

## *Heterodox Economics Newsletter*

A RENEGADE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES, Thaddeus Russell, New York, NY: Free Press, 2010; ISBN: 978-4165-7106-3, 382 pages.

*Reviewed by* Cameron M. Weber, New School for Social Research

When reading *Renegade*, one is reminded of Robert Nozick, and may find himself in the realm of radical heterodoxy:

My earlier reluctance [of questioning State paternalism] is not present in this volume, because it has disappeared. Over time I have grown accustomed to the views and their consequences, and I now see the political realm through them. (Should I say that they enable me to see through the political realm?) Since many of the people who take a similar position are narrow and rigged, and filled paradoxically, with resentment at other freer ways of being, my now having natural responses which fit the theory puts me in some bad company (Nozick 1974, x).

Thaddeus Russell's excellent work of popular history fits neatly into the context of political economy. The text exposes the U.S. founders as constructivists with puritanical idealism, ultimately creating the Power against which the Renegade acts as an agent of change. Furthermore, the civil and economic liberties that remain in the United States are due to the history of the renegade acting outside of this constructed "formal sector" Power.

From the sociology of 'deviance and control', one learns to classify individuals in three ways: some are *conformists* who agree to society's rules and act according to them; others are *nonconformists* who agree to society's rules yet do not always act according to them; and there is yet another group referred to as *rebels*, who do not agree with the social rules at a given place and time and act accordingly. Russell's renegade is sociology's rebel, although the renegade may not be conscious of this fact and may be indifferent. Russell's renegades are two-fold, using ideal-types, degenerate sensualists and entrepreneurs. It should be noted too that Russell often runs against the grain; his book touches on issues that are not at all politically correct. The work is in fact an exercise in political antagonism.

### *The Founding*

In the simplest terms, Russell's use of U.S. history can best be understood through the examination of his chapter titles. In "Drunkards, Laggards, Prostitutes, Pirates and other Heroes of the American Revolution" a reader learns that the founders (i.e., those granted land by the King) believed that the many denizens of America's cities were drunken degenerates who needed to be brought under the thumb of their puritanical political leadership because the sensualists are unable to govern themselves (Dialectically, Russell too believes that a society governed by renegades would be "chaotic", unsafe and that trash would pile the streets).

It was the whorehouses (houses of ill-repute) which broke the monopoly of the landed class, with the *madames* later becoming some of the largest landholders in the developing frontier and who "owned more wealth than any other women in the United States" (p. 105).

Pirates led to gay liberation, libertines lead to freedom to divorce, and “Whores and the Origins of Women’s Liberation” reveals that prostitution lead to the mini-skirt. “Like laws against prostitution, laws against fornication and adultery were largely ignored in the revolutionary period” (p. 14).

Russell quotes Thomas Jefferson from a letter to his daughter written while the Constitution (which itself was unconstitutionally counter to the Articles of Confederation, thus Patrick Henry’s “I smell a rat”) was being drafted in Philadelphia:

It is your future happiness which interests me, and nothing can contribute more to it (moral rectitude always excepted) than the contracting [of, *sic*] a habit of industry and activity. Of all the cankers of human happiness, none corrodes it with so silent, yet so baneful a tooth, as indolence (p. 32).

### *Slavery and whiteness*

Taking a risk, one of Russell’s most controversial observations occur in “The Freedom of Slavery.” In this chapter, Russell argues slaves were happier being enslaved, with a master covering the necessities, than being “free.” To support his claim, Russell draws on the oral evidence captured by the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Writer’s Project in the mid-1930s to document this. One must remember that this sample came from a handful of slaves still living in the 1930s and as documented by those employed by the State (This reviewer’s opinion on this is that this may or may not be true, could be the fallacy of “golden age” thinking in oral history, and most importantly something which would be subjective to the individual). For Russell it is the freedom of slavery that has given present-day the sublime artforms of jazz and the blues.

“The Freedom of Slavery” also introduces the study of the white experience. It is explained those in blackface seek the freedom of the slaves<sup>1</sup>. Russell quotes the original lyrics to “Road to Richmond” (“now known as the anthem of Southern Racism” with different lyrics, p. 43) by Dan Emmett, a minstrel travelling circus performer in the 1830s, believing they signal a wish to be enslaved:

*When I was young and in my prime/Labor nebber done./I used to work, but took my time.  
I wish I was in Dixie/Hurray! Hurray!.../Freedom to me will never pay.*

In “From White Chimps to Yankee Doodles: The Irish” the reader learns that the Irish are a “notoriously funky people” (p. 140). Russell claims the Irish were white people who could actually dance spontaneously -- that is until they become indoctrinated to puritanical Power (as do Jews in “The Jew Was a Negro” and Italians in “Italian Americans: Out of Africa”).

