Nell Irvin Painter, *The Journal of American History*, 74, no. 1. June 1987

Bias and Synthesis in History

Nell Irvin Painter

In 1938 C. Vann Woodward, a young historian, accepted an invitation to write a volume of the History of the South series and set out to subvert the southern historical establishment's apology for the South's prevailing social order. Modestly underestimating the scholarly soundness of his synthesis, *Origins of the New South: 1877–1913*, Woodward later ascribed the book's longevity to its congruence with events, notably the civil rights movement, which had affirmed his concentration on conflict and discontinuity.[1] I would add that events also invalidated earlier histories that had assumed the rightness and perpetuity of white supremacy. Woodward's experience suggests that discovering bias in historical writing did not begin in the 1960s, that events can reduce the acceptability of historical verities, and that a rebellious impulse can produce synthesis.

In a more recent cycle of events, the civil rights, feminist, and New Left movements laid bare the racism, sexism, and middle-class bias prevalent in American life and in the writing of American history. Noting the existence of real discrimination and actual oppression, historians writing in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s undertook the remaking of history, embarking on research that would analyze, rather than justify, the status quo. The result has been an outpouring of monographs, the raw material of a new synthesis. In the meanwhile, all the new findings have produced in some a sense of confusion and a counteracting impulse, expressed in demands for a new synthesis, which Thomas Bender called for in these pages a year ago.[2]

Bender's appeal presents Louis Hartz and Richard Hofstadter as positive examples of the syntheses now lacking. Admitting that we cannot return to the older modes of historical writing that they practiced, Bender would welcome syntheses focused on "public culture" and relations of power in public life. I agree with him on the fundamentals: that much of the new historical writing has proven inaccessible to the informed layman for whom we were trained to write and that we need histories that are coherent and comprehensive. I also recognize the need for histories of whole communities, including nation states. But Bender omits mention of exactly what discredited historical synthesis in the first place. Any lament over the desuetude into

Nell Irvin Painter is professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[1] C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge, 1986), 44, 22; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South: 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951).

[2] Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History*, 73 (June 1986), 120–36.

which national history has fallen ought to recognize the excesses that precipitated the decline.

Perhaps in the spirit of the 1980s, which considers discussions of "oppression" and "discrimination" *infra dig*, Bender makes no mention of the chauvinism that appears in such syntheses as *The Liberal Tradition in America*, by Hartz. This analysis, which demonstrates the "failure" of socialism along with the "triumph" of liberalism in the United States, was well received during the Cold War. After the Vietnam War and the scandals of Watergate, Iran, and funding for the contras, hymns to virtuous American exceptionalism do not play quite so well. For me, however, Hartz's digs at socialists are less distasteful than his blindness to the lot of enslaved people and the meanings for them and American democracy of white supremacy. His repeated generalizations about "free society" and "free air" offend anyone conscious of racial discrimination.[3]

Richard Hofstadter's books from the 1940s and 1950s succeed far better than Hartz's in capturing political controversy. Hofstadter was unusual in his day for citing the writings of women.[4] But at the same time, this most sensitive of 1950s historians analyzed the era that produced national organizations dedicated to combating segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching without mentioning blacks as anything more than the "Negro bogy" that distracted southern white Populists.[5]

With a few significant exceptions, American historians writing in the 1950s, the halcyon days of historical synthesis, did not recognize sexism (and the omission of women) or racism (and the omission of blacks and other minorities). A third bias—toward the middle and upper classes—accompanied racist and sexist biases, so that Hofstadter could write of reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as though working people were not historical actors. Many of us writing today, however, see labor as the source of much that has been called Progressive reform.[6]

The new histories expose the sad fact that the purported syntheses of the 1950s—Hartz's, Hofstadter's, and a whole host of textbook writers'—claimed to encompass all the American people but spoke only of a small segment, white, male elites, presenting an illusion of synthesis that was no synthesis at all.

[3] See, for instance, Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955), 39, 55, 62, 66, 71, 89, 119.

[4] See Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), 75, 83–86, for discussions of the work of Mrs. S. E. V. Emery and Mary Elizabeth Lease. Toward the end of his life, Hofstadter began to recognize the existence of angry conflict in American life; see the collection, Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence* (New York, 1970).

