



## OUR ESSAYS

January 23, 2012

### The Ruinous Reign of Race-and-Gender Historians

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By KC Johnson

In a ruling likely to be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, the Montana Supreme Court last month **upheld the state constitution's prohibition** on corporations directly spending on state campaigns. For those concerned with academic matters, the case is important for reasons quite unrelated to political debates about *Citizens United*. In a significant case involving history (the Montana court relied heavily upon the scholarship and words of historians to reach its conclusions), all the books cited were more than 35 years old. And that wasn't a coincidence: the kind of U.S. history relevant to influencing legal and public policy debates increasingly has been banished from an academy obsessed with scholarship organized around the race/class/gender trinity.



A quick summary of the decision: the Montana court ruled that "unlike *Citizens United*, this case concerns Montana law, Montana elections and it arises from Montana history," requiring the justices to examine "the context of the time and place it was enacted, during the early twentieth century." To provide this necessary historical background, the Court repeatedly cited books by historians Helen Fisk Sanders, K. Ross Toole, C. B. Glasscock, Michael Malone, and Richard Roeder. The Court also accepted an affidavit from **Harry Fritz**, a professor emeritus at the University of Montana and a specialist in Montana history, who affirmed, "What was true a century ago is as true today: distant corporate interests mean that corporate dominated campaigns will only work 'in the essential interest of outsiders with local interests a very secondary consideration.'"

An attorney analyzing the decision, however, probably would have been surprised to see that the works of history upon which the Montana court relied were all published before 1977. She might even have wondered whether the court's reliance on older works suggested that it had ignored newer, perhaps contradictory, publications. But for anyone familiar with how the contemporary academy approaches U.S. history, the court's inability to find recent relevant works could have come as no surprise at all.

The study of U.S. history has transformed in the last two generations, with emphasis on staffing positions in race, class, or gender leading to dramatic declines in fields viewed as more "traditional," such as U.S. political, constitutional, diplomatic, and military history. And even those latter areas have been "re-visioned," in the word coined **by an advocate of the**

**transformation**. Illinois history professor Mark Leff, to make their approach more accommodating to the dominant race/class/gender paradigm. In the new academy, political histories of state governments--of the type cited and used effectively by the Montana Supreme Court--were among the first to go. The Montana court had to turn to Fritz, an emeritus professor, because the University of Montana History Department **no longer features a specialist in Montana history** (nor, for that matter, does it have a professor whose research interests, like those of Fritz, deal with U.S. military history, a topic that has fallen out of fashion in the contemporary academy).

To take the nature of the U.S. history positions in one major department as an example of the new staffing patterns: the University of Michigan, once home to **Dexter** and then **Bradford Perkins**, was a pioneer in the study of U.S. diplomatic history. Now **the department's 29 professors** whose research focuses on U.S. history after 1789 include only one whose scholarship has focused on U.S. foreign relations--Penny von Eschen, a perfect example of the "re-visioning" approach. (Her **most recent book** is *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*.) In contrast to this 1-in-29 ratio, Michigan has hired ten Americanists (including von Eschen) whose research, according to their department profiles, focuses on issues of race; and eight Americanists whose research focuses on issues of gender. The department has more specialists in the history of Native Americans than U.S. foreign relations.

It's true, of course, that departments heavy in African-American historians might have lots of scholars who focus on such topics as a sympathetic portrayal of Ward Connerly's efforts against racial preferences. Or a department heavy in women's historians might have lots of scholars who focus on such topics as a study of grassroots pro-life women, as part of a project suggesting that feminists don't speak for a majority of U.S. women. But in the real world, figures with such interests would have almost no chance of being hired for an African-American history or gender history line.

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One-sided scholarly approaches tend to produce one-sided views on contemporary political and public policy issues. In recent years, controversies in the history departments at Duke and the University of Iowa revealed that neither department had even one registered Republican. Political registration figures are the crudest possible measurement of a faculty's pedagogical breadth, but a partisan ratio of dozens-to-zero raises some troubling questions about the open-mindedness of a department's hiring process. So too did the justifications offered for the imbalance. **Iowa's Sarah Hanley rationalized**, "I don't think there is a downside [to having a department that, according to a survey done by the local newspaper, had 22 registered Democrats and zero registered Republicans]. If it is a downside, then it would be a downside to have states to be so-called blue or so-called red. It would be casting a pall on the democratic system where people are free to choose." The then-chairman of Duke's history department, John Thompson, **dismissed findings** that his department had 32 registered Democrats and zero registered Republicans, on grounds that "the interesting thing about the United States is that the political spectrum is very narrow."

