Insiders and Outsiders in American Historical Narrative and American History
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THIS ESSAY HAD ITS ORIGIN in a slightly frivolous but nagging question that a previous research project had left unanswered. In a monograph about American spiritualism, I had made the assumption often associated with scholars who pursue American Studies that no historical belief or activity can be wholly deviant with respect to the age in which it appeared. Everything, after all, is a product of its cultural milieu and, therefore, has some more or less normal meaning within the culture. That assumption, among other things, steered me away from the tendency evident in some earlier historical accounts to interpret nineteenth-century spiritualists as either "kooks" or charlatans. Spiritualists, it clearly appeared, had given expression to many central intellectual currents of their time. For that reason, millions of Americans in all social classes had taken a strong and sympathetic interest in their claims. Arguing that American spiritualist leaders were close to the center of the American belief structure (they were "insiders"), the book insisted, I suppose, on interpreting American psychics as part of the mainstream.¹

Despite the book's demonstration of the importance and prevalence of spiritualist belief in nineteenth-century America, however, considerable evidence remained to suggest that the argument that rendered spiritualist perspectives "normal" or "typical" was downright perverse. Anyone who has read the writings of the leading proponents of spiritualist belief—or, for that matter, of the abolitionists and feminists with whom they frequently allied—is aware of their heavy reliance on what can appropriately be called a rhetoric of deviance.² In their public and private statements, they constantly claimed that they were outcasts (or "outsiders"). Since they had good and tangible reasons to talk about themselves as the victims of verbal and physical abuse, I had to ask myself whether efforts by the historian "to mainstream" spiritualist belief distorted the way in which historical actors perceived

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themselves or sought to resolve in too simple a way ambiguities inherent in their self-perceptions. A reading of the "objective facts" about the popularity of spiritualist activities seemed to bear an antagonistic, certainly confusing, relationship to any number of realities vigorously asserted by all of the parties in the controversy. Were spiritualists inside the nineteenth-century mainstream (because they created a broad popular movement) or outside it (because they constantly emphasized the powerful opposition they aroused)?

This nagging question would remain frivolous if the only thing at stake were the proper interpretation of American spiritualism. More general problems, however, are involved in the questions we pose about insiders and outsiders in America's past and present. American historical narrative has depended, perhaps to an unusual degree, on tales about people identified by one of these two labels or their equivalents. Given the "Balkanization" of the American past evident in our recent narratives, that dependence may even be increasing. In a period when the ideas of national character, an integrated society, and a shared national culture have come "under withering attack," narrative all the more seems to need a center; and reference to a mainstream, our currently popular metaphor that automatically divides the world into insiders and outsiders, provides one. The boundaries of a particular mainstream may be broad and fluid, but the metaphor nonetheless leads historians to distinguish between the people in its central currents and those in side channels and backwaters.

When historians write about insiders and outsiders, about mainstreams and eddies, they are doing more than locating a center. Historical stories about insiders and outsiders are constructed from the implicit and explicit assumptions that historians make about how power and status have been distributed in American life, about how values have been created and disseminated in a plural society. Historians locate the mainstream according to how they conceptualize majority and minority groups and according to how they analyze such sociological categories as marginal and elite groups and sub- and dominant cultures. Their division of historical landscapes into insiders and outsiders, ingroups and outgroups, conceals a multitude of judgments about American socioeconomic structure.

Historians are, of course, supposed to disagree about these matters, and the point of the ensuing discussion does not mean to suggest how we might attain a steady definition in our narratives for terms like "typical" or "dominant." Quite the contrary. Its point is to clarify some of the reasons why our disagreements about these matters have no ultimate resolution. It is also to suggest some ways in which we can make better sense of the historical contests between insiders and outsiders and to clarify the meaning of those contests within the context of American pluralism. To do these things, I will pay attention not only to the ways in which historians have used insider and outsider labels but also to the ways in which historical actors have used them. For both historians and historical actors often tend to conceal or neglect ambiguities that are essential to the meaning and importance of those and closely related forms of identification.

3 John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., New Directions in American Intellectual History (Baltimore, 1979), xii.
The organization of this essay is perhaps sufficiently eccentric to warrant a few initial sentences about the direction and aim of the argument. First, I will try to clarify the ideological perspectives that often lurk behind historians' use of insider and outsider labeling and to show in what ways the most familiar patterns of American historical narrative stereotype the role of outsiders. In the next section, I will examine some examples of insider and outsider rhetoric used by historical figures and suggest that historians' stereotypes, though all derivable from the rhetoric, often neglect important counterimages, which are frequently suppressed in the rhetoric but are nevertheless essential to its meaning. The following, and longest, section discusses some common consequences of the neglect of ambiguities in outsider identity. What mistakes of historical judgment can result when counterimages are not given due weight? In what ways can the historian's estimate of the political (or social or economic or intellectual) significance (or insignificance) of various outsider groups encourage a misreading of the meaning of outsider rhetoric? What can be misleading about the outsider's estimate of his own deviance? That section, though restricted to illustrations drawn from my current research in American religious history, suggests the need to redress a general interpretive neglect of the strategical uses of insider and outsider rhetoric. The final section of the essay draws out the reasons why contests between insiders and outsiders have an importance in America's pluralist past that cannot be analyzed solely in terms of objective conditions that determine America's socioeconomic structure. In that concluding part, I shall have something to say about what is wrong with the way we often try to understand typical or dominant culture in America.

The nagging question I asked earlier about nineteenth-century American spiritualists is, in fact, badly posed because attempts to answer it cannot at the same time address what we must often distinguish as levels of perceived reality and levels of factual reality. The latter relates to conditions that do not change as a result of what people, past or present, say about them. What follows is an attempt to ask better questions.

**What common roles have insiders and outsiders generally played in twentieth-century historical narrative?** The Progressive historians are the appropriate starting point for discussion. Strongly influenced by Marxist dialectical ideas, they were perhaps the first American historians to make outsider groups important to an interpretation of American life. Certainly they were the first to take much explicit interest in the sociostructural determinants of group conflict. In the histories of Charles A. Beard and Vernon Louis Parrington, the dominant, though not necessarily typical, culture in America was economically determined, reflecting the value system of the largest propertyholders. Since financiers and industrialists commanded vast reserves of economic and political power, the conservative norms imbedded in the dominant culture determined much of what happened in American life. But, thanks to the struggles of the economic underdogs, they did not determine everything. Inspired in different eras by such people as Thomas Paine, Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, and Eugene Debs, outsiders—the
humble folk who individually had no economic power—arose periodically to challenge the overlordship of the propertied comfortable classes.

