

*Troubled in Mind:  
The Education of a Historian*

LEON F. LITWACK

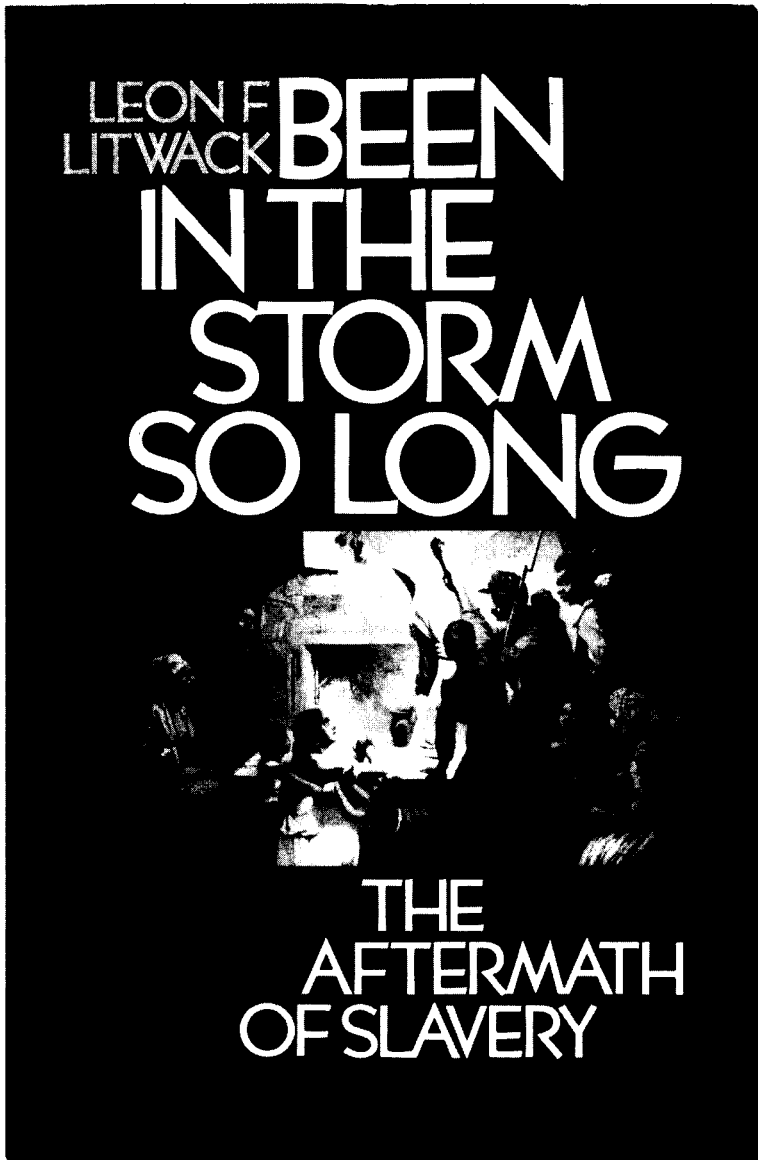
WHEN ASKED TO GIVE the Baron lecture, I was deeply honored. My only hesitation was that it might be all too brief. I know of no change I would make in *Been in the Storm So Long* twenty-five years after its publication. Nor do I have the time to read every one of the many books that have appeared on the end of slavery and the early experience of black freedom in the South. The theme of this lecture, then, is not the historiography of black emancipation but how I came to write *Been in the Storm So Long*, how and why I committed myself to the writing and teaching of African American history, and the influences that shaped that commitment more than half a century ago.

