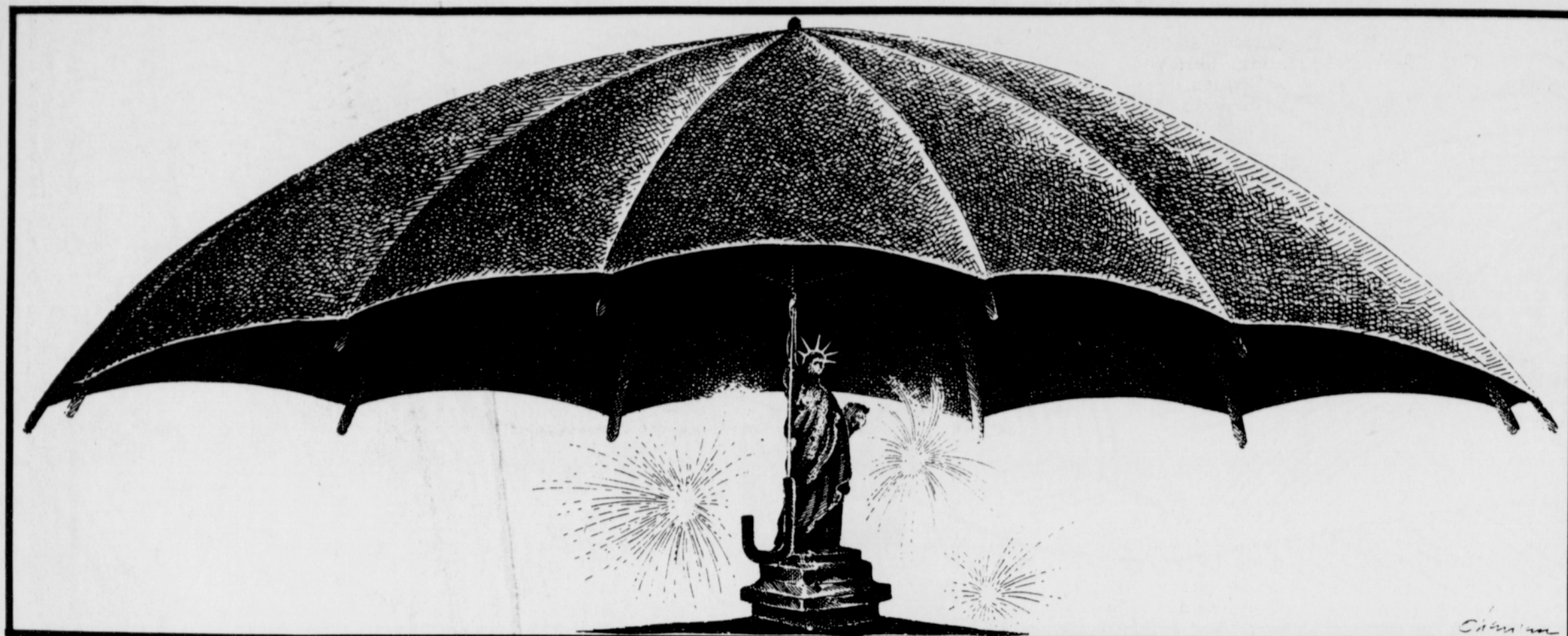




NANCY OHANIAN

THE LONELINESS OF THE SYNTHETIC HISTORIAN: A PLEA FOR THE NINETIES

BY DAVID A. HOROWITZ

The writing of history can be compared to sex: everyone thinks they know something about it but few perform the act with grace or integrity. Professionals in both fields rank among the worst offenders. For academic historians, the dawn of the century's last decade comes at a time of hopeless fragmentation. Drifting without apparent anchor, the profession suffers from a demoralizing lack of vision and purpose.

Historians of America's past tend to be torn by an unacceptable dilemma. On one hand, they can anticipate recognition and prestige by mounting weightless portraits of the dominant culture which unthinkingly validate success, mastery, and the permanence of the status quo. These celebrations of the nation's corporate and political institutions often stress the "burdens" and "responsibilities" of power, particularly at critical junctures such as the early Cold War. Despite surface homage to "objectivity," studies emanating from establishment citadels such as Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and Indiana too often amount to outright flattery of entrenched interests and unexamined assumptions.