Progressive patterns of narrative often present historical outsiders as both victims and heroes. Outsiders suffered from injustices imposed upon them by the insiders who controlled the mainstream institutions of economic and social power. Because of the circumstances of their lives—their low wages, the declining importance of their skills, their recent entry into Anglo-American culture—they could not take their “power, status, or sense of reality for granted.” They were not, however, defeated or unimportant. Despite their victimization, they bore a counterimage of the American mainstream, one ironically derived from a close reading of the egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence. “Outgroups,” to quote Robert Kelley, whose recent noneconomic structuring of American conflict none-theless fits a Progressive pattern, were “the ones among whom the basic ideals of the democratic order have been most energetically agitated.” Underdogs never successfully overturned the economic base of class dominance, but they did manage to organize effectively, especially in the Democratic party. Their struggle to shift the mainstream from what it was at any time in the past closer to what they thought it was and is supposed to be has never ended.

A markedly different configuration of insiders and outsiders is apparent in the narratives of Consensus-minded American historians. In the fashions of Consensus history, economically privileged groups have not foisted the dominant American culture upon powerless outsiders. Rather, the dominant culture in America has always been the result of a widely shared liberal viewpoint that grew naturally from the historical circumstances that gave birth to the American republic. Louis Hartz, whose classic book turned Alexis de Tocqueville’s tyranny of the majority into Lockean unanimity, argued this point of view most persuasively. But the general tendency of all Consensus narrative is to turn the mainstream into a broad and almost irresistible current. No longer conceptualized as the private swimming hole of economic elites, the center becomes a public bath to which almost all people, regardless of ties to minority or special interest groups, gain entry. In historical narrative, these assumptions work in a decisive way to undercut the role of outsiders as heroes and alter as well the meaning and significance of their victimization.

Consensus narrative turns most Americans into insiders who experienced outsiderhood, if at all, as a temporary form of identification. Focusing on the ever-widening mainstream, it argues that Americans were essentially alike even when they talked as if they were unlike. True outsiders—that is, alienated malcontents and socially marginal people—were not harbingers of progressive change. They were threats. They were the ones who might suddenly rally around the political banner of a Senator Joseph McCarthy. The narrative use that Richard Hofstadter

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made of the anti-intellectual and paranoid behavior of outgroups very much shaped the Consensus interpretation of "real" outsiderhood as a kind of social disease. Insofar as that form of identity gathered strength in any particular period, it disrupted the comity necessary to the stability of American pluralism. In Consensus narrative, the victimization of true outsiders turns them not into heroes but into villains of varying degrees of malevolence.6

Many American historians who began to write in the 1960s noted what they believed was a fundamental dilemma in Consensus narrative. On the one hand, with the significant exception of Daniel Boorstin's books, most Consensus history written in the 1950s had intended to make criticisms of the American liberal imagination.7 The existence of malcontented outsiders, whose status anxieties led them to support extremist politics, suggested the need to transcend the social attitudes accepted by the average insider American citizen. Unfortunately, and this is the other hand, Consensus narratives never specified how that might be done. The logic of the narratives seemed to legitimate the politics of compromisers and technicians who had neither personal reasons for challenging nor the necessary ideological perspectives to challenge the status quo. If the Consensus interpretation is right, American insiders had succeeded in making too many people share their hostility to ideological divisiveness. Neither the majority who shared their views nor the dissolve and sometimes disruptive remainder appeared likely to become the agents of truly progressive change.

Having made that observation, many young Radical historians began to take steps that restored heroic stature to historical outsiders. The task was not always easy, for the Radicals' perspective on the past was not nearly so sanguine as the one of the more Whiggish Progressives. Although "New Left" historians agreed with the Progressives that economic and social power, rather than a majoritarian viewpoint, had determined what was dominant culture in America's past, they emphasized more strongly the strength of that power. In fact, in one way that emphasis represented less a return to Progressive narrative than a reinforcement of the Consensus interpretation. Much like Hartz, Gabriel Kolko and Howard Zinn plotted narratives that showed liberal belief strangling the American political imagination.8 In their view, a numerically tiny governing class created the mainstream. Power elites exercised hegemony at any point in our past because they owned a disproportionate amount of the country's wealth, received a disproportionate share of the country's yearly income, and contributed a disproportionate

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6 For examples of the kind of analysis I have in mind, see the essays in Daniel Bell, ed., The Radical Right (Garden City, N.Y., 1964); Richard Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life (New York, 1965), and The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays (New York, 1965); and Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970 (New York, 1970).


8 Zinn wrote in his Postwar America, "All that I have said here supports the 'consensus' interpretation of American history which states, I believe, a profound truth about our society, that its progress and its political clashes have been kept within severe limits"; Zinn, Postwar America, 1945–1971 (Indianapolis, 1973), xvi–xvii. Something of the same perspective informs Kolko's The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916 (New York, 1963) and James Weinstein's The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900–1918 (Boston, 1968).
number of members to the country’s controlling institutions. Most other people in any historical era were simply “co-opted” into the mainstream and fell into a state of false consciousness. The mainstream side won by taming or splintering dissenting viewpoints in ways that nullified any real threat to the status quo.

Although citations to the work of C. Wright Mills and Antonio Gramsci certainly encouraged a reading of the past that diminished the political achievements that Progressive historians wanted to credit to historical outsiders, transforming what were once considered great victories into empty reforms that actually strengthened the economic position of power elites, recent Radical histories have focused more attention on outsiders than the narratives of any other school of American historiography have. Indeed, politically conscious outsiders—the ones whose struggles resulted in something that historians might regard as “a politically significant cultural achievement”9—became the subject of American history in the 1960s and 1970s, as scholars paid attention to many outgroups that the Progressive historians had barely noticed—feminists, blacks, native Americans, and immigrants with preindustrial values. The narrative assertion that some of these outgroups had maintained a value system at odds with the dominant culture underlines what is, after all, a crucial distinction between Consensus and Radical narratives. According to the New Left historians, America’s hegemonic bourgeois culture did not arise naturally out of shared historical experiences. It was the fabrication of specific class interests. The efforts of outgroups to gain a critical awareness of their true interests were therefore terribly important. Those struggles gave the past whatever meaning it has for the present.10 When Radical historians structure narrative around a politics of struggle generated by oppressed people outside the mainstream, they are paying homage to the most durable legacy of Progressive historiography. The Radical historian’s outsiders are almost always defeated heroes or victims. All the same, just as in Progressive history, they invariably carry the true version of the American dream in their heads.

Heroes, villains, victims—these roles, shaped in one way or another by historians’ perspectives, are the common ones that outsiders play in twentieth-century historical narratives. Those narratives are not, of course, quite so formulaic as my discussion here might suggest. But it should at least clarify what kinds of underlying issues historians argue when they divide the historical landscape between insiders and outsiders. How do social values and norms get created? How and why do the values of one group get imposed on another group? Who benefits from what gets called “mainstream” values and who gets oppressed? Who in the society can effectively contest the “mainstream” norms? The ways in which historians use insiders and outsiders in their narratives invariably indicate their answers to these questions. That is to say, whether historians make the outsider John Brown a noble hero or a misguided victim or a disruptive villain depends in large part on their views about the working, or nonworking, of American society.