Shortly after the Civil War, Oliver Howard, head of the Freedmen's Bureau, a government agency designed to oversee the transition from slavery to freedom, came to Edisto Island, off the coast of South Carolina. The newly freed slaves who lived and worked there knew why he was coming—to order them to surrender to the original owners (their former owners) the lands they had been working as their own after the masters had fled during the war. Only Howard, it was thought, who enjoyed immense popularity among blacks, could make them believe it. They didn't. The church in which he met them was filled, the

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The front of the dust jacket of *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* by Leon F. Litwack (Knopf 1979), winner of the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for History. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

auditorium and galleries jammed with sad and angry blacks who were in no mood to come to order. Perhaps to quiet the crowd, an old woman began to sing, 'Nobody knows the trouble I feel— Nobody knows but Jesus.' The entire audience of more than two thousand joined her in a resounding chorus. Whether it was the song, the look of dismay on the faces before him, or the shouts of 'no, no!' that greeted his words, Howard found himself so flustered that he could barely finish his speech. But he managed to communicate the position of the federal government. He told them to lay aside any bitter feelings they harbored for their former masters and to return to work at the best terms they could command; they would, he assured them, achieve the same ends. If the freedmen found Howard's advice incomprehensible, that was because they understood him all too clearly. A voice from the gallery rang out, 'Why, General Howard, why do you take away our lands? You take them from us who have always been true, always true to the Government! You give them to our all-time enemies! That is not right!'

What drew me to history, even as a child, were the stories. The stories I read. The stories I heard. The stories my parents told me about coming to the United States from Russia, and then finding their way out to California. And the stories I heard growing up in Santa Barbara's 'barrio,' the stories related by Greek, Italian, and mostly Mexican neighbors, all of them immigrants, most of them (like my parents) renters rather than homeowners.

My father was an ordinary working man (a gardener) but an extraordinary intellect. My mother worked as a seamstress (dress-making and alterations); she had learned the trade as a young immigrant in New York, where she worked a ten-hour day and at night attended classes on Shakespeare, listened to lecturers at Cooper Union, and heard Caruso and Chaliapin in the Opera House. Neither of my parents had any formal education but they were very learned people. Early on, they introduced me to a cultural world that helped to shape my writing, thinking, reading, and listening. They spoke often of the people they most admired,

many of them well known (from Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Leo Tolstoy to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Gandhi, and from Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Sibelius to Verdi and Puccini). They also introduced me to less-known figures, rebels and dissidents: Eugene Debs, Big Bill Haywood, Mother Jones, Sacco and Vanzetti, Emma Goldman, Tom Mooney—men and women who had engaged themselves in struggles for social justice, who in their engagement with authority, repressive legislation, and hostile courts had defined the limits of dissent in America.

One advantage of living in Santa Barbara was that there was little to do but read. I was exposed many times to what Alfred Kazin has called the 'raw hurting power' that a book can have over a person. The public library was my sanctuary, and I mined its riches, reading passionately, feeling the words, discovering the world outside of Santa Barbara: the USA of John Dos Passos, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Theodore Dreiser, Richard Wright, William Faulkner, James T. Farrell, John Steinbeck, Jack London, Langston Hughes, William Saroyan, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and Nathaniel West, among others, and less-known writers (Howard Fast, for example, who first introduced me to Tom Paine, John Peter Altgeld, and black Reconstruction, and to alternative ways to view the past, to traditions of protest and resistance). My neighborhood exposed me at the same time to a diversity of cultures, languages, and histories. I found my upbringing in Santa Barbara to be intoxicating, a unique, exciting, often exhilarating educational experience. I learned as much out of school as in school.

But my extracurricular education came into conflict with the patriotic drumbeat, the uncritical celebration of the American Dream to which I was exposed in school, a vision of the past and the present that contradicted much of my reading and what I sensed in my own community. The stories I heard in my own neighborhood did not prepare me for the history I learned in

school—Pilgrims, Puritans, Founding Fathers, Anglo-Saxons and Northern Europeans. That was someone else's history. Where were my people, my parents and neighbors? Their stories were nowhere to be found; they were excluded from the narratives of the American experience.

If Mexican Americans appeared in the text, it was as exotic, picturesque appendages to the Europeanized mainstream, as in this textbook describing Mexicans in California before the Gold Rush. 'Life in California was delightful, at least for the Mexicans. The weather was warm and sunny. There was plenty of beef, beans, and tortillas to eat. People learned to ride at the age of 4, and women as well as men wore brightly colored jackets and silver spurs on their boots. Dancing was a passion. Weddings and parties often lasted for three days.' Every year in Santa Barbara, townspeople recreated the Spanish past in the Fiesta; gaily costumed Kiwanis and Rotarians evoked, in the words of Carey McWilliams, 'a past that never existed to cast some glamour on an equally unreal today.' The postcard icon, the Old Mission, rendered invisible the Mexican field worker as a symbol of the past.