The other horn of the dilemma is no less comforting. Historians moved by compassion for the powerless often focus upon "alternative" institutions such as labor unions, women's organizations and civil rights groups. Yet they often fail to relate these efforts to overall portraits of American society. Consequently, their work suffers from the same narrowness that constricts the established scholars.

All too often such history equates expertise concerning institutional development with historical knowledge. When scholars develop fields of interest into marketable specialties, it is not

surprising that their accounts seldom prove of interest to any but the smallest constituencies.

The truth of the matter is that programs at history conferences resemble the election-day tickets of the old-fashioned political machines of the East — smorgasbords of ethnic and other interests selected to provide the illusion of diversity. In both cases the expectation is that no one will seriously overturn the table.

Unfortunately, historians engage in even less dialogue than voters since scholars seldom relate to those outside their specialty. As a result, chroniclers of minorities and the powerless often are content to talk to themselves in sparsely attended conference sessions. Not surprisingly, the results of their scholarship seldom are integrated into the overall work of the profession.

One leading historian reached similar conclusions while president of the Organization of American Historians more than a decade ago. William Appleman Williams, formerly of Oregon State University and now retired to the writing of novels in Waldport, hoped to inspire a synthetic approach to American history. As author of "The Tragedy of American Diplomacy" (1959) and "The Contours of American History" (1962), Williams had pioneered the fusion of economic, cultural and political analysis. He sensed the profession's need for synthesis in the post-Vietnam era of the late 1970s and hoped the OAH could lead the way.

Williams sought to raise a capital fund for the organization to support periodic workshops among historians searching for dialogue. He particularly hoped to assist young scholars in integrating the history of women and minorities into broad accounts of the nation's development. But when the OAH president personally appeal-

ed for financial support from some 200 of the nation's leading scholars of American history, response was practically nil.

Just a few years ago, OAH president Stanley Kutler rekindled the idea of subsidized workshops. But Kutler ran into bitter opposition from a group of prestigious historians led by Yale's C. Vann Woodward and Edmund Morgan. In an open letter, the protesters objected to wasting the organization's money and resources on workshops and discussions that only distracted historians from their essential work, which had to be done alone.

As Williams pointed out in response, the letter's disdain for cooperative effort reflected an unconscious elitism among some of the profession's leaders. But it also underlined a failure to understand that scholarship operates within the context of a shared community of ideas and dialogue. Not surprisingly, elitism, over-specialization and intellectual isolation have been among the serious drawbacks to the creation of vital history in our time.

Historians seem to have the greatest difficulty in portraying popular social movements and attitudes. These subjects first received serious study in the 1950s by Richard Hofstadter and social scientists such as Daniel Bell and Seymour Lipset. Yet the period's pioneering analysis of Populists, Progressives, World War II noninterventionists, and followers of Senator Joseph McCarthy were marred by an excessive distrust of ordinary Americans.

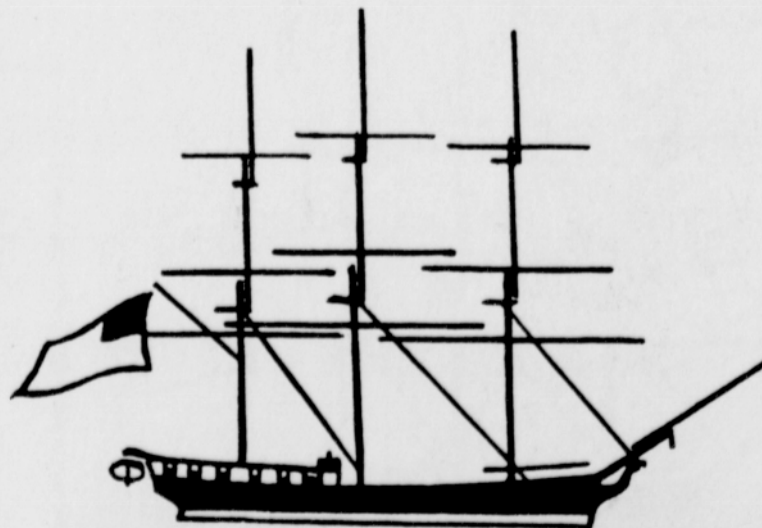
Hofstadter, Bell, Lipset and the others were reacting to the horrors associated with European Nazism and Communism of the 1930s and 1940s. Understandably, they viewed ideological fervor and populist rhetoric as the tools of irrational extremists out to destroy civiliza-



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