The last of the usual roles that outsiders play in narrative is, in fact, a nonrole. Obviously, Consensus-minded historians, because of the inclusive nature of their mainstream, often simply omit some outgroups from any serious consideration. Unless an outsider group threatened to become disruptive, it can have no particular importance in historical narrative. True outsiderhood in the Consensus view often becomes synonymous with historical insignificance. For somewhat less obvious reasons, Progressive and Radical historians can be almost equally dismissive of some types of outgroups. Although their mainstream is less inclusive, or is not given the same “legitimate” status that Consensus narratives accord to it, they focus their attention on outsiders whose politics supported what the historian judges to be a “progressive” trend. Other outgroups they ignore or treat with harsh condescension. In addition, then, to the presentist assumptions implicit in the act of typecasting outsiders as heroes, villains, or victims, historians of all persuasions sometimes simply push, for various reasons, many outsiders to the fringes and margins of narrative. If they cannot serve a political, or ideological point in narrative, outsiders are in danger of disappearing altogether from historical sight.

Historians defend their narrative treatments of outsiders by insisting that a particular treatment is faithful to the facts. In other words, some outsiders really are heroes (Emma Goldman), some really are paranoid (Whittaker Chambers), and some really are best left to sociologists and psychologists of deviance (the people who died with Jim Jones in Guyana). In defense of these claims, historians can get a lot of help from the historical actors in question. After all, historical outsiders usually saw themselves as fitting stereotypical roles of heroes or victims, though not, perhaps, of villains. And many defined themselves as social radicals, or as persecuted martyrs, or as alienated underdogs. But the trouble is that outsiders quite commonly assumed all of the identities at once. Historians have no trouble quoting John Brown in ways that show the famous abolitionist analyzing himself as a victim, a hero, or a crazed fool. Before quoting words that emphasize one identity at the expense of another, however, they have good reason to think about why outsider rhetoric—or, alternatively, insider rhetoric—allows such a variety of interpretations. The rhetoric is not simple, and seldom does it in any easy way provide confirmation of or negate the points that historians often want to make in their narratives.

A few examples of “typical” insider and outsider rhetoric suffice to make clear the nature of the interpretive problem. The first one, drawn from an essay by the Reverend S. M. Campbell written in 1867, is on one level the declaration of someone who perceived his own values to be the ones that dominated American society and culture. “This is a Christian Republic, our Christianity being of the Protestant type,” he wrote. “People who are not Christians, and people called...
Christians, but who are not Protestants, dwell among us; but they did not build this house. We have never shut our doors against them but if they come, they must take up with such accommodations as we have." Campbell’s statement is obvious grist for any historical mill seeking to make Protestantism the dominant American culture of the mid-nineteenth century. Campbell’s words imply that he, as a member of that dominant culture, took his status and identity in America for granted.

The second example, this time of outsider rhetoric, comes from the memoirs of John Humphrey Noyes. Noyes was descended from respectable New Englanders; by virtue of his breeding and education, he knew a good bit about the traditions to which Campbell referred. Still, the antinomian implications in Noyes's teachings about Christian perfectionism had led to the severance of his ties to the church to which he was first called. In remembering, long after the fact, the moment when he had lost his license to preach, he wrote, "I had now lost my free standing in the Free Church, in the ministry, and in the College [Yale]. My good name in the great world was gone. My friends were fast falling away. I was beginning to be indeed an outcast. Yet I rejoiced and leaped for joy. Sincerely I declared that I was glad when I got rid of my reputation." Noyes called himself an outcast, and, by his other remarks, he invited historians to start plugging him into a narrative role either as victim, as disrupter, or as heroic protestor. But his statement, if pressed too quickly into the service of any one of these narrative lines, can be misleading. Both Noyes’s declaration of his outsiderhood and the opposite sort of declaration made by Campbell raise rather than settle a problem about locating American mainstreams.

As soon as we start to think about the occasion for each of these statements, the underlying reasons for such assertions, we begin to recognize almost mirror images of the explicit identifications. Campbell wrote what he did because he had grown unsure of his majority. He knew that significant groups were making claims that undercut his own claims to elite status. The self-proclaimed insider in this case defined a “mainstream” at the moment when the objective reality of that mainstream had in his own mind become problematic. A full interpretation of his statement requires our awareness of his awareness of cultural fragmentation. In 1867 substantial doubts existed as to whether a homogeneous Protestant mentality enjoyed much dominance, however that dominance is defined, in a country where most people did not belong to or attend a Protestant church and where the largest and fastest-growing denomination was Roman Catholic. Campbell's statement grew from rejection as much as from self-confidence. He harbored fears about the diminished influence of men like himself.

In contrast, Noyes’s explicit statement of rejection exuded self-confidence rather than fear, a sense of growing influence rather than a feeling of social isolation. Clearly, when Noyes emphasized the hostility directed at him, his alienation from his neighbors and their values, he was not proclaiming his insignificance or irrelevance. His words, contained in a journal written for future generations, were rather

chosen for the effect they had in stressing his importance. His enthusiastic admission that he was an outcast proceeded from a deeply held belief that he had achieved, whatever the paradox, a status and respectability that both God and his enemies took seriously. He tied his rhetoric into the ancient tradition of religious sacrifice that a long line of Christian saints and martyrs had made sacred. He could be certain that his American readers would not miss the point.

Spotting these counterimages does not require any between-the-lines reading. Indeed, they are explicitly stated in other passages drawn from Campbell's and Noyes's works. Persecuted individuals like Noyes, who in more recent times have typically wrapped themselves in the flag, have frequently dropped the rhetoric of deviance to emphasize their embodiment of the "true" American spirit. Reverend Campbell, along with virtually all other Protestant ministers in the nineteenth century, could scarcely utter a paragraph proclaiming the dominance of Protestantism in America without adding another bewailing its decline. From early in the century, they regularly trotted out the Jeremiad sermon to attack "secular" editors and politicians who gave them no help in their efforts to curb the Catholic menace, combat infidelity, or enforce Christian moral standards. H. A. Boardman, the pastor of the Walnut Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, stated flatly in 1840 that the "secular press" was "decidedly un-protestant, if not anti-protestant," and that "public sympathy" was with Catholics. "It is a remarkable fact," he said, that, if any one of the Protestant sects "rises up to withstand the bold and threatening aggressions of Romanism, it is sure to draw down upon itself the imputation of a self-aggrandizing and persecuting spirit."14 The complaint had many echoes. People who saw themselves in one mood as guardians of dominant American values seized regularly on the language of the martyr. Insider and outsider identities are rarely unmixed. In fact, when the identifications are of most interest to historians, they are interlocked. The assertion that one is an outsider often implies the opposite, and vice versa.