If black Americans were mentioned in history courses, they appeared as docile and contented slaves or as easily manipulated freedmen; their history was said to be a history of submission gladly endured. The textbook I read in high school (and later at Berkeley) was no more enlightened than the textbook used in most Ivy League colleges, in which Samuel Eliot Morison of Harvard and Henry Steele Commager of Columbia said of slavery: 'Sambo suffered less than any other class in the South. Although brought here by force, the incurably optimistic negro soon became attached to the country and devoted to his "white folks." . . . Most slaves were adequately fed, well cared for, and apparently happy. . . . The Negro learned his master's language, received his religion, and accepted his moral standards. In return he contributed much besides his labor—rhythm and humor for instance—to American civilization.' That version of slavery prevailed until at least the 1960s.

As I would come to learn, no group of scholars did more to shape the thinking of generations of Americans about race and ethnicity than historians. Historians did not simply reinforce prevailing racial and ethnic biases; they helped to create and shape them, miseducating generations of Americans, including my generation. What passed for American history were the views and acts of exceptional people, most of them privileged white men who belonged to the political and economic elites and left the most easily accessible records, the people who had the leisure to record their thoughts in journals, diaries, newspapers, and letters. (Historian Richard Hofstadter said of Thomas Jefferson, 'The leisure that made possible his great writings on human liberty was supported by the labors of three generations of slaves.') The history of the laboring classes was said to be impossible to reclaim, because ordinary people (like my parents) did not usually leave or keep such records.

But I was fortunate. My teachers invited me to express my thoughts in every possible way; they encouraged me to be curious, and to satisfy my curiosity—a dangerous indulgence, a most subversive activity.

Consequently, the textbook and my first class in United States History were my first confrontation with history. I asked my eleventh grade teacher at Santa Barbara High School for the opportunity to respond to the textbook's version of slavery and Reconstruction, to what I thought (based on my earlier reading of Howard Fast's *Freedom Road*) were distortions and racial biases. The research led me to the public library—and to W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, with that intriguing subtitle: 'An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880.' Armed with that book, I presented what I thought to be an absolutely persuasive rebuttal of the textbook. At the conclusion of my report, the teacher looked at the class and said, 'Now students, you must remember that Leon is bitterly pro-labor.' What did this have to do with my report? Only some years later did I come

to appreciate the relevance of her remark. My views of labor, my outspoken support of unions, my political and social activism had helped to shape—my teacher might have said prejudiced or distorted—my historical vision.

In my senior year, I edited the school newspaper, only to find myself embroiled in a running conflict with the vice principal, who several times threatened to shut us down over editorials and stories he deemed obscene or subversive. They were. He was right. We called for the removal of the *Reader's Digest* from English classes, on the grounds that it advanced right-wing values in the guise of vocabulary building. We opposed the ROTC and the prospect of compulsory military training. We questioned the Cold War. We thought the funds used each year to stage the Fiesta would be better spent on low-cost housing. And in a special issue for Brotherhood Week, we focused on the persistence and virulence of racism in American society and the need for a civil rights movement. This was an unusual high school newspaper, especially in Santa Barbara, and I had a talented, committed, and supportive staff. The fate of *The Forge* was left in the hands of the principal, a gentleman from Tennessee who had to balance the protests of 'civic minded citizens,' as they were called, against a grudging tolerance of what we were doing—that is, expressing our thoughts on important, even volatile issues. He advised me, as did a Berkeley dean several years later, to be cautious and prudent in exercising the constitutional rights I had put to memory in my history and civics courses. Their advice was well intended, but they had to repeat it several times. That was one lesson I never learned. I could be a poor listener. (The principal and vice principal were both chastened by the news that our paper had been awarded a major prize by the National Conference of Christians and Jews—a certificate signed by President Truman—for the special issue devoted to Brotherhood Week.)