This type of comment is exactly what would be expected in an environment characterized by faculty groupthink--the common assumption that all thinking people chose to be Democrats (full disclosure: I'm a registered and partisan Democrat), the law of group polarization producing extreme arguments on the merits of affiliating with the Democrats.

The increasingly one-sided conception of the profession has appeared most distinctly when national historical organizations have placed their members' partisan interests ahead of a commitment to historical ideals. During the second Bush term, for instance, historians were pressing for increased access to government documents from an administration notoriously indifferent to open government. Any claim that the chief purpose of the request was academic rather than political, however, was undermined in 2007, when the American Historical Association approved a **"Resolution on United States Government Practices Inimical to the Values of the Historical Profession."** The resolution called on all AHA members "to do whatever they can to bring the Iraq war to a speedy conclusion." That was a perfectly appropriate goal for partisan Democrats. But for historians? And why would any administration want to increase access to government documents for a profession whose major national organization demanded that its members seek to undermine a key foreign policy goal of the President?

Similarly, last year during the **William Cronon controversy in Wisconsin**, the American Historical Association issued an official statement demanding that the GOP withdraw its open-records request, offering the following reasoning. "The purpose of the state's Open Records Law is to promote informed public conversation. Historians vigorously support the freedom of information act traditions of the United States of which this law is a part. In this case, however, the law has been invoked to do the opposite: to find a pretext for discrediting a scholar who has taken a public position. This inquiry will damage, rather than promote, public conversation." Shutting down any inquiry into Cronon, even if it meant advocating a narrowing of the state's Open Records Law, was a perfectly appropriate goal for partisan Democrats opposed to the Walker administration. But for historians?

There are few areas in which the groupthink academy has had a more disastrous impact than the study of U.S. history. One-sidedness has its costs, however, in terms of influence outside the Ivory Tower. Courts or politicians who rely on the opinions of professors who now qualify as "mainstream" U.S. historians do so at their own peril.

## COMMENTS (27)

Although I got to a year post-M.A., it was quite some time ago--so long ago that in my second incarnation as a graduate student I actually took a seminar in US diplomatic history.

I'm curious, Professor Johnson, and this is not a facetious question. The rubric that all history must be viewed through a race-class-gender prism--how was that determined? Did someone write a monograph that was generally accepted? Was there a resolution somewhere. Really, I don't know--why is this the methodological tool to the general exclusion of all others?

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Posted by Alex Bensky | **January 23, 2012 10:07 AM**

Alex: How long have you been in a US University?

As an employee of an Ivy league University your snark is not only pathetic but so far off reality as to be laughable. Instead of asking people to do research for you, why not use this wonderous tool called Google. Or spend some time as a graduate student actually doing real research, like find a Republican in your department.

I mean, if you want to show evidence that the article is bollocks all you have to do is find one in your local History department, right?

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Posted by Tristan Phillips | **January 23, 2012 8:25 PM**

Just ask yourself, "KC", why did you, as an "historian", feel compelled to specify the sex of the anonymous attorney in your third paragraph by using "she" rather than the historically standard "he"? "he", in this context, has always meant either sex. This sort of knee-jerk Puritanism is absolutely symptomatic of the mental disease that has led to whole faculties morphing into herds of simultaneously-head-nodding Libtard sheep.

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Posted by Robert Speirs | **January 23, 2012 8:45 PM**

"... historians were pressing for increased access to government documents from an administration notoriously inattentive to open government."

The Obama administration has been far far worse than the Bush administration w.r.t. to open government. Expect the historians to be disinterested.

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Posted by Locom | **January 23, 2012 8:52 PM**

"the race/class/gender trinity"

The real trinity has been race, \_sexual orientation\_, and gender for a while, for the simple reason that if a historian champions the lower class, he ends up siding with people who like to hunt, attend mega-churches, watch NASCAR, and wish you "Merry Christmas!" indiscriminately, and that WILL NOT DO. (Viz. that U. of Iowa journalism professor in the recent Atlantic.)

"And why would any administration want to increase access to government documents for a profession whose major national organization demanded that its members seek to undermine a key foreign policy goal of the President?"