This point can easily be pushed too far. Obviously, the rhetoric of self-proclaimed insiders and self-proclaimed outsiders tells us a great deal about the social and economic realities that prevailed in a given period of time. Whatever Campbell did or did not say, America was in some important factual respects a Protestant nation in the mid-nineteenth century. Protestants, even if that term only signified any non-Catholic who adhered to a vague sort of Christianity, could rely on the support of many institutions (the public schools, for example). Compared to Irish-Catholic immigrants, native-born Anglo-Americans had unproblematic identities, and they held the vast majority of key economic and political positions. And, whatever Noyes did or did not say, he confronted throughout his career customs and laws that were directly antagonistic to his goals. The burdens of outsiderhood, no matter what boost they give to a sense of self-importance, are quite real. The social costs that Noyes paid for his outsider identity were, relatively speaking, light, which no doubt explains the unusual cheerfulness in his remembrances of the circumstances that made him an outcast.

Although there most likely was some sort of connection between rhetoric and factual reality, there are particular reasons why these connections often became tenuous in conflicts between American insiders and American outsiders. The historian who quotes Campbell to prove that dominant American culture was purely and simply Protestant or who quotes Noyes to prove that “complex marriage” offended the moral standards of most Americans is asking for trouble. Mistakes start piling up once the historian forgets about the wide gap that is maintained in history between a factual reality, which keeps the same face, and a perceived reality, which does not. The assertions that historical actors made to identify insiders and outsiders have to be considered in part as metaphors and as strategic fictions. Such statements do not—cannot—tell us all there is to know about power and status in American life, for they were often the ways in which power and status were contested. A group that calls itself the moral majority or a political party that titles its journal *Mainstream* is trying to shape perception in a particular way.\(^{15}\) The label does not necessarily describe the group’s numerical strength. Indeed, such labels usually aim at trying to change the facts by taking what strategic advantage there is in being identified with the majority. The reasons behind this strategy may seem obvious—at least to anyone who has read Tocqueville on America. What American historians more often miss, however, in relating their stories about insiders and outsiders are the advantages that can be drawn from the identification as an outsider—advantages that significantly alter the roles, and nonroles, that historians have usually given outsiders in historical narrative.

**Rhetoric from the Past Generally Gives Historians No Choice but to Treat Some Groups as Insiders and Others as Outsiders.** At the same time, historians cannot forget about the counterimages running through the rhetoric or about the impressive degree of popular and elite support that the values of outsiders often enjoyed. The question now becomes, What can happen if historians do?

In this section, I shall ignore differences between particular schools of historical narrative (but return to those in the conclusion) and concentrate on how stereotyped treatments of outsiders can cause blind spots in historical judgment. I know that common narrative stereotypes about outsiders capture some aspects of historical reality well enough. I am concerned with those instances in which the stereotypes mislead us about the meaning and uses of outsiderhood in American culture, for trying to characterize outsiderhood simply in terms of objectively measured distances from an objectively located, unshifting mainstream is impossible. No matter what rhetoric may seem to say, sometimes to be an outsider can really mean, both objectively and figuratively, to stand at the center of American experience.

The notion that historical outsiders stand at some measurable distance from the dominant (typical?) concerns of American life is perhaps most strongly reinforced

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\(^{15}\) One journal of American communism, published between 1956 and 1963, bore the title *Mainstream*; before 1956, the name of the journal was *Masses and Mainstream*. 
in our conceptualization of the outsider as victim. We analyze victims as people who consciously or unconsciously violate social norms and are punished as a result. We can cite almost endlessly the words of historical outsiders who recall for us the ridicule of their friends and neighbors when they dared to be different. According to Joseph Smith, his relating the story of his controversial vision of 1820 "excited a great deal of prejudice against me... and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase." The American historical record is filled with people who suffered savage discrimination because of clear differences between themselves and their surrounding culture. The sorriest tales relate to non-English-speaking immigrants, to native Americans, and to black slaves.

Clear and obvious differences do not, however, tell the whole story about many historical outsiders. The indisputable facts about the harassment and brutal murder of Joseph Smith make Smith an outsider in any historical narrative. Whether he remembered the stories about his early persecution with unfailing accuracy or not, his translation of the Book of Mormon and his founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints clearly caused him trouble in his upstate New York community. Those Americans who joined the Mormon Church crossed sharp boundaries drawn between themselves and surrounding "gentile" settlements and were eventually driven into exile. Yet historians know some equally important things about Joseph Smith and his followers. Those persecuted outsiders were clearly optimistic, pragmatic, and hardworking—a group of people whose religion "brought together various impulses and ideas of the emerging American Weltanschauung." If they were so like many other Americans, why did the practices of their religion, which did not for a long time include polygamy, cause such severe social consequences?

That question cannot be answered without taking into account the complexities of outsider identification and the ways in which Smith controlled his role as an outcast. That is to say, the deep divisions that sprang up between Mormons and many other Americans cannot be explained entirely by reference to differences between Smith's beliefs and those championed by powerful Protestant institutions. Labeling theories of deviance are surely useful for understanding the nineteenth-century Mormon controversy. Outsiders (deviants) do get more or less arbitrarily stigmatized whenever the legally dominant part of the social order wants to draw boundaries. The theory explains why the persecuted outsiders in fact often share the basic value structure of the persecuting insiders. Groups whose objective deviance from existing norms is vast can safely be ignored by the dominant parts of society. What is not sufficiently emphasized in labeling theory, however, is the degree to which both parties to a controversy have active parts in drawing

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16 Smith, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as quoted in Fawn M. Brodie, No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet (2nd edn., New York, 1971), 23.
boundaries. Smith may innocently have crossed some lines that others suddenly made an important test of social conformity. But Smith did a great deal subsequently to keep those lines important. By the time he wrote “the Lord has constituted me so curiously that I glory in persecution,” Smith had learned to exploit his identification as an outcast.19 Like John Humphrey Noyes, he responded to persecution by letting his imagination elaborate and dwell upon what it meant to be a victim.

One of Mormonism’s frustrated nineteenth-century critics complained that the “Mormons always have, and ever will thrive by persecution. They know well the effects it has upon them, and consequently crave to be persecuted.”20 We need not accept “crave” as the proper verb to recognize that Mormon history does seem to bear out the observation of Georg Simmel that “groups, and especially minorities, that exist in struggle and persecution, frequently rebuff approaches and tolerance from the other side, because otherwise the solidity of their opposition would disappear, and without this they could not further struggle.”21 More recently, Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine have noted that “oppositional” movements often perceive more opposition to their cause than seems to exist objectively. That “unrealistic” notion of opposition results not from paranoia but from the functional benefits it can obtain for the movement’s strength.22 Persecution, real or imagined, can breed success.

