

# The End of American History: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Metaphor of Two Worlds in Anglo-American Historical Writing

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inside Roberts's movement while maintaining a scholarly objectivity are admirable.

All historians, but especially religious historians, face the tension between "inside" and "outside" ("objective") history. It is clear from this book and a previous one, *All Things Are Possible*, that few scholars, if any, know the pentecostal subculture inside and out the way Harrell does (though he is not, as *Newsweek* had it in a recent article on Roberts, a "devout Pentecostal"). Those who cannot distinguish among evangelicals, fundamentalists, pentecostals, and holiness folks have difficulty appreciating Roberts's taming influence on the pentecostal tradition.

Still, I occasionally thought Harrell went beyond the call of duty in his efforts to defend Roberts. I also thought he relied too heavily on sources within or obviously sympathetic to the Roberts camp, to the exclusion of more objective accounts. Perhaps this is because other sources are not available—a limitation Harrell acknowledges in the preface (xi). In any case, readers need to refer often to the notes, which unfortunately are printed at the back of the book.

Finally, one is left with the question of how representative Roberts is of anything—even his own constituency. Despite the subtitle, which remains an enigma to me, Harrell never—except in a brief reference in the preface—addresses this issue. Nevertheless, Harrell's fluid and compelling biography of this remarkable American life will open new worlds to many scholarly readers and others whose own subcultures are often and in many ways no less narrow and exclusive than Roberts's.

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*The End of American History: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Metaphor of Two Worlds in Anglo-American Historical Writing*, by David W. Noble. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. ix, 166 pp. Notes, index. \$25.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

David Noble's *The End of American History* is a complex, densely packed work that is at once a study of the historical profession in America and an examination of several central interpretations of American history and culture. Less than 150 pages of text, it nonetheless is multidimensional and resists easy summarization.

Thomas Kuhn and Gene Wise provide the organizational foundations of the book. Noble's subject is a major paradigm shift within the historical profession precipitated by the collapse of the progressive synthesis in the 1940s and 1950s. He also relies on important recent in-

terpretations of American culture by Sacvan Bercovitch and J. G. A. Pocock to demonstrate that this historiographical revolution was closely tied to, and contributed to, changes in the larger culture. For both Pocock and Bercovitch the "metaphor of two worlds"—American exceptionalism and promise compared with European decadence—and ambivalence towards capitalism are central elements of American history.

All of this is developed through an examination of five leading interpreters of American history and culture—Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles Beard, Reinhold Niebuhr, Richard Hofstadter, and William Appleman Williams. At the same time that Turner was a passionate creator and supporter of the metaphor of two worlds, his frontier thesis of 1893 marked a strong challenge to American exceptionalism. Once the frontier, the source of American uniqueness, had disappeared, Turner foresaw the inevitable destruction of his cherished western democracy in a Europeanized America characterized by industrialism, urbanization, and capitalism. Charles Beard was able to renew Turner's jeremiad by finding in abundance and economic prosperity a new frontier. But for Beard this promise of industrialism tamed and controlled by democratic, egalitarian principles was destroyed by America's entry into World War I and World War II. Like Turner, Beard feared the eventual conquest of American republican democracy by the alien, corrupting forces of naked capitalism.

Niebuhr was the chief architect of a philosophical revolution precipitated in the United States by World War II and the Cold War. For Niebuhr as for Beard World War II represented the end of American isolation and innocence (hence the "end of American history"). But faced with the totalitarian evils of fascism and communism, Niebuhr reversed his earlier critique of capitalism and found in America a symbiotic union of capitalism and democracy. By the end of his career, in Noble's analysis, Richard Hofstadter had come to agree fully with Niebuhr. Passing through Beardian, then Marxist phases, Hofstadter finally came to celebrate the pluralistic values of American capitalism. William Appleman Williams, who did not have deep roots in the two world tradition of pre-World War II America, developed a native Marxist critique of American capitalism, but then abandoned Marx for a profoundly conservative jeremiad that rejected many centralist, capitalist, and modernist elements in American society.

This is not a book for beginners or casual browsers, but it has many rewards for the serious reader. Noble is at his best in linking the historical profession to broader cultural issues and in insisting that capitalism is central to any important interpretation of American history. At the same time any book that tries to do so much in so few pages

risks serious problems. This one is no exception. Complex historians are subjected to procrustean summarizations, and they go through a bewildering series of shifts of positions and ideas. While Noble argues that the 1940s marked the end of American exceptionalism, another common view is that the 1950s was a golden age of that tradition, and that the decline of American hubris came primarily in the 1960s and 1970s. Noble may be right, but he needs to address opposing interpretations more directly.

Potentially important themes are deeply hidden or not developed. All of Noble's protagonists except Hofstadter had deep roots in the Midwest. Indeed, the entire metaphor of two worlds and democratic, anticapitalist republicanism have sectional aspects. But Noble, a midwesterner writing about midwesterners, seems to miss whatever is significant in this approach to his topic.

Overall, then, this is a flawed but provocative book. Given the rudimentary state of American historiography, one hopes that Noble will continue to contribute to the field. Compared to the casual essays, personal memoirs, and various association presidential addresses that currently constitute the state of the art in the field, Noble is one of the few people seriously attempting to carry on the tradition of Gene Wise and John Higham in making some significant sense out of the historical profession in America. But this book is more a beginning than an end to that task.

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