Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution

New Edition

Originally published in 1967, *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* was among the first studies to identify the importance of slavery to the founding of the American Republic. Provocative and powerful, this book offers explanations for the movements and motivations that underpinned the Revolution and the early republic. First, Staughton Lynd analyzes what motivated farm tenants and artisans during the period of the American Revolution. Second, he argues that slavery, and a willingness to compromise with slavery, were at the center of all political arrangements by the patriot leadership, including the United States Constitution. Third, he maintains that the historiography of the United States has adopted the mistaken perspective of Thomas Jefferson, who held that Southern plantation owners were merely victimized agrarians.

This new edition reproduces the original Foreword by E. P. Thompson and includes a new Foreword by Robin L. Einhorn that examines Lynd's arguments in the context of forty years of subsequent scholarship.

Staughton Lynd received his BA from Harvard College and his MA and PhD from Columbia University. He taught at Spelman College and at Yale University. He is the author, editor, or co-editor of more than a dozen books and has published articles in journals including the *Journal of American History*, the *William and Mary Quarterly*, and the *Political Science Quarterly*.

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STAUGHTON LYND

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Robert K. Lamb and Franz L. Neumann

Contents

Forty Years Later: A New Foreword

The freshness of the essays in this volume, forty years after their initial appearance, can only be attributed to the fact that they began as revolutionary statements about how Americans ought to think about this nation's history. Staughton Lynd attacked cherished myths, or, as historians might prefer to say, "established interpretations," with courage, candor, and learning. If we had to pack his arguments into a single punch line, it might be that power relations do not disappear simply because people attempt to ignore them. Class antagonisms did not disappear in the crucible of Revolution. Omitting the word "slavery" from the Constitution did not erase the fundamentally proslavery character of the document. And although generations of Americans have absorbed textbook stories that downplay the impact of slavery, exposing the partisan roots of these stories may yet allow us to replace them with fuller and more accurate – if less celebratory – accounts of the origins and development of the United States.

Looking back from the present, it might be hard for readers to imagine what actually was so revolutionary about all this. Today, nobody would say that ordinary people cannot understand their own interests or that slavery was irrelevant to the waging of the Revolution and framing of the Constitution. Yet Lynd's essays entered a historiographical exchange in which (1) Charles A. Beard was a giant, with his interpretations the ones taught in schools, and (2) Beard's critics, the "consensus historians" whose interpretations were the ones taught in universities, were denying that economic interests caused anything important in American political history at all. It was a strange impasse, perhaps, but it was the impasse into which Lynd inserted these essays.

The initial reviews of *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* were mixed. The *Journal of Negro History* was enthusiastic: "Precisely written, painstakingly knit together, copiously documented," exhibiting Lynd's "objectivity, compassion, [and] breadth of scholarship." The *William and Mary Quarterly* hailed "a book worthy of serious attention," endorsed its main arguments, and praised its combination of "detailed scholarship with bold synthesis." The *New England Quarterly* was more reserved – Lynd was "more candid and fair than most writers" and "restrained in his judgments" – while the *Journal of American History* wondered if ten brief essays offered enough support for Lynd's ambitious interpretations. The *Journal of Economic History* was hostile ("he is ringing changes on old bells on which countless changes have previously been rung"), though not in the same league with Eugene Genovese's personal and political attack in *The New York Review of Books*.[1]

[1] Marjorie F. Hooper, *Journal of Negro History* 53 (1968): 361; James Henderson, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 26 (1969): 123–26; Theodore B. Wilson, *New England Quarterly* 41 (1968): 608; Joseph C. Burke, *Journal of American History* 55 (1969): 861; Roger Weiss, *Journal of Economic History* 28 (1968): 707. The back story of the Genovese review, *The New York Review of Books*, Sept. 26, 1968, is provided in several places, including David Waldstreicher, "Foreword," in Staughton Lynd, *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism*, new ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Among Genovese's observations was that Lynd "seems to gag on the notion that [slaveholders] could have been developing their own system of morality." Well, yes!

