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Anti-radicalism and history from below

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Anti-radicalism and history from below

Abstract

In 1969, American historian Jesse Lemisch was in his early thirties. His politics and approach to history were shaped by the Cold War, as well as his involvements in the civil rights and anti-war movements and other struggles against the power structures of the day. That year, his paper 'Present-Mindedness Revisited: Anti-Radicalism as a Goal of American Historical Writing Since World War 11' was the centrepiece of a controversial session of the American Historical Association in Washington, D.C.

Passionate, strident, scholarly and forensic, the Lemisch paper detailed the ways leading American historians variously claimed political neutrality even as they were deeply engaged as conservatives or as liberals in the politics of post-war USA, with their historical writings part of and reflecting this engagement

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Anti-radicalism and history from below

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In 1969, American historian Jesse Lemisch was in his early thirties. His politics and approach to history were shaped by the Cold War, as well as his involvements in the civil rights and anti-war movements and other struggles against the power structures of the day. That year, his paper 'Present-Mindedness Revisited: Anti-Radicalism as a Goal of American Historical Writing Since World War 11' was the centrepiece of a controversial session of the American Historical Association in Washington, D.C.

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Indeed, some of the historians he examined thought it possible to 'sympathetically' study the radical American past even as they worked against and denounced the radicalism of the present as being unwarranted – or as the manifestation of psychological malaise.

The paper was a hit among a young generation of historians struggling to make sense of their times and seeking ways to be both scholarly and committed as social movement participants. The Lemisch paper was an armoury of ideas, arguments, and pointers to scholarly possibilities.

Nonetheless, when submitted to the leading historical journals of the day, it met with serial rejection. It was accused of being ill-mannered, of being an unwarranted attack on doyen intellectuals.

Being sent to Coventry by the gatekeepers of academia failed to stop the Lemisch flow. The paper received national media attention, there was discussion and comment in progressive publications, it circulated in photocopied formats, and Lemisch was invited to campuses and forums to speak about his paper. Retitled as *On Active Service in War and Peace: Politics and Ideology in the American Historical Profession*, the essay was published in book form (150 pages) by New Hogtown Press, a small radical publisher in Canada in 1975. That made the work available in an orthodox format. Still, over the years, it remained scarce and not readily accessible.

The place of Lemisch in American historiography, and his significant influence on many historians on both sides of the Atlantic, has since been recognised by historians, despite an academic career that was, at times, blighted by blacklisting and political persecution, and an associated need to find publication outlets and distribution networks to disseminate his work when traditional academic forums were unwelcoming. His 1962 Yale University dissertation *Jack Tar vs John Bull: The Role of New York's Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution*, circulated informally (especially in the form of some major articles by Lemisch in scholarly journals) becoming, according to historian Marcus Rediker 'something of an underground classic'.

It exercised a profound influence on American, transnational and maritime histories – as well as history-from-below writing generally – for some thirty years before it was published in book form in 1997.

Now nearly 80 years old, Lemisch is still alive and active, very much a public historian. Recently, his classic *On Active Service in War and Peace* broke free from the restraints of libraries and the dusty shelves of the 1970s and went online: [free and 'open access'](#) (pdf). Despite the decades since it rocked the US-history profession, the study still packs a punch. It's an energising historiographical ride, as relevant today as it was in 1969/75: a challenge to a profession then at the dawn of the creation of the modern corporate university, a profession busily insinuating itself into fabric of the military-industrial-knowledge factories of the contemporary capitalist state and the culture of consumerism. By contrast, Lemisch and his colleagues were throwing themselves into social movements, arguing that history was not finished, that there was a long way to go, and that history was about the making of an inclusive and democratic world in which everyday people, not elites, were the shaping forces.

For those who have come in late, as they say in comic books, for an introduction to the work of Lemisch, I recommend the essay by Marcus Rediker, '[Jesse Lemisch and History from the Bottom Up](#)'.

Enjoy!

Rowan Cahill is a sessional teaching academic at the University of Wollongong, and blogs at <http://www.radicalsdney.blogspot.com.au>.