Joseph Smith and other nineteenth-century Mormon leaders did not discover the principles of contemporary sociology and make them central to their plans; they did not in high and secret councils choose strategies that deliberately invited misunderstanding and persecution. They did, however, choose strategies that insisted on their distinctiveness. Knowing that they had considerable control over the way that other people perceived them, they reacted to the widely advertised belief that they were different by seeking to reinforce it. Their public speeches and writings made no attempt to reconcile the differences they had with the gentiles. They sought to maximize, rather than minimize, the importance of the innovative features of their church. Mormons, not gentiles, authored the notion of a separate Mormon culture. It was not distance from a mainstream that made that idea credible; it was, rather, the consequence of a conflict in which all parties found strategic reasons to stress not what Mormons had in common with other Americans, which was a great deal, but what they did not have in common. The mutual exaggeration of differences, which encouraged the idea that the differences could not be peacefully resolved, gives historians a considerable problem in trying to relate this controversy between insiders and outsiders to questions they have about dominant and subordinate value systems in American life.

19 Smith, “Address of May 26, 1844,” in his History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as quoted in Donna Hill, Joseph Smith: The First Mormon (Garden City, N.Y., 1977), 392.
A similar sort of problem is raised by the struggles of Roman Catholics, another important religious group that is usually given a victim's role in historical narratives about nineteenth-century America. These narratives, which strongly condemn nativist attacks upon Catholicism, end with the happy conclusion that the Church prospered in adversity. Indeed it did; but, as with the case of Mormonism, that result was not entirely fortuitous, nor did the persecution of the Church result solely from the affront it raised to Protestant "mainstream" norms.

Orestes Brownson, a native-born American who converted to Roman Catholicism, did not believe that opposition to the Church was inevitable. If Catholics would "quietly take their position as free and equal American citizens . . . , they will gain that weight and influence in the country to which their merit entitles them. All depends on ourselves." Brownson was surely much too optimistic in this estimate, just as his famous antagonist, Bishop John Hughes of New York City, charged. But the Irish-born Hughes, whose influence on the course of American Catholicism was far greater than Brownson's, never gave Brownson's advice much of a chance. Rather than urging Catholics to take a quiet place, Hughes learned early in his career that the tradition of outsiderhood had important uses. During the bitterly fought New York City school controversy of the mid-nineteenth century, Hughes played a central role in destroying the Public School Society and replacing it with a school administration less obviously hostile to Catholics. Although Hughes was as much a victor as anyone in the dispute, public statements stressed the opposition that his positions aroused rather than the support they received. Undeniably a powerful man, he rarely lost an opportunity to review the "vituperation, calumny, and slander" heaped on him.

"Americanizers" in the Catholic Church were always critical of Hughes's militance and of what they regarded as his choice to separate Irish-born Catholic immigrants from the larger currents of American nationality. In 1967 Andrew Greeley wrote that Hughes "did not like American society. . . . He could see nothing but hostility and persecution." Another Catholic scholar, David O'Brien, has argued that Hughes encouraged a "ghetto mentality" among American Catholics, that he did little to assist "his immigrant followers to understand their surroundings and to live in peace with their neighbors." Both judgments are in part correct, although they seriously underestimate the kinds of strength and influence Hughes managed to conceal under the label "victim." Hughes in fact liked America and often said so. Denying that America was de jure a Protestant country, he believed that the American Catholic Church had enjoyed great success. Nonetheless, he concentrated on the paradoxical strategy of pursuing the power of the "insider" by keeping the stigma of outsiderhood constantly attached to the people he tried to lead. Hughes and most other nineteenth-century American Catholic leaders developed a vested interest in supporting the claims of nativists that America was de facto

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overwhelmingly a Protestant country. By and large they left it to the outspoken “Americanizers” among them to dream idly of a Catholic America while they forged a more important myth that posited almost a natural connection between Catholic outsiderhood and Catholic power. They perpetuated vague notions about an American mainstream of Protestant values in order to make victimization a usable tradition.

Interpretive difficulties similar to those that are created in narrative versions of the outsider as victim appear in narratives that stereotype outsiders as agents of social change. The assumption that outsiders stand at a measurable distance from a set of dominant values encourages the conception of outsiderhood as something that inevitably promotes social change or disruption. Historical figures who did not share what are posited to be mainstream concerns must, it is argued, pose a threat to those concerns. Their discontent, whether it serves progressive or regressive ideologies, acts in narrative as a challenge to the status quo. The historian’s own biases may make the pattern a useful form of narrative. But, as is true of our images of historical victims, those biases find much support in the statements of historical figures. Often the same historical statements that stress victimization tell of the holy causes for which victims struggled.

Perhaps we do not need reminding that the causes of historical outsiders were not always very holy. The persecutors (not merely the persecuted), the Know-Nothings (not merely the Catholics), the mobs that attacked the abolitionists (not merely the Garrisonians)—all at one time or another posed as beleaguered outgroups. But their posited victimization may suggest another oft-overlooked point: outsider rhetoric, regardless of the group or individual employing it, has some uses that are as likely to thwart change as to promote it. The quickest way to make this argument, although the main point has nothing to do with a particular political persuasion, is simply to note how often American conservatives of one kind or another have resorted to outsider rhetoric. The case of Henry Adams should remind us that people who possessed elite social status by any reasonable view of the facts did not necessarily perceive of themselves as part of the American “mainstream.” If Adams seems to represent an extreme case, an eccentric attracted to a kind of conservatism that had never been comfortable with American institutions, then consider a recent representative of the more typical school of American free-enterprise conservatism. William Simon, a man of considerable wealth and a recent secretary of the treasury, suggested in memoirs published in 1978 that he was an outsider. “The United States,” he wrote with a passion verging on bitterness, “is now ruled, almost exclusively, by a political-social-intellectual elite that is committed to the belief that the government can control our complex marketplace by fiat better than the people can by individual choice.”

It would be a mistake, I think, to write Simon’s comment off as mere hypocrisy. In America’s past, outsiders have taken their stand at the top and the bottom and the middle of the social scale. And, whatever our perception of the politics of any of them, they have all in some sense invented a mainstream against which to direct

opposition. Obviously, some inventions are more "real" than others, and some oppositions more serious and less chosen than others. We should at least recognize, however, that a common strategy of exaggeration can be found in the writings of Eugene Debs as well as in those of Simon and that the exaggeration, rather than creating a verbal space for radicals to sustain their dreams, just as often created a verbal space for conservatives to vent their despair.