The three major claims in these essays fared differently over the ensuing decades. Lynd's arguments about New York tenant farmers and city artisans became standard in short order, not least because of the allied work of two of his contemporaries: Alfred F. Young's *The Democratic Republicans of New York* (1967) and Jesse Lemisch's "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America" (1968). If you went to graduate school in the early 1980s, as I did, you read Lynd on New York during the Revolution, Young on New York in the early republic, and Lemisch as a (perhaps as *the*) foundational methodological statement about the need for a social history that was written "from the bottom up." You glanced at Sung Bok Kim's *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York* (1978), but you studied Gary B. Nash's *The Urban Crucible* (1979) and Edward Countryman's *A People in Revolution* (1981), which echoed and expanded on the findings of Lynd, Young, and Lemisch.[2]

The triumph of the bottom-up New Social History was so complete by 1980 or so that I actually have never thought twice about the correctness of Lynd's explanations of how Hudson Valley tenants chose sides in the Revolutionary struggle or why New York artisans supported the Constitution. If Beard's clunky economic determinism required the tenants to be revolutionaries and the artisans to be antifederalists, it was so much the worse for Beard's determinism. By the late 1970s, the idea that ordinary people acted in the political economy on the basis of rational calculations of their own interests was no longer open to question.

[2] Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763–1797* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967); Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968): 371–407; Staughton Lynd, *Anti-Federalism in Dutchess County, New York: A Study of Democracy and Class Conflict in the Revolutionary Era* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1962); Sung Bok Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York: Manorial Society, 1664–1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978); Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

Of course they did. Yes, they could be distracted at times, but so could elites. And while elites could (and usually did) enjoy greater resources to pursue their interests, I don't think I've ever so much as met a historian who thinks they were better able to understand them by definition. The New Social History did not survive very well as a set of concrete research methods, in part because historians inevitably tired of writing and reading the more or less heavily quantitative studies that fleshed out the contours of American economic and social life. The profession moved on to a cultural history that tended to focus on the vicissitudes of fascinating and well-chosen individual lives. But the change in our professional sensibilities was irreversible – no matter how often Lynne Cheney, from her perch at the National Endowment for the Humanities, told us we should be celebrating the virtues of elites. We don't all study history from the bottom up any more, but we all have internalized its core message: that people have never needed wealth or fancy educations to achieve sophisticated understandings of their interests – and to make history accordingly.[3]

While Lynd's chapters on the farmers and artisans covered familiar territory in the 1960s, his essays on the Constitution charted terrain that had not been prominent in American historical thinking for nearly a century. Both the Progressive historians and their "consensus" antagonists had written slavery out of early American history. It was with reason that Lynd had to go back to the "abolitionist" historians of the nineteenth century (Richard Hildreth, Henry Wilson, and so on) to find precedents for his arguments about the centrality of proslavery power in the framing of the Constitution. Nor did Lynd's interventions win the day immediately. His specific claim that the founders struck a deal

[3] Lynne Cheney headed the NEH from 1986 to 1993. For an overview of her activities see Mary Jacoby, "Madame Cheney's Cultural Revolution," salon.com, Aug. 26, 2004. See also Peter N. Stearns, "Uncivil War: Current American Conservatives and Social History," *Journal of Social History* 29 (1995): 7–15 (in a special issue: "Social History and the American Political Climate: Problems and Strategies"); Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

exchanging an antislavery Northwest Ordinance for a proslavery Constitution was vulnerable to challenge in its details, while his more general portrayal of the Constitution as "a compromise between capitalists and slaveholders" raised red flags for anyone who wanted to protect the idea of framers with aspirations for justice.[4] But his key arguments – that the Constitution was a proslavery document and that the founders' failure to abolish slavery betrayed the promise of the Revolution – have finally also come to dominate historical thinking.

The legal historian Paul Finkelman deserves a lot of the credit for bringing the profession around on these points. In a long series of essays, seven of which he collected in a book called *Slavery and the Founders* (2001), Finkelman all but bludgeoned historians and legal scholars to take slavery seriously. It is sobering that this effort took as long as it did, but most historians have indeed finally come around to the conclusions that Lynd reached in the 1960s: that concern for the protection of slavery was central to the framing and adoption of the Constitution, that Southerners would never have signed on without the Constitution's guarantees for slavery, and that it did indeed take a bloody Civil War to abolish slavery – not because that war empowered Northern abolitionists, but because, when the political regime that protected slavery collapsed, enslaved African Americans finally could seize their own freedom. Although there are still a few dead-enders who think it is the historian's role to empathize with the guilt-ridden Virginia planters (it has always been okay to attack the South Carolinians), most historians have joined Lynd in recognizing that the influence of slavery was pervasive in the Constitution, tucked into every facet of the regime it created rather than merely in a few isolated clauses that could be amended away.[5]

[4] Howard A. Ohline, "Republicanism and Slavery: Origins of the Three-Fifths Clause in the United States Constitution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 28 (1971): 563–84. The Northwest Ordinance argument has resurfaced in Alfred W. Blumrosen and Ruth G. Blumrosen, *Slave Nation: How Slavery United the Colonies and Sparked the American Revolution* (Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks, 2005).

