Book Review for Heterodox Economics Newsletter


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When reading *Renegade* one is reminded of Robert Nozick (amongst others as we shall see) and we find ourselves 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 (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p. x).

First I would like to place Thaddeus Russell’s excellent work of popular history in the context of political economy. (Full disclosure: Russell used to teach at the New School for Social Research). We find in *Renegade* that the US founding fathers are constructivists with puritanical idealism creating the Power against which the Renegade acts as change agent, and, that the civil and economic liberties we do have (left) in the US today are due to the history of the renegade acting outside of this constructed “formal sector” Power.

From the sociology of ‘deviance and control’ we classify individuals in three ways. There are *conformists* who agree to society’s rules and act according to them, there are *nonconformists* who agree to society’s rules yet do not always act according to them, and there is the *rebel*, who does not agree with the social rules at a given place and time and acts accordingly. Russell’s renegade is sociology’s rebel, although the renegade may not be conscious of this fact and may in fact be
indifferent. Russell’s renegades are two-fold, using ideal-types, degenerate sensualists and entrepreneurs. It should be noted too that Russell is a rebel (perhaps not a renegade) in that his book touches on issues which are not at all politically correct; the work is in fact an exercise in political antagonism.

The founding

Next I will summarize in thumbnail form Russell’s US history to give a taste of where he is coming from, the chapter titles giving us a lot of what we need to know. In “Drunkards, Laggards, Prostitutes, Pirates and other Heroes of the American Revolution” we learn that the founding fathers (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 in “Whores and the Origins of Women’s Liberation” we learn 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

The most controversial of Russell’s results is found in “The Freedom of Slavery”. Russell believes that slaves were happier being enslaved, with master covering the necessities, than being “free”, using oral history captured by the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Writer’s Project in the mid-1930s to document this (of course this is from a sample of those slaves still living into 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 which has given us the sublime artforms of jazz and the blues.

The slavery chapter also introduces whiteness studies, where we find those in blackface seek the freedom of the slaves. 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” we learn that the Irish are a “notoriously funky people” (p. 140), white people who can actually dance spontaneously (not the bourgeois Broadway stuff we know today), 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” where we find that conspicuous consumption emancipates the working girl and that Progressive feminists did not seek freedom
of desire for womankind, the subchapter entitled, “women against girls”. 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 contents 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”. The 1930s is when, per 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 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 (make-) work 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, the iconography is almost identical (p. 255). We 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,” because the SSA included the Aid to Dependent Children 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 so he worked with Congress to pass the first peacetime draft in 1940. The war was however popular with gay people (“renegades”) in small towns as they were able to move to military bases and “find one another” (p. 277). Bringing us up (almost) to today are “Gay Liberation, American Liberation” with a discussion of the Stonewall renegades and “Almost Free: The Promise of Rednecks and Hippies” which for most readers of this review is probably self-explanatory (we can just mention Merle Haggard and Jimi Hendrix), although it is too bad Punk Rock doesn’t have its own chapter or at least share a chapter too with Gangster Rap.

Political economy

It is now time to pull back in 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 “renegade” and to Marxism and Anarchism. Prior to this there were 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). Buchanan and Hayek had a later (1978) discussion about scientism¹, which can be used in service to the State. This can then lead us 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. Perhaps we need not be overly concerned about the State’s monopoly on social ordering as long as we have enduring (and how could we not) “renegades” in competition with Power.²

References


¹ Available: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzNpD9DXU2w

² 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 14th Summer Institute for the History of Economic Thought at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond, June 14-17, 2013.