For me, Berkeley was a welcome liberation from the smugness and constraints of Santa Barbara. When I came there as an underclassman, political ferment was extensive and diverse. But old and

revived mechanisms of surveillance and repression soon made the University of California a more compliant campus. University rules forbade controversial speakers and using the college grounds for partisan political activity. The most memorable line from my graduation came from the student speaker. He reminded us of the war in Korea, that some of us were bound to serve there (my draft notice was on its way), and that our enemy—being Asian—had no concept of the worth of human life. No one at my graduation thought to mention the exodus of renowned scholars who found the intellectual atmosphere at Berkeley too stifling, or the professors (none of them Communists or even ex-Communists) dismissed for refusing to sign the loyalty oath, or the earlier action of the Academic Senate in barring Communists as faculty members. Nor did anyone speak to the debasement of political, intellectual and cultural life in the nation, corrupted by the hysteria over alleged Communists in our midst. And no one thought to mention to this predominantly white graduating class the rampant and rigid racism that circumscribed and abused the lives of millions of black citizens.

Some of us did not want to be protected or immunized from the contamination of unorthodox ideas. We were a small band of dissidents, but we waged some important battles. We questioned the campus orthodoxy. We challenged racial discrimination in student housing and employment. We advanced successfully the rights of student workers. We fought the loyalty oath imposed by the Regents. We fought the exclusion of political speakers and activity from the campus. We did so in the face of an elaborate intelligence network that entailed collaboration between campus administrators, some faculty, and police and federal intelligence agencies to monitor our political thoughts, activities, and associations. (Several years ago, a graduate student, while using the University archives, found a letter from the Dean of the School of Education, dated June 20, 1951, to President Robert Gordon Sproul seeking to blacklist me from the teacher certification program. 'All agreed that Mr. Litwack should be



discouraged, but none was able to provide us grounds for doing so that would stand up in court.'

These were the years of the Cold War and a search for internal security that seemed to know no limits. All of this in the 1950s attracted me to a new group of dissidents, who are seldom mentioned in courses on American intellectual history, who found this society rational but no longer sane: Lenny Bruce (a standup nightclub comic), the Beat Generation across the Bay in San Francisco (especially Alan Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti), Joseph Heller, Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, Dwight McDonald, and Terry Southern, among others). Because of my proximity to San Francisco and Oakland, I was also introduced to rebels who disturbed the peace through their music—jazz and blues artists in particular, those who played at the Black Hawk, or at the clubs on Fillmore Street or, after 2 a.m., jammed at Bop City.

My experience with organized radicalism was not very productive. It demanded a discipline and regimentation and a brand of orthodoxy that I found troublesome and ultimately unacceptable. Like my boyhood hero Big Bill Haywood, I wasn't into this 'ideological' stuff. I agreed with a critic who warned during the 1920s, 'The revolution will not come, or coming, it will not survive, if it depends fundamentally upon discipline. The essential meaning of the revolution to me was the liberation of individuality, the extension of my privilege of individuality to the masses of mankind. For my own part, I have not the glimmer of a desire to lose my identity in a collection.' I read very little Marx, but enough to appreciate Haywood's remark, 'Socialism is so plain, so clear, so simple that when a person becomes intellectual he doesn't understand socialism.' Haywood preferred common sense to doctrine. Who needed Marx to understand, 'If one man has a dollar he didn't work for, some other man worked for a dollar he didn't get?' I ultimately lost faith not in the struggle to create an equitable society but the perversion and betrayal of that struggle. I was less concerned with Marxist theory than with

the need to understand and act upon the idea that social, economic, and racial inequities are neither inevitable nor accidental but rather reflect the assumptions, beliefs, and policies of people who command enormous power. That was true in the 1950s, and it is no less true today but more urgent.

When I came to Berkeley, my writing focused on voices long stifled, peoples once marginalized, black Americans and workers, as well as the dangers of McCarthyism. Some of what I wrote, regrettably, attracted the wrong readers—my landlady, for example—and ended up in Army Intelligence and FBI files. But I managed to preserve my long narrative, written for an English class, on a strike of black nurses aides and orderlies at a Berkeley hospital, a strike in which I had been a participant. That characterized the writing to which I remained committed. My master's thesis combined my interest in labor and African American history, examining the exclusion of black workers from trade unions in the nineteenth century. My dissertation and first book (*North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*) focused on racial attitudes in the North and the anomaly of free blacks largely disfranchised, segregated, and relegated to menial positions. (The book, published in 1961, was warmly received in the white southern press, often on the editorial page, where readers were reminded that racial problems and bigotry were not confined to the region below the Mason-Dixon Line.