[5] Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001); Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State

The most original of Lynd's arguments is historiographical. *Class Conflict* is clear about its efforts to come to terms with Beard, but in the process Lynd makes an argument that you will not see anywhere else – but that I think is profoundly right and very important for understanding the slowness of the historical profession to come around on the centrality of slavery. More than this, once many historians begin to reckon with this argument, it may well remain controversial for some time. The argument I have in mind is not about why Beard was wrong but about the source of Beard's conception of early American class conflict. In "On Turner, Beard, and Slavery" and "Beard, Jefferson, and the Tree of Liberty," Lynd grapples with the legacy of Progressive historiography in general and Beard in particular, showing how such interpretations managed to minimize or even erase slavery from American history. And the punch line is that it was *Jefferson* who forged the contours of this extremely influential interpretive strain. What we have been calling a Beardian interpretation of the political history of the early republic (or, for that matter, of the United States over the long haul) is actually a Jeffersonian interpretation. Nor does Lynd stop there. The Jeffersonian interpretation at issue, he shows, is the one framed in the intensely partisan atmosphere of the 1790s – and then read backwards, initially by Jefferson and then later by Beard, to explain the struggles over the framing and adoption of the Constitution.

The Beardian premise that politics in the early republic was based on a nationwide class struggle between commercial elitists and agrarian democrats (with artisan allies) is simply wrong as a description of the

University Press, 2000); Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Robin L. Einhorn, *American Taxation, American Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Mark Graber, *Dred Scott and the Problem of Constitutional Evil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Ira Berlin et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil* War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For other early works, see Donald L. Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics, 1765–1820* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); Duncan J. MacLeod, Slavery, *Race, and the American Revolution* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

eighteenth-century wealth structure and the shape of eighteenth-century class conflict. It is wrong not only because, as Lynd noticed forty years ago, it managed to erase slavery but also because it managed to erase planter-yeoman class struggle within the South, particularly the Upper South. Following the lead of one side in the partisan struggle between the Federalists and the Jeffersonians in the 1790s, Beard lost sight of what politicians do – describe reality (today we say "spin" it) in ways calculated to promote their power. The coup of the Virginia planter-politicians was to persuade many of their contemporaries, and then generations of historians looking back, to define the elite of the early republic as a small group of Northerners, classing the owners of dozens if not hundreds of people among the "agrarian" victims of commercial elites. By taking the characteristic class conflict of the North and calling it the national class conflict, the Virginians managed to erase both of the characteristic Southern class conflicts: the one within the white South and the one between the white South and the black South. And, all the while, they cast themselves as subaltern victims of Northern commercial elites.

We are used to "big lies" today, but this one still stands out as a whopper. Virginia was actually the powerhouse of the early republic, and the Virginia planters were its rulers. Virginia was the largest state, the one with the most slaves and slaveholders, and the one with the most powerful (many would say the most talented) politicians. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the rest rarely sounded like the South Carolinians who defended slavery openly and without embarrassment, but the Virginians were the proslavery leaders of the period because they were the ones with the power. Generations of historians have been misled by the rhetoric with which the Virginia planters habitually "lamented" the evil of slavery, usually on the grounds that it victimized *them* (as opposed to the African Americans they enslaved). Yet in the same breaths in which they "lamented" slavery, they insisted that Northern nonslaveholders – both the elite merchants and the small farmers and artisans – make concessions to help protect the institution of slavery. They repeatedly demanded that Northerners assume burdens and yield proportionate shares of political power to compensate Southern slaveholders for their

victimization by slavery. This twisted argument worked over and over: in framing the Articles of Confederation in 1776, in distributing national tax burdens in 1783, and then in framing the Constitution in 1787. And it worked because the Virginians could back it with real political power. They rarely sounded like their unambiguously proslavery colleagues from South Carolina, but the Virginians were the true proslavery leaders in the early republic.