[5] Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 61.

[6] Although two recent studies of the Progressive Era—Page Smith, *The Rise of Industrial America: A People's History of the Post-Reconstruction Era* (New York, 1984), and James MacGregor Burns, *The Workshop of Democracy* (New York, 1985)—continue to focus on the middle class in discussions of reform, other new writing seeks the source of many reform ideas in the labor movement. See, for example, Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880–1917* (New York, 1980); Ellen Carol DuBois, "Working Women, Class Relations, and Suffrage Militance: Harriot Stanton Blatch and the New York Woman Suffrage Movement, 1894–1909," *Journal of American History*, 74 (June 1987), 34–58; Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Hull House in the 1890s: A Community of Women Reformers," *Signs*, 10 (Summer 1985), 658–77; and Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877–1919* (New York, 1987).

Nell Irvin Painter, *The Journal of American History*, 74, no. 1. June 1987

Happily Bender has moved past that point; he does not wish to return to the narrow-minded, illusory syntheses of the 1950s. But he has only moved as far as the early 1970s, when new histories were preoccupied with their subjects' suffering. Detractors have spoken of "victim studies," and for a moment that label might have been applicable. But historians have continued to pose further questions about what newly found actors have accomplished, taking into account how such actors affect entire historical periods.[7] Recognizing the discrimination that women and minorities faced is a first step in remaking historical synthesis, but it is not the last.

Afro-American history shows that a group's history is more than the sum of its oppression, that the history of culture (music, folklore, and the accumulation of tradition that Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called the "countergenre") is also part of history. Bender's anchoring of synthesis in "public culture" and relations of power would truncate Afro-American history and sharply limit the role of most blacks to that of victims.[8] Women's history, too, has widened the inquiry to show that public and private concerns are intertwined. As in the case of oppressed minorities, a synthesis limited to public culture would lose much women's history. Particularly for the centuries during which women and minorities were disfranchised, focusing on "public culture" reinforces the centrality of the most powerful people in American public life—white men—and relegates the rest of us to the margins, where, excluded or subordinated, we react to the issues raised by white men.

I would much prefer syntheses that, first, recognize the part that minorities and women have played in public culture and, second, accommodate Afro-American music (because it has played so crucial a part in black culture and because of its enormous influence on American popular culture) and life and work in the home, where millions of women have labored for themselves and others. Conceding that there exists life in the United States with nonwhite and female protagonists and that it belongs in studies of the whole, such syntheses, bound to be untidy, would examine culture and experience in which public power is not always in question.

Both Bender and I echo the late Herbert Gutman's recognition that "a new synthesis is needed, one that incorporates and then transcends the new history." But having reached Gutman's conclusion via a very different route, I hesitate to join the ranks of those demanding synthesis for its own sake. Not only do I still remember the 1950s and retain a distrust of illusory synthesis, I also believe that the new histories have taught us a great deal about United States society. I do welcome the genuine syntheses that have begun to appear that recognize discrimination and en-

[7] Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Florence Kelley and the Integration of 'Women's Sphere' into American Politics, 1890–1921," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, New York, April 1986 (in Nell Irvin Painter's possession) links the female network at Hull House that sustained Florence Kelley in her public activities. Discriminated against as a woman, Kelley, like others facing similar difficulties, needed several sorts of intellectual and emotional support in her life and public work.

[8] As best I can interpret its meaning, "public culture" would seem to demand "events" and to be defined from the top down by white men. See Bender, "Wholes and Parts," 125–27.

Nell Irvin Painter, *The Journal of American History*, 74, no. 1. June 1987

compass the conceptual insights, as well as the subject matter, of the new histories of the last twenty years.[9]

[9] Herbert G. Gutman, "The Missing Synthesis: Whatever Happened to History?" *Nation*, Nov. 21, 1981, p. 554. Cf. Bender, "Wholes and Parts," 129. One example of synthesis that recognizes discrimination and the new histories is the popular textbook by Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States* (Boston, 1986), now in its second edition. Two recent studies, Paul Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850–1900* (Chapel Hill, 1985), and Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1985), present comprehensive syntheses that take into account the plural nature of southern society. Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore, 1985), recognizes the artificiality of severing the public from the private in his study of the linkage between statesmanship and the master-slave relationship.