My first teaching position was at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where I taught the Early National Period (1815-1840) and the survey course. (There were no courses in African American history, though I integrated that history into my teaching.) I returned to Berkeley in 1964 as a visiting professor and the next year as a member of the faculty, and I have been there ever since. I felt privileged, at both Madison and Berkeley, to be teaching at a public university trying to provide an affordable education to a broad range of the population. This of course was an exciting time to be in Berkeley. Challenging the conventional wisdom became a way of life, in intellectual discourse and in the streets. But

it attracted me for still other reasons. The conflict over free speech at Berkeley was about the right of students to demonstrate their support for the civil rights movement, both in the South and in the Bay Area. After much struggle, not only did dissent become a much revered tradition at UC, but a black studies department was established, and black history came to be accepted as a valid field worthy of research and teaching. (Four years after my arrival, Winthrop Jordan and I would establish an upper division lecture course and we would offer graduate seminars in black studies.)

Not one but several influences solidified my decision to teach and write African American history: my political activism (around such issues as loyalty oaths, racism, and the Cold War), my experience shipping out on freighters during the summer and membership in the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union, the many hours spent aboard ship and in the library stacks nourishing my engagement with the past, and my growing awareness of the uses and abuses of the past—my growing sense of the fundamental contradictions between this country's often-proclaimed ideals and its practices, between its professed egalitarianism and deep inequalities in wealth, and in conditions of work and life.

A chance meeting in my sophomore year at Berkeley also proved memorable. The graduate teaching assistant in the history course in which I was enrolled called and asked me to come over to his apartment; he said someone wanted to meet me. I recognized his guest immediately—W. E. B. Du Bois. I was deeply impressed. I had read his books. But why had he singled me out? He wanted, he said, to meet an undergraduate in history. He wanted to know what I was learning about slavery and Reconstruction. My response was in two parts: the textbook (by John D. Hicks) reflected familiar distortions and biases; the course lectures did not, and their content impressed and astonished Du Bois; they revealed new ways of thinking about slavery and Reconstruction. The person teaching the course was a young assistant professor, Kenneth M. Stamp, who would have a profound impact on my thinking, and with whom I would ultimately write my dissertation.

My political activism no doubt influenced the way I looked at history, but history also helped to inform and shape my politics. I would come to believe, too, that to study and teach the past did not require one to abandon commitment; on the contrary, it helped to inform and often solidify commitment. As a historian, I feel the need to address the inequities and injustices in our society, but also to underscore the resiliency and cultural richness of peoples long marginalized in our history—the need to communicate their lives, aspirations, and hopes in a language that would engage the public.

Most of all, I wanted my work as a historian and teacher to make a difference. History, the way in which it is written and taught, does have consequences. Black people, in particular, have seen the tools of history used as powerful weapons to circumvent their lives. The ways in which Reconstruction, for example, came to be portrayed, in the textbook and on the screen, for nearly a century shaped white southern (and northern) responses to any challenge to Jim Crow or disfranchisement.

For much of our history, popular culture depicted black men and women as something less than 'true' Americans. That notion came to be quickly assimilated by European immigrants, almost as quickly as they learned the epitaph 'nigger'—a sure sign of their Americanization. Whether whites caricatured the Negro as comic (as in minstrelsy, vaudeville, and on the screen), as Sambo-like contented slaves (as in Morrison and Commager), or as bestial (as in Thomas Dixon's novels and in films such as 'Birth of a Nation'), whites managed to strip blacks of their humanity and individuality, making a mockery of their lives and aspirations. The consequences were far-reaching. The image of blacks as unreliable and shiftless confined them to menial labor, to jobs that required the least skill and knowledge. The image of blacks as incapable of reaching higher levels of intelligence shaped and narrowed their educational opportunities, even as the image of educated blacks incited fears that such blacks would be overly ambitious and not stay 'in their place.' The image of ignorant and

duped blacks explained the need to exclude them from polls and juries. The image of blacks as bestial, as sources of contamination, explained the need to quarantine them rigidly, even to lynch them occasionally.

