finally, the course examines the way that the death and destruction of the Civil War undermined the faith in humanity that was the basis of the social and political liberalism of Jacksonian America. This destruction, coupled with the growing popularity of evolutionary theory, gave rise to

Social Darwinism and a *laissez faire* political approach to economics and social problems that typified the years immediately after the Civil War. In some ways, at this point, the course has come full circle and it is interesting to highlight the dilemma that all philosophical conservatives face who embrace popular government—the challenge of finding a governing group which somehow rises above the common run of a flawed humanity. For the Puritans, it was the Visible Saints; for republican theorists, it was those whose wealth placed them beyond need; for advocates of late nineteenth-century *laissez faire*, it was the fit captains of industry.

I find this central theme, which is vastly oversimplified here, useful because it helps students understand some of the most important movements in history by revealing the logical connection between the views of humanity held by various groups in the past, and the social and political traditions that they embraced. This approach also helps students to understand that the programs espoused by liberals and conservatives have, or should have, some logical basis; in the process, this approach encourages students to seek logic in their own political views. Hopefully, too, it encourages students to contemplate the common characteristics that define humanity.

This theme reveals that various groups in the past believed that their social and political institutions had to be consistent with the laws of God or nature, however, it is necessary to demonstrate that the past is never this simple. For example, not all the Founding Fathers believed that people were selfish by nature. Jefferson believed that education and property ownership would lead people to embrace civic virtue. Moreover, many Jacksonian capitalists were attracted to social reforms like temperance in order to increase worker productivity. This latter theme may be integrated into the course in the inevitable analysis of the Market Revolution. The Market Revolution can be presented both as a movement that paralleled social reform, and as a force that led many to anticipate a better material future, which in turn encouraged Jacksonian optimism and its attendant philosophical liberalism.

To help students better understand the changing views of human nature, I provide students with a reader that highlights the views of humanity held by the groups that the course highlights. For the Puritans, I include what I consider my least satisfying reading, because it is somewhat anachronistic, Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." For the Quakers, I use various writings by George Fox. For the Founders, I use brief sections of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Hamilton's "Federalist Number 6," and the section of Ben Franklin's Arator "On the Price of Corn, and Management of the Poor," which presents his rather cynical attitude toward poor relief. For the Jacksonians, I include Ralph Waldo

Emerson's "Divinity School Address" and William Lloyd Garrison's introduction to Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*. To illuminate post Civil War-era *laissez faire*, the reader includes a section of William Graham Sumner's "Sociology."

If it seems this organizing theme requires a focus on the ideas of Dead White Men, it does not. Time is devoted to Native Americans, a group whose view of the universe and people's relation to it shaped their values and cultural traditions in ways that were both logical and unique, but which are hardly inconsistent with the theme of the course. Women's limited status was often a product of the Puritan belief that women were "eviler and weaker," than men because of Biblical Eve's role in The Fall, while the Jacksonian era's belief in the moral and intellectual potential of all people encouraged women's rights and abolitionism in Jacksonian America. Slavery and expansionism, the paradoxes of Jacksonian liberalism, highlight the messiness and inconsistency of the past, but they also reveal the ethnocentric nature of Jacksonian democracy.

It is important to end by noting that it is both easy and necessary to step away from this theme at times to explore a variety of questions that it does not directly address. For example, I give what I believe is an essential lecture on the historiography of the American Revolution. (Even freshmen should know why not all history books agree and why those written at different times often have a particular slant. In this context, it is interesting to demonstrate how and why both liberals and conservatives have sought to claim the Revolution.) In dealing with the coming of the Civil War, I briefly remind students that historians and contemporaries traditionally attribute the War's origins to slavery, economic differences between the sections, state's rights, and free soil ideology. The class discusses a series of documents including the platforms of the major political parties in 1860, South Carolina's explanation of the causes of secession, and Lincoln's, Address to Congress on July 4, 1861, to tease out the complex relationship between those interpretations.

Thus, while the philosophical liberalism and conservatism theme creates a unified course, it also broadens a curriculum that has by my measure become too narrow, and provides perspective on the culture wars of the twenty-first century, helping students better understand the relationship between some of the major developments in the American past. This approach does not allow an instructor to address every issue that ought to be addressed in the first half of the survey, but it does illuminate many. And of course, no central theme will address all topics, and no sane person would wish to highlight the same theme on a daily basis.

Notes

1. For a summary of the most popular texts in one survey, see Daniel J. Cohen, "By the Book: Assessing the Place of Textbooks in U.S. Survey Courses," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1405-1415. The titles of the four best-selling American History texts identified by Cohen suggest their themes: James L. Roark, et al., *The American Promise*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005); Gary Nash, et al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 6th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2004); James W. Davidson, et al., *Nation of Nations; A Concise Narrative of the American Republic* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002); and John Mack Farragher, et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2003). The prefaces and or introductions of these and other texts highlight this theme.

2. Gary Kornblith and Carol Lasser, "Teaching the American History Survey at the Opening of the Twenty-First Century: A Round Table Discussion," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 4 (March 2001): 1409-1441.

3. "Washington to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [John Jay]," August 1, 1786, John C. Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 28 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 502.