Spot on. I can't stand it when professors can't keep their damned liberal opinions to themselves, and shout them in socially inappropriate venues, and are then surprised when people in state legislatures want to cut their funding, or propose affirmative action programs for conservatives. They simply have \_no idea\_ where such things come from! Help, help, we're being oppressed! (It's like these people never actually graduated from high school, and are still demanding the Holy Grail of teenage life: the right to be themselves, and to be cherished and affirmed for being themselves.)

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Posted by Gilbert | **January 23, 2012 8:55 PM**

Even though I am a non academic with a personal interest in history, I find myself going through used book stores to find good books. With very few exceptions, modern "historians" have produced grotesque and unreadable "histories" for the general public. I recognized this years before I knew of the rise of groupthink in the academy.

There are notable exceptions like Victor Davis Hanson or Robert Kaplan (although he styles himself as a travel writer, his writing delves into the historical roots of things), but like the court, most of the books I have read and kept are from the pre 1980 period.

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Posted by Thucydides | **January 23, 2012 9:07 PM**

Alex Bensky: "The rubric that all history must be viewed through a race-class-gender prism--how was that determined?"

Through power. When the Sixties generation (and their ideological successors) began the long march through this country's institutions they purged them of everyone but liberals and leftists.

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Posted by Paul Ciotti | **January 23, 2012 9:09 PM**

The "rubric" is the only one that may arise when the overwhelming majority of professorships are held by individuals specializing in race-class-gender. The case made by the article was rather simple, but it doesn't take a great deal of reasoning to notice the connection. Also, I hardly think a "generally accepted monogram" is much of a substitute for logic.

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Posted by Cameron Carlisle | **January 23, 2012 9:19 PM**

"...(full disclosure: I'm a registered and partisan Democrat)"

---credo quia absurdum est

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Posted by wGraves | **January 23, 2012 9:20 PM**

#Alex Bensky,

Perhaps I can provide you with an analogy that might explain how this rubric was determined. A Texas Aggie was appointed to the top spot in the office and the rumor mill said that soon there would be more Aggies at the top because it is not possible for the man at the top to be the only Aggie in the corporation. That is how The rubric that all history must be viewed through a race-class-gender prism----- was ---- determined.

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Posted by Zainuddin | **January 23, 2012 9:26 PM**

"An attorney analyzing the decision, however, probably would have been surprised to see that the works of history upon which the Montana court relied were all published before 1977. She might even have wondered whether the court's reliance on older works suggested that it had ignored newer, perhaps contradictory, publications."

I can't help but wonder why even those purporting to oppose the "groupthink" which they condemn so vigorously still slavishly adhere to the obnoxious PC practice of exclusive use of female pronouns to refer generically to positions of authority, leadership and expertise.

"Now the department's 29 professors whose research focuses on U.S. history after 1789 include only one whose scholarship has focused on U.S. foreign relations . . . "

Really? I didn't know there was a US BEFORE 1789.

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Posted by sestamibi | **January 23, 2012 9:52 PM**

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Posted by Sestamibi | **January 23, 2012 9:52 PM**

The reason the universities have only registered Democrats is they are composed of well educated, intelligent people. The Republicans need to be out there working to pay the taxes to transfer to their betters in academia.

Does anyone believe these one-sided historians have no idea what they are doing? They will say or do anything to hang on to their perquisites.

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Posted by Robin | **January 23, 2012 9:57 PM**

I would think another example is the way Bellesiles managed to win the Bancroft prize \*after\* questions had been raised about the legitimacy of his work, and just how long it took to get it rescinded in light of how blatant the fraud was.

Clearly influenced by the fact that the work's thesis was congenial to almost all historians for partisan ideological reasons.

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Posted by Brett Bellmore | **January 23, 2012 10:00 PM**

I think you will find Dexter Perkins was not at Michigan.

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Posted by Xavier | **January 23, 2012 11:12 PM**

"The rubric that all history must be viewed through a race-class-gender prism--how was that determined?"

It was determined when the academy was overrun by Marxists.

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Posted by Otto Maddox | **January 23, 2012 11:59 PM**

First time I've read this blog - a link from Instapundit.

From time to time I pick up a current college level history text just to get a feel for the 'historians' bias (or lack thereof).

My observations of college "history" texts over the last 25 years matches exactly what this writer finds.

Bravo!

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Posted by William Woolen, JD | **January 24, 2012 12:29 AM**

I must be missing something here, a US Constitutional tight trumps state law so why is this even an issue?