What has always seemed to most Americans distinctive about their heritage is freedom. That is what sets us off from much of the world, and to listen to most Presidents, that explains the uniqueness of the United States—that ‘city on the hill.’ But that is to read American history without the presence of African Americans. Once you incorporate the African American into American history, as Nathan Huggins argued, it would transform and redefine that history. ‘You may be obliged to reinterpret the American experience in such a way that *freedom* is not the word that defines it. You’re going to have to change the terms in which you think and talk about American life.’ This nation from its very inception had to face up to some enormous contradictions—slave owning champions of liberty! The Founding Fathers managed to reconcile slavery with the natural rights of man and equality.

When Fisk University in 1929 and 1930 interviewed former slaves about their lives and history, one of them asked the interviewer, ‘In all the books you never have studied Negro history have you? If you want Negro history, you will have to get it from somebody who wore the shoe, and, by and by from one to the other you will get a book.’ That was the spirit, and these were the voices I hoped to bring to my study of the aftermath of slavery. Since white folks owned the history, the ‘faithful’ and ‘devoted’ slaves had been firmly enshrined in southern mythology—in the white folks’ Hall of Black Fame, in story, legend, statues and song. There was little room in this scenario for a Nat Turner, the slave rebel, or an Aunt Delia, the black cook in a North Carolina family who spat in the biscuits and pissed in the coffee to get back at her white folks. Every black man and woman had a capacity for outrage and resistance. Enslaved or freed, none was above suspicion—‘the suspicion,’ a Virginia legislator believed, ‘that a Nat Turner might be in every family, that

the same bloody deed could be acted over at any time and in any place, that the materials for it were spread through the land and always ready for a like explosion.'

The tensions created by this kind of uncertainty could be unbearable, and they were never more evident than during and after the Civil War, that moment of truth when seemingly docile, childlike, model slaves could suddenly become, in the eyes of their masters and mistresses, unrecognizable men and women. An epic chapter in the history of the Civil War, there are few more dramatic moments in our history. (Documentary film maker Ken Burns missed it entirely in his six episodes.) What the Civil War did was to sweep away the pretenses, dissolve the illusions, and lay bare the tensions and instability inherent in the master-slave relationship.

When I set out to write *Been in the Storm So Long*, I asked a simple question: What happened when nearly four million black men and women, who had known nothing but slavery, suddenly learned they were no longer slaves? To what could a freed black man or woman aspire in a society where whites owned the land, the tools, the crops, and the law, and where the prospect of black freedom made it all the more imperative that they retain control? How free was free? To answer these questions required nearly six hundred pages. And the answer was filled with unexpected complexity and ambiguity and with extraordinary drama. I wanted to study slavery at the very moment it came apart, when whites and blacks confronted each other in new and unprecedented ways.

To capture this drama, the moment when a newly freed people encountered the exhilaration and the terror and uncertainties of freedom, it was essential to recover the black voice, to recount the countless ways in which black men and women perceived and acted upon their freedom, how they tested its limits and its meaning. Experiencing her first days of freedom, a young Mississippi woman wondered what it meant, how it would change her life: 'I used to think if I could be free I should be the happiest of anybody in the world. But when my master come to me, and

says—Lizzie, you is free! It seems like I was in a kind of daze. And when I would wake up in the morning I would think to myself, Is I free? Hasn't I got to get up before daylight and go into the field to work?'

To find the black voice, every resource needed to be examined, including the much-ignored—and to some suspect—narratives collected in the 1930s by interviewers from Fisk University and the Federal Writers' Project. I found them to be indispensable, for regardless of age, one event bound to stir vivid memories was the moment they learned they were no longer slaves. That there may be problems of selectivity and bias does not render these records invalid, but they must be used with care and subjected to the same rigorous standards of historical criticism the historian would apply to other sources, such as *The New York Times*.