Beard did not see this. Lynd did. It is not a compliment when Lynd calls Beard a "latter-day Jeffersonian" in the final pages of *Class Conflict*, since this appellation comes after Lynd has explained that Jeffersonian democracy "was essentially Southern" – with "Southern" defined as proslavery. It also follows a stunning passage where Lynd traces Jefferson's ideas to the British Tory view that "the people should be represented by their landlords." "What was wrong," Lynd explains, "was not so much Beard's emphasis on economics as the Jeffersonian economics he espoused." The irony is that many of the other historians who answered Beard's Jeffersonian economics in the 1960s countered it with a Jeffersonian ideology drawn from the same British landlord sources. As Beard followed Jefferson in casting the economic analysis as a defense of the "common man," Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and the many historians they influenced followed Jefferson in casting the ideological version – the romance of country life, mistrust of cities, preference for the political decentralization that enabled landlords to rule locally without interference – as a similarly populist creed.[6] Lynd would have none of this. To the extent that there was a truly democratic creed in the American Revolution, it was articulated by Thomas Paine rather than Thomas Jefferson. It did not glorify "the country" or burnish the populist credentials of slaveholders.

[6] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), is more circumspect than Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969). For the ways this interpretation expanded as it echoed through the historiography of the 1970s and 1980s, see esp. Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 11–38.

So, to circle back to the issue of ordinary people understanding and acting on their own economic interests, Beard misunderstood urban artisan support for the Constitution because he expected the artisans to act on the basis of a Jeffersonian economics in which "the people" were "agrarians," which urban artisans obviously were not. The implication is that we should finally abandon the whole Beardian (or Jeffersonian) story about a grass-roots democratic Revolution tamed by a conservative Constitution – whose conservatism lay in the fact of its centralization. No matter how you slice it, the Articles of Confederation had to go. The United States needed a national government that could service the debts accumulated to fight the Revolutionary War. Alexander Hamilton was an elitist, but he was right to fear that the United States would have trouble defending its independence if it defaulted on its debt. The artisans wanted a stronger national government for a different reason – for tariffs to protect them against cheap British imports – but the artisan support reminds us that there was nothing inherently undemocratic about greater centralization, about a government with the power to implement the will of the people.

Once the Constitution was being framed to establish a national tax power so that the war debt could be serviced, deals had to be struck, including deals with antidemocratic interests. But the truly antidemocratic interest in play in these struggles was not finance capital. It was slavery, as championed by charismatic slaveholding Virginians who then won the power to define what counted as "radical," "conservative," "democratic," and "elitist" in American history. Lynd may not be willing to go the whole way with this interpretation. But by cutting through the nonsense of economic determinism and ideological posturing that have captivated so many generations of historians, the essays in *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* have made it possible to understand the multifaceted political struggles of the early republic with a clear-eyed directness. This book is a classic, but it also remains a revelation.

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Foreword to the First Edition

Staughton Lynd is already known to many people outside the United States in his person as a responsible and alert internationalist – as a good citizen of that immanent, more rational world which must come into being if any world is to survive our time. This is to say that he is known, to those who are able to take a long and settled view, as a good American.

For some reason his kind of good American, who combines a Yankee energy and irreverence with a moral toughness which comes from older, more puritan, timber, has been seen around the campuses of the United States a good deal in the past few years.

It is only to be expected that such people will run into misrepresentation of various kinds. This generally awaits those who have the temerity to object within the heart of a swollen imperial consensus. Nor should this bother them much, since they know that it is one plain part of their business to *be* objectionable.

It is perhaps because I am also an objector (although within an imperial power now growing impotent and merely techy) that Staughton has done me the honour to invite me to put some words down here. At first I thought that our common objectionableness – our brotherhood in the shadowy international of revolutionary humanism – was scarcely relevant to the matter on hand. After all, Staughton appears here as Professor Lynd: not in his person as an arch-seditionist or arsonist (or whatever the mutton-fisted narks of academe suppose) but simply as a master of his chosen trade. And although we are both of the same trade, we deal in such different and highly-specialised branches that it seemed beyond my competence to offer comment on much of the detail in his inticately-wrought historical argument.