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Posted by cubanbob | **January 24, 2012 1:23 AM**

Alex, my best guess would be the rise of cultural Marxism in academia. While the desire to flesh out the contributions of historically marginalized groups has merit, it quickly became the chosen method to denigrate white males and American history, i.e., it's racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.

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Posted by Valerie | **January 24, 2012 3:49 AM**

Alex: Here's the guy who invented the word "racism":

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnus\\_Hirschfeld](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnus_Hirschfeld)

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Posted by Avery | **January 24, 2012 6:04 AM**

(full disclosure: I'm a registered and partisan Democrat)

You think it's ruinous. Imagine how much worse Republicans think it is.

Then stop and realize that those affiliated with neither party (but who still pay attention to these kinds of things) think it's even worse than that.

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Posted by Deoxy | **January 24, 2012 9:31 AM**

A person that has a bias in academia, has often been advanced by the very types of people who regulate and monitor

A meme that I, as a non-academic, have often seen advanced by the very types of people who populate race and gender studies departments, is that statistical evidence of inequality is tantamount to evidence of racial and gender barriers. It's laughable, therefore that statistical inequality regarding intellectual difference is so utterly blatant in their own bailiwick. Constitutionally, of course, race is a protected class, and intellectual difference is not, but be that as it may, the underlying principle deserves application or rejection in either argument. The only defense of the "party" bigots is that there is no argument worthy of inclusion in academia which supports the opposing view. The wealth of argument, throughout intellectual history, across the ages and continents, which supports a conservative worldview, gives the lie to such a defense, while at the same time making suspect the motives of the race and gender warriors who promote intellectual apartheid.

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Posted by Laka | **January 24, 2012 10:28 AM**

Give me four years to teach the children, and the seed I have sown will never be uprooted.

Vladimir ilyich lenin.

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Posted by Waterman3 | **January 24, 2012 11:43 AM**

A school board member in rural Oregon questioned the use of the Howard Zinn book, A Peoples History of the US, in high school courses. It was decided that the book could be used but with balanced historical views presented by other authors. I was interested in the board's discussion of the book. I got a copy and have read through 400 of the 600+ pages (paperback version). I find it an interesting novel. The odd thing is that the 365 documents, papers and books referenced in the pre-Viet Nam chapters, fully 305 (85%) were written after 1960 and predominately after 1970. Howard Zinn is not a historian, but rather a novelist and a skilled propagandist. For a definition of a historian refer to Carl Sandberg.

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Posted by Claude Hopper | **January 24, 2012 7:00 PM**

Well, considering the parlous state of our nations finances, I look forward to the day when federal funding of these clowns (both directly and through student loans) dries up and blows away. It's not a good thing to be professionally useless during an Obamalyse.

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Posted by DocinPA | **January 25, 2012 8:37 AM**

It's really just the pendulum swinging in the other direction. Unfortunately, you seem to be on the wrong side of it whereas in the past you were not. So i can see how this make you uncomfortable. However, more balanced resources are out there is anyone would bother to seek them out. Or perhaps we should ignore that issues of race, class, and gender are relevant and head on back to good ole days... I imagine there has to be a way to find a middle ground although our history suggests that people see everything as a zero sum game, so maybe not.

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Posted by **Jacquetta Szathmari** | **January 27, 2012 5:41 PM**

I am reminded that John Silber said that the only reason he was hired (by the faculty) to lead Boston University is that they found him so expertly conversant in Marxism that they thought he WAS a Marxist.

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Posted by rrahamilton | **January 27, 2012 5:45 PM**

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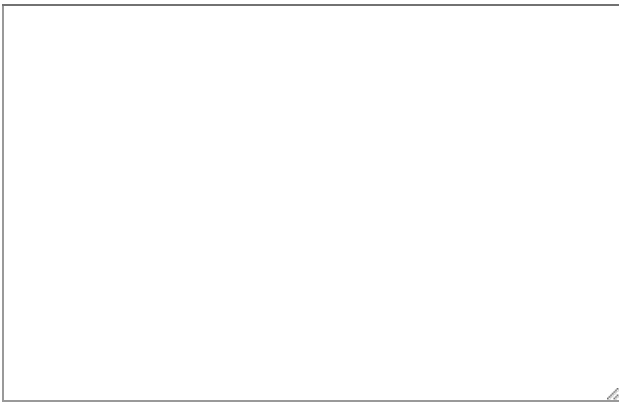
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