### *The Real Revolution*

Part Three of the book, “Fighting for Bad Freedom,” begins with “Shopping: The Real American Revolution.” In this chapter, readers find evidential support of conspicuous

---

<sup>1</sup> Russell believes that white people at the time thought or perceived that enslaved black people actually were more free than the white person herself. It is therefore projected (‘whiteness studies are pretty common in US history) that the poor white people painted their faces black and performed dances and songs originated by blacks

consumption emancipating the working girl. Progressive feminists did not seek freedom of desire for womankind, the subchapter entitled, “Women Against Girls” explains. Social-worker Lillian Wald laments that one of her referrals, a troubled, “immoral” shop-girl, labors “where the display of expensive finery on the counters and its easy purchase by luxurious women had evidently played a part in her moral deterioration. Her most conscious desire was for silk underwear; at least it was the only one she seemed able to formulate” (p. 221). Russell contends that such social reach is seen by the puritan American State as “vulgar vanity”.

### *The 1930s*

This reviewer’s favorite chapter is “Behold a Dictator: Fascism and the New Deal” primarily because.... In the 1930s, according to Albert Jay Nock, Max Weber’s coercive monopoly turns from *government* (a “process” for the good of the people) into a *State* (a “construct of will” out for itself alone). The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) of 1933 “created an economic system that was virtually identical to the national economies established in Italy and Germany, and further consolidated power in the hands of the president” (p. 245).

How could such a radical policy come about in the United States?....The architects of the early New Deal had their roots in progressivism and shared that movement’s obsessions with social order, discipline, rationality, and the merging of the individual’s identity with the nation (p. 245).

The NIRA was drafted by Gerard Swope, Chairman of General Electric, who “argued that antitrust laws had to be suspended so that companies in a given industry could free themselves from market forces and *collectively* determine prices, wages and production levels” (p. 247, *emphasis added*).

After describing how the 1930s government projects in the USA and Germany “were in large part directed towards military purposes.” Russell juxtaposes the State agitprop (posters mounted in public spaces) created by the Federal Art Project in the USA with that of Nazi Germany is responsible for the almost identical iconography (p. 255). Readers learn that President Roosevelt’s favorite social New Deal program was the Civilian Conservation Corps, similar to Hitler’s youth work camps. “Both the New Dealers and Nazis designed the programs to shape young-men into citizen-soldiers” (p. 253).

The Social Security Act (SSA) of 1935 “was created to give aid to only a certain type of woman: a woman who contributed to the nation as the producer of workers, soldiers and citizens.” The SSA included the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program: “a welfare program intended to keep mothers in the home” (p. 256). The purpose of ADC was to keep reproducing fodder for the State. The Statist puritanical Power of the 1930s even extended into film. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a 1938 piece in *Photoplay* supporting the Hays Code by asking, “will movies be an instrument in the development of good taste and are we growing up to be a nation with artistic knowledge and appreciation?” (p. 261)

### *War and post-war (sic)*

“Just How Popular Was World War II?” describes how Roosevelt knew that war was unpopular, and why he worked with Congress to pass the first peacetime draft in 1940.

However, the war was popular with gay people (“renegades”) in small towns as they were able to move to military bases and “find one another” (p. 277). Bringing readers up to date are the chapters “Gay Liberation, American Liberation” with a discussion of the Stonewall renegades and “Almost Free: The Promise of Rednecks and Hippies”. Most readers might be more familiar with these musical rebels who also added social commentary to their work (we can just mention Merle Haggard and Jimi Hendrix) because we or our parents had direct experience with these art forms. Finally, in this section it is too bad that Punk Rock does not have its own chapter or at least share a chapter with Gangster Rap. These art forms have also been replaced in popular consciousness, and have mutated into more diverse stylistic ‘types’, yet they are relevant to the narrative through to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### *Political economy*

In the late-1960s, some in the American academy were disenchanted with the Vietnam War (the welfare/warfare State), and some political economists turned to “renegade” tendencies, Marxism, and Anarchism. Prior to this, intellectual discussions between the Virginia Political Economy School (now orthodox with Public Choice economics and the ‘representative agent’) and that of the Austrian school (still heterodox) took place. Buchanan and Hayek had a later (1978) discussion about scientism<sup>2</sup>, which can be used in service to the State. This can then lead readers to Hayek’s theory of the spontaneous emergence of rules in society and how competition amongst rules might bring about a freedom-oriented social order if indeed people chose the government they deserve.

The point here is that although the State may perceive it has and/or continually attempt to have a monopoly on social-ordering (social-engineering), we have learned from Russell that historically in the U.S. there has existed “rebels” which question authority during times of increasing State power-grabbing. Or perhaps most insulting to the central planners, the rebels just ignore the State altogether. As long as there is a ‘sliver’ of freedom, there will be “renegades” in competition with Power.<sup>3</sup>

### *References*

- Cohen, Albert C. *Deviance and Control*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966.
- Colander, David, Richard P. F. Holt, and J. Barkley Rosser, Jr. editors. *The Changing Face of Economics: Conversations with Cutting Edge Economists*, paperback edition. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2004.
- Nock, Albert Jay. *Our Enemy, The State*. Caldwell, OH: Caxton, 1950.
- Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, paperback edition. New York: Basic Books, 1974.

---

<sup>2</sup> Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzNpD9DXU2w>

<sup>3</sup> Thanks go here to Régis Servant for discussion of his paper “Spontaneous emergence, use of reason and constitutional design: Is Hayek’s social thought consistent?”, presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> Summer Institute for the History of Economic Thought at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond, June 14-17, 2013.