Every declaration of outsiderhood, even Simon's, is on one level made with the intention of changing something. But the rhetoric, whenever it expresses a well-developed form of self-identification, also means to conserve, in a nonpolitical sense. Victor Turner has shown in what ways a "liminal" or "underground" identity can act as a challenge to the existing social structure.27 Yet, even the pose of the revolutionary can quickly become domesticated, not because the "system" somehow finds a way to crush revolutionary zeal but because the identity becomes important for itself. An outsider identification pursued by a group over time can provide the group with well-recognized social status within the structure of existing social arrangements. Mormon self-identity was initially shaped by the radical notion that those who followed Joseph Smith were preparing the way for the transformation of America into the Kingdom of God. But the longer Mormons waited for that kingdom, the more their outsider identification took on a life of its own. It concerned itself less with changing America than with preserving the social structures that made the identification significant. The Mormon sense of uniqueness was maintained by preserving—conserving—an oppositional relation to a perceived mainstream. At the same time, the effective desire to alter that mainstream lessened and to preserve—conserve—the status quo increased.

Andrew Hacker has noted that ethnicity, one form of American outsider identity, may be a form of consciousness that keeps people from making trouble for the system. The cultivation of ethnicity allows group members to make the best of their relatively low social standing by finding psychic satisfaction in their limited opportunities.28 Much the same point could be made about the kind of consciousness sponsored by many nonfeminist women's groups in America's past and present. The conservative uses of outsiderhood must almost always qualify the use of the category in historical narrative to emphasize a potential force for change or disruption. An opposite potential also exists, even if it is rarely directly expressed in outsider rhetoric. Historical narrative may properly champion the cause of economic underdogs. But that commitment should not erase our awareness that outsiders often had a substantial investment in many of the same cultural and social values that maintained the status of insiders. The image of outsiders as agents of change, no more than the image of them as victims, does not capture their full importance for American historical narrative. Certainly, a priori judgments cannot tell us whether outsiders were more likely than insiders to promote the cause of social justice.

This point raises a third common problem in the narrative treatment of outsiders. Noticing outsiders only as agents of change often leads to almost total neglect of important outsider groups, a neglect that is yet another option that a great deal of historical rhetoric invites. Historical outsiders frequently used words to suggest what we now call marginal social status. The exaggeration of their differences from others cannot help but carry that implication. Whether historians decide to pick up the invitation should depend on what they conclude about the strategies involved in outsiders’ declarations that “we are not like anyone else.” The decision often depends, however, on other things, such as a historian’s beliefs about progressive politics; and historians as a result fail to attend to values that, while not dominant among elites, were nonetheless quite typical in popular culture and enjoyed a degree of support among elites, regardless of the explicit statements in their public rhetoric. To illustrate what kinds of confusion strategical assertions about marginality may cause, not only to historians but even to the historical actors involved, there is no better case than the experiences of Christian Fundamentalists in the twentieth century. As before, the confusion occurs when counterimages contained in the rhetoric of deviance are ignored.

Christians who coupled insistence on a literal interpretation of Scripture with premillennialism began to find themselves written out of the Protestant mainstream in the late nineteenth century. In fact, ministers who favored a premillennial view of Christ’s coming helped do the writing out, inasmuch as they had come to believe that they had scriptural reasons to accept the depiction of themselves as outsiders. The prophecies of the Book of Revelation suggested that the number of true Christians would dwindle to a small, suffering minority as the last days approached. The “small remnant” mentality grew stronger among premillennialists during the first part of the twentieth century. National press reaction to the Scopes-Darwin trial in the 1920s was only one of the causes. By the end of the 1920s, leading Fundamentalist ministers were declaring that their efforts to prevent Christian Liberals from gaining a dominant position in the largest Protestant denominations had failed. This was by no means the case, but the perception was important in what happened next. With some considerable success in the 1930s and 1940s, the most uncompromising of the Fundamentalists tried to organize the faithful into separate churches and associations. Although they put a much different interpretation on their announced “failure” than Liberal Protestants did, they outdid everyone in attesting to the declining significance of Fundamentalism as a force in the “mainline” churches. That is to say, Fundamentalists joined with the Liberals, who by and large played the insiders in this particular struggle, in distorting the facts about the strength of Fundamentalist Christianity. Exaggeration, once again, was essential to outsider rhetoric.

29 Pessimism was not the dominant tone in late-nineteenth-century premillennial journals and sermons. Dwight L. Moody, the best known of the premillennial ministers, was invariably upbeat. In contrast, James Brookes, in his journal *The Truth: or, Testimony for Christ*, stressed the decline of Protestant Christianity. He persisted in his work, he wrote, as “a help to the scattered witnesses for God’s insulted truth, although it is certain that the protest will be unheeded, and that the voices of the witnesses, here and there, will be silenced amid the clamor of infidelity which will close the present age”; Brookes, Editorial, *The Truth*, 11 (1885): 530.

30 The separatist-minded Carl McIntire was the shrillest voice in asserting Fundamentalism’s rout in the major Protestant denominations. The more moderate voice of William Bell Riley had, however, begun to stress...
Many American historians in writing about the twentieth century have wanted to emphasize a theme of secularization. For that reason, in analyzing the consequences of the Scopes-Darwin trial in Dayton, Tennessee, they were more than happy to take the statements of Fundamentalists as evidence that their movement became something of a fringe cult after the 1920s, a refuge for the alienated and the dispossessed. The anti-Darwinism and the anti-intellectualism that historians correctly understood as basic to the Fundamentalist stand were not things they saw as helpful to a rational political order. Given all of the other troubles that stood in the way of the political enlightenment of Americans, historians wanted to write Americans beyond their religious backwardness as quickly as possible.

Unhappily for the proponents of secularization theory, various forms of conservative Christianity, which included Fundamentalists but also included groups more specifically labeled neo-evangelical and pentecostal, staged a dramatic comeback in the 1970s. That in any case was what the media reported. The wealth of publicity that attended this "resurgence" put Fundamentalists and historians alike in something of a quandary. Fundamentalists faced an identity crisis. They had to settle what George Marsden has characterized as their "strikingly paradoxical tendency to identify sometimes with the 'establishment' and sometimes with the 'outsiders.'" They had to worry about the cost of accepting an image—being tailored for them in the press—that settled the paradox by placing them firmly in the "mainstream" of Protestant Christianity. Recent issues of the glossy journals of conservative Christianity, themselves a sign of what can superficially be transformed as a result of media attention, have to an unusual degree been filled with hand-wrting discussions about the dangers of "respectability." And with good reason. The outsider's stance, which in this case was frequently accompanied by a strident patriotism, had worked rather well for the Fundamentalists, keeping the faithful militant even in those churches where the movement had supposedly died. The wholesale switch to an insider's identity contained risks; among other things, it voided the assumption that until Christ's coming the hypocrites must control the churches. A peace treaty with Liberals clearly eliminates one primary reason why

the defeat of Fundamentalism by the end of the 1920s. Louis Gasper, in describing the mood of Fundamentalists in the 1930s, wrote, "For the most part they acted like martyrs and regarded themselves as the 'faithful remnant' of modern times suffering for Jesus Christ. This was a psychological stimulant, because they believed their faithfulness would be rewarded posthumously." Gasper, The Fundamentalist Movement (The Hague, 1963), 21.