As a fellow-tradesman I can, of course, see that the workmanship in these pages is of the first order: the command of the subject assured: the argument open, sinewy, and challenging an open response: the texture scrupulous as to detail and yet impatient of marginalia, insistent upon essentials. It is the large kind of historical argument, which demands the total attention of the intellect. We are not "carried along" by Professor Lynd or snowed by the choice flowers of his rhetoric: he asks, all the time, that we stay with him and reason with him. Moreover, he does not waft around us some attenuated "climate of ideas": he immerses us within particular, and significant, historical contexts and demands that we think in actualities. And this seems to me to be the primary discipline of history (and the one which distinguishes it from sociology): the discipline of context.

I can see also that every chapter of this book is locked into the next, in such a way that the total argument presented both draws upon and feeds strength back into each part. Some parts arise from original research while others arise from thinking about and connecting in new ways long-familiar sources and the recent research of colleagues. The old kinds of argument for and against Beard, over which generations of students have grown weary (and whose echoes have become even a little tedious across the Atlantic) have now been superseded; and a new stage of argument (into which much of the heritage both of Beard and of his

critics has been assimilated) has been initiated. Professor Lynd would not wish anyone to claim that he has initiated this single-handed: it has been the work of many hands. Still, with the greatest clarity, this book signs off the old and announces the definitions of the new.

Reading these pages it has occurred to me that Professor Lynd and I encounter some similar problems in our work as tradesmen, just as we share common aspirations in our more objectionable roles. In Britain also there was a radical and humanitarian ascendancy in some areas of historiography in the early twentieth century (at the time when the history of our industrial revolution and of popular movements in the nineteenth century was first being mapped out) followed, in more recent years, by a long conservative ascendency, whose products have been valuable as correctives and have been enriching in the detail of research, but whose total emphasis has been such as to fragment the full historical process – to celebrate interest and contingency, and to deny any area to rational historical agency except in its most trivialised and personalised expression.

At the same time the historian in the radical tradition has sometimes had most to fear from the friends, fighting with blunt instruments and bandaged eyes, at his own side. There have been the sentimentalists with their vapid portrait of the all-holy-common-people, touched up with real heroic instances, but with every interesting wart and wrinkle erased. And there have been the Marxists of various tendencies (to whom both Lynd and I are closely related in a continuing dialectic of argument) who have so often handled historical problems as if they were settled theorems for which proof only was required ("a truth to be established by means of accepted truths," my dictionary has it); and some of whom have handled the essential historical concepts of class in such a bald and hectoring way that they can only be rehabilitated, as they are by Professor Lynd in this book, by the utmost precision as to context, and the utmost delicacy before the creative vitality – and the contradictoriness – of culture.

I may misunderstand the signs. But it would seem, from this side of the Atlantic, that the position of the American historian who is now seeking to recreate the radical tradition is an enviable one. For Professor Lynd is

one among a large, and growing, group of younger scholars who combine the old zest with a professional excellence and human maturity which are ridding the radical tradition of the bad intellectual habits into which it fell so often in the past. Those parts of the established professional ascendancy which are somewhat comfortable, somewhat fashionable, and somewhat conservative, are coming under a criticism very much more searching than anything to which they have been accustomed.

To challenge established positions in this way requires, in the challenger, something of the awkwardness of an Objector. It would seem, then, that Staughton Lynd and Professor Lynd are in fact the same person. To write old history afresh cannot be done without un-writing other people's history; as Lynd reexamines the meaning of the 1770's and 1780's, so he must also reexamine the meaning of these decades as they appeared to minds in the 1830's, and 1890's, and at different decades in this century. And this way of seeing events, both as they occurred and as they were refracted, with changing emphases, in the historical memory, enforces the realisation that as we argue about the past so also we are arguing about – and seeking to clarify – the mind of the present which is recovering that past. Nor is this an unimportant part of the mind of the present. For some of the largest arguments, about human rationality, destiny, and agency, must always be grounded there: in the historical record.

That is why the writing of history, in this kind of way, is also an act of contemporary self-consciousness and social control. It should be unnecessary to keep on reminding oneself of ultimate purposes in the pursuit of a profession. But one does sometimes doubt the usefulness of history today, when the present appears to be so perilously near to the edge of all of it. If Professor Lynd, in his other, more objectionable, person, has his doubts, I trust that he will set them at rest. This book should provide that person with his answer.

E. P. Thompson
The University of Warwick
August 1967