For an influential book that guided much of what was subsequently said, see Dean M. Kelley, Why Conservative Churches Are Growing (New York, 1972). Also see Richard Quebedeaux, The Young Evangelicals: Revolution in Orthodoxy (New York, 1974), and The New Charismatics: The Origins, Development, and Significance of Neo-Pentecostalism (Garden City, N.Y., 1976).


Fundamentalists had been influential. All of their previous rhetoric had implied that the acceptance of majority or mainstream status meant defeat.

The quandary of historians is of a different sort. Realizing that things rarely happen as suddenly as journalists like to think, historians must come to grips with the likelihood that the relative number of liberals and conservatives among Protestant believers has changed less dramatically over the last sixty years than historical narrative has suggested. Of course we have no reliable way to be absolutely sure. We can tally up leaders and militants in each camp, but those figures do not get us very far in estimating what sorts of belief attracted less active church members. Nonetheless, a decent regard for historical continuity suggests that, although recent media accounts have swayed the way liberals and conservatives have perceived their relative strength in the Protestant camp (not unimportant in itself), they have overstated the degree to which belief actually changed. Therefore, judgments that have made Fundamentalism a movement of drastically dwindling significance in the twentieth century, although they have reflected fairly enough one image in the historical rhetoric, have ended by distorting historical reality in the worst possible way. Historians, by ignoring the contradictory elements in self-perception, the counterimages in Fundamentalist rhetoric, have caused a good chunk of the American population to disappear. Such benign neglect can serve admirable moral purposes in narrative. Yet it produces history that many Americans cannot recognize as their own.

The lines between historical insiders and outsiders may seem so hopelessly muddled in subjective perceptions that American historians ought simply to drop any suggestion of those categories in constructing narrative. We are stuck with some fundamental problems, and one of my purposes here has been to clarify the reasons why we can never definitively resolve such questions as when or even whether Roman Catholics entered the American mainstream. Even if we accept the common opinion that they did enter the mainstream sometime in the twentieth century, we cannot prove the case merely by referring to such undeniably important information as rising intermarriage among Catholic ethnic groups, the upward movement of average Catholic family income, or the election of John F. Kennedy as president. With respect to purported mainstream boundaries, these facts are important only to the degree that they prompted American Catholic and Protestant leaders to modify dramatically their nineteenth-century rhetorical patterns. Making sense of those patterns is a more difficult chore than citing demographic information or election results. The same caveat applies to the study of other groups. The opinion of one historian that Utah's Senator Reed Smoot led a twentieth-century Mormon march into the American mainstream has to be viewed


35 For a useful collection that offers varying perspectives on the Church's place in America, see Thomas T. McAvoy, ed., Roman Catholicism and the American Way of Life (Notre Dame, Ind., 1960).
cautiously. Present-day Mormons, despite all of the chatter about their having become “super-Americans,” still know how to keep their rhetorical distance from the mainstream when it suits their purposes. And, to complicate the matter further, Mormons’ use of a less strident language of differentiation does not in itself prove that the Mormon world view has undergone a transformation that in some easily defined, objective way has “normalized” their system of belief.

Given the almost endless variety of possible misinterpretation, the temptation to abandon the effort to make sense of the complex relationship among particular events, perception, and rhetoric is strong. But this relationship, with all of its inherent and attendant problems for historians, is the very thing that gives historical importance to questions about insiders and outsiders. We should not, therefore, reduce the narrative uses of insider and outsider categories but, instead, allow our narratives the chance to heighten rather than conceal the ambiguities. Perhaps the time has come for American historians to stop using the particular word “mainstream.” It carries too many normative connotations about what values most Americans really did accept. Its casual and habitual use invariably deflects thought away from difficult problems about how to discuss typical or dominant values. An overused metaphor, it works to dismiss the fictional aspects of insider and outsider labeling and invites simplified conceptual versions of what is majority and minority culture in America. Carried through, however, with a proper appreciation for the reasons why distortion and exaggeration are part of the meaning and why outsiders on one issue may be insiders on other issues, a narrative focus on contests between insiders and outsiders remains one of the best ways to analyze America’s past. It works because the contests themselves were typically American, rather than necessarily the values that one side or the other proclaimed. Historical analysis of the contests is a means to open up, not settle prematurely, a multitude of questions about what were typical or dominant values in America’s past. Such analysis must examine the social costs and benefits that attached to insider and outsider identifications on a case by case basis.

It is, of course, one thing to argue that the most common patterns of historical narrative do not fully reveal the complexity of these issues and quite another to

36 For various issues relating to the “Americanness” of the Mormons, see Klaus Hansen, Mormonism and the American Experience (Chicago, 1981), esp. chaps. 2, 8; the essays in Marvin Hill and James Allen, eds., Mormonism and American Culture (New York, 1972); John Sorenson, “Mormon World View and American Culture,” Dialogue: A Journal of Modern Thought, 8 (1973): 17–29; and Editorial Introduction: “In This [Fall] Issue,” Utah Historical Quarterly, 45 (1977): 323. In a January 1979 syndicated column, the conservative columnist George F. Will wrote, “Mormons comprise the most singular great church to come into existence in the United States, and it is quintessentially American.”

37 In addition to the national, sociopolitical mainstream, there is apparently a mainstream tendency in every subcategory of American life. Recent articles in the New York Times have announced that Hispanics are “beginning to have a broad impact on the economic, social, and cultural life of mainstream America,” that “courses on ethics . . . have moved into the mainstream of American universities and professional schools,” that conservatism, once a “backwater of American intellectual and political life, has spilled into the mainstream,” and the Village People “sociologically . . . attest to the continuing permeation of homosexual ideas into the mainstream.” References pulled more or less randomly from scholarly works about America posit such things as “mainstream political discourse,” “a Marxist mainstream,” “mainstream feminism,” and “mainstream Pentecostalism.” With respect to normative overtones of the metaphor, remember that “mainstreaming,” as an educational goal, is a “good thing”; it is the process by which the aspirations of “normal” men and women become realizable by everyone.
Insiders and Outsiders in American Historical Narrative

poset an alternative. Any usable suggestions must derive from recognizing what is right and wrong in the typecasting of outsiders found in the major schools of American historiography. Actually, a good bit of what I have said here bears out some important themes of Consensus interpretation. This essay has, after all, pointed out that differences between ostensibly antagonistic groups have often been more apparent than real. It has, furthermore, supported the notion that centers of meaningful power really have been dispersed in American life. The rituals of outsiderhood, whatever they might seem to imply about alienation or victimization, have often been the means of finding or even maintaining a well-established, comfortable place in American life. The tradition of dissent, and the moral authority and respect dissent can command, have contributed to the relative stability of a plural system that even its architects had feared might quickly collapse.

I do think that many of the insights of Consensus historians are essentially correct. We know that at least some immigrant groups into this country, even in the late nineteenth century, shared more with the host country than was generally recognized. We know, too, that many immigrant groups, having gone through a cultural assimilation, continued to resist what Milton Gordon called "structural assimilation." We know that many "ethnics" stressed their differences from other groups in America, even when their sense of those groups remained vague, and cultivated in public rhetoric the feeling that "this country did not belong to them." This last sensibility continues to inform the strategies of the so-called new ethnicity. Michael Novak's *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, published a decade ago, fits into the well-established tradition of making outsiderhood count to one's advantage.

Novak's re-invention of the Protestant mainstream and his exaggeration of the differences between Catholics and Protestants were his ways of cutting WASP America down to size. People like Novak insisted, of course, that the American mainstream was shifting to include ethnic groups—that "America really was becoming America." But, if America ever did become America in Novak's sense, then our variegated national culture would be indistinguishable from a homogeneous one. Differences remain important only if someone asserts their existence and takes them seriously.

As it happens, a failure to appreciate this last point has seriously disabled Consensus interpretation. If Consensus historians have understood well enough that differences between groups have often been exaggerated, they have not been very sensitive to the reasons why many asserted, and even imagined, differences have so effectively divided people. A Consensus viewpoint might correctly spot "phony" aspects of Novak's ethnicity as judged by some objective standards, but it

has trouble making sense of the ways in which "subjective" perception itself becomes "objective" historical information, to be analyzed and interpreted just like crime statistics or marriage patterns or election results. Suggesting that antagonism in American life was somehow always the result of misunderstanding, as Louis Hartz did, imposed severe handicaps on historical imagination. Consensus narrative tended to render cultural differences ("real" outsiderhood) either relatively rare—and, hence, historically unimportant—or rapidly disappearing—and, hence, of no great moment. Since Consensus interpretation could not adequately explain why Americans quarreled, it has encouraged us to think that they did not. The quarrels that did get noticed were deprived of substantive content. The argument that perception does not count dissolved differences. The possibility that competing groups turned similar values to very different uses was not explored.41 These failures contributed to what was surely the biggest mistake in Consensus interpretation: the notion that the dispersal of power in America had led to a rough equality among groups. To say that self-proclaimed outsiders often gained an effective control over their lives and that self-proclaimed insiders were often insecure (as this essay has argued) is not to demonstrate that groups, of either the insider or the outsider variety, have had an equal say in American life.

Schools of historiography that have stressed conflict, therefore, began with a solid advantage over the Consensus school. Rather than making a disappearing line between insiders and outsiders the grand theme of American history, they have recognized that American experience is unintelligible without giving central importance to the lines insiders and outsiders drew, and consciously perpetuated. The aim of narrative should not be to drain those contests of meaning, because the participants had not realized their common commitment to Locke, but to explore the sorts of social meaning, real or imagined, they created. From the standpoint of this essay, what is weak in Progressive and Radical narrative is the tendency to turn all contests into sociopolitical struggles. Insiders were important only as the normal occupants of the most powerful positions in America and as the defenders of the status quo. Outsiders were important only as the economic underdogs who, because they had no social standing to protect, championed greater social justice. This sort of meaning is only one among many possibilities. As we have seen, outsiders may have had a significant social status and selfish interests to protect. They may have victimized as well as have been victims. And they may have had an importance to American culture even if they did not criticize things that some historians think they should have.

Undeniably, the number of American outsiders being recovered in historical narrative is growing at an impressive rate. That process has inevitably called attention to some of the complexities and ambiguities discussed in this essay. Radical historians especially have demonstrated that many groups and individuals, formerly thought to be without power or significant influence, had both. Thus, Herbert Gutman, in a postscript to a justly famous article, chided an earlier

generation of labor historians for accepting the view that “the Gilded Age radical lives outside the mainstream of his times.” In following the “route” of the Paterson, New Jersey, socialist leader Joseph McDonnell, Gutman found a way to “fit the Gilded Age labor radical into the mainstream of that era’s history.”

For several reasons, however, I am not completely reassured by present trends. Outsiders are still taken up in narrative largely for the political significance they can be assigned. The full importance of outsiderhood in American historical experience will continue to go unrecognized until we are willing to see that not all, perhaps not most, outsiders have been “nice” or egalitarian-minded people. Once we finish studying the many historical groups whose protests remain politically important in our own time, we may find that we still have not got very close to writing a “people’s history of the United States.” Too much will remain buried, either with pity or contempt, under the label “fringe” or “marginal.”

Second, to turn back to the question that began this essay, we do have to ask whether “mainstreaming” people who were once considered outsiders or passive victims is exactly the right narrative tactic. Constructing history so that Joseph McDonnell becomes one of the founders of the welfare state may only be Consensus history with a politically raised consciousness. It may reflect well enough some facts, yet still seriously distort the way people defined their own acts. The perceptions of historical actors, too, are facts. Inserting McDonnell narratively into an American mainstream can only undercut the oppositional strategy in his own self-identity.

Can historians ask questions about nineteenth-century spiritualists and Joseph McDonnells that can treat levels of factual and perceived reality together—questions that can assume the central cultural importance of contests between insiders and outsiders but that do not try to settle which side best reflected American norms? Clearly we can, but only if we stop assessing these contests solely for their impact on sociopolitical conflicts affecting American egalitarian principles. As a cultural process, contests between insiders and outsiders do not give the historian clear ways to divide the landscapes of the past into sub- and dominant cultures, but they do help us see that commonly held cultural values and norms did not always create common meanings or serve common purposes. To be sure, empirical research will reveal that many outsider groups had no influence, were truly deviant, and remained marginal to the major concerns of most American communities. Yet American historians cannot possibly discuss culture in America without recognizing the importance of the rhetoric and activities of opposition. (I do not therefore share the fashionable view that the study of outsiders, by showing us what America was not, can help us discern what America was.) By analyzing outsiders more carefully, we can more adequately address questions about the distribution of power and status in American life.

We cannot keep the historian’s own perceptions out of the answers, and particular ideologies will no doubt continue to inform the shape of American

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historical narrative. Indeed, since I have argued that the perceptions of historical actors themselves not only fail as reliable guides to definitions of dominance or typicality but also confuse the interpretation of other empirical data, an ideological perspective may seem to be the only remaining way to begin a useful analysis of American social structure. I am somewhat reluctantly drawn to that point of view. But particular ideologies will, I think, lead historians in more interesting directions, if they do not merely quote insider and outsider rhetoric to support or knock down Whiggish views of American history, if they actively pursue in their narratives the ambiguities that gave the rhetoric meaning in historical time. In so doing, they will preserve the best insights of the major schools of American historiography and find better reasons than narrative now provides to look closely at groups that have not yet commanded much historical attention. After all, outsiders were as American as cherry pie not because it makes sense to award the ones we admire posthumous admission into a mainstream but because their contests with insiders were the means by which many Americans invented themselves.