To understand fully how black people endured centuries of legalized slavery and repression is also to appreciate the resourcefulness, the resilience with which they have acted and expressed themselves. That resourcefulness is evident at all levels of black society, not simply in the actions and words of black leaders. For black Americans, the conventional outlets of expression and dissent were closed, forcing them to find alternative ways to articulate their feelings about matters of daily and far-reaching concern to them. That may require, as one historian has suggested, that a chronicler of the black experience needs to enter a world in which the spoken, chanted, sung, or shouted word is often the primary form of communication. I have learned as much from novelists, poets, musicians, story tellers, and artists as I have from historians. They have illuminated the past in ways that are difficult for an historian to capture: the poetry of Sterling Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, or Langston Hughes; the prose of Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston or Toni Morrison; the plays of August Wilson, the photographs of P. J. Polk or James Van Der Zee, the artistry of Aaron Douglass, Jacob Lawrence, or Romaine Bearden; the sounds of John Coltrane, Miles Davis or Thelonious Monk; the

voices of Sam Cooke, Mahalia Jackson, Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, or Chuck D.

And then there is the eloquent matter-of-factness, the frightening honesty conveyed by the bluesmen and blueswomen. It has been said that some of the most spirited, some of the bleakest and some of the most anguished nonfiction in the American idiom may be found in their work, in the toughness, tensions, passion, wisdom, wit, immediacy of Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Son House, Tommy Johnson, Ma Rainey, and Muddy Waters (names strangely and conspicuously absent from most anthologies of American literature). In his book *Deep Blues*, Robert Palmer asks, 'How much thought can be hidden in a few short lines of poetry? How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string?' And he answers, 'The thought of generations, the history of every human being who's ever felt the blues come down like showers of rain.' In the late twentieth century, hip-hop or rap raised the stakes. The most intimidating, subversive, and creative force in music in the last several decades, hip hop became, as Ice T defined it, 'the scream from the bottom.'

That's the spirit that informs my writing and the subjects I choose to explore, including an ongoing trilogy on the black experience in the South, beginning with *Been in the Storm So Long*, followed by *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, and the book now in progress, *Pearl Harbor Blues*, focusing on World War II and its aftermath. In all of these works, I am fortunate to have had access to some extraordinary sources. The challenge is to do justice to the sources, to the richness, eloquence, complexity of the voices.

I still think about that day in high school when I hoped (with all my youthful idealism and enthusiasm) to change the way my classmates and teacher thought about slavery and Reconstruction. More than half a century later, I would like to think my work has made some difference, not only my writing but my teaching, the more than thirty thousand students I have taught at Berkeley over nearly forty years, mostly in the survey course.



Edmund Morgan, a historian I very much admire, once asked, 'If history is so popular, why are historians so unpopular?' The answer must be, at least in part, that we have made ourselves unpopular. We leave a large audience with an avid interest in history to learn its history from 'popularizers' excluded from the academy, and we then have the temerity to condemn the 'popularizers' for distorting or simplifying history. We have, in fact, surrendered the field by default.

It has everything to do with writing, how we present our research. Unfortunately, historians of the American people reach very few of those people, because what they write is often unreadable, if not unintelligible, cast in a language only a select few are privileged to understand. For 'outsiders,' it is like being in a foreign country, without knowing the language, and with little incentive to learn it. Even those who engage in what they believe to be 'people's' (or 'bottom-up') history too often write for an elite vanguard and demonstrate in their works an arrogant (if unintended) disregard for the very people whose lives they are seeking to recapture; they all too often suffocate those lives in unreadable prose and in thickets of jargon. It is a serious breakdown in communication. Sharing 'a common allegiance to a cult of obscurity,' Patricia Nelson Limerick argues, scholars of different political persuasions 'hide behind the idea that unintelligible prose indicates a sophisticated mind.'

Fortunately, there are exceptions, and a number of academic historians have influenced my thoughts and my writing, through the sheer eloquence and imaginative powers they have brought to the historical experience: Richard Hofstadter, Edmund Morgan, Kenneth Stampf, and C. Vann Woodward, to mention but a few. Based on such models, we do have the opportunity to make a difference: to help overcome cultural illiteracy and parochialism, to open the minds of Americans to a diversity of world views, cultures, and historical experiences, to challenge the conventional wisdom.

My writing is not aimed at an academic audience. I want to write clearly, in readable, unspecialized prose, uncluttered by the

trendy, ponderous, pretentious, impenetrable, jargon-ridden prose that has inflicted itself on the academy. I admit to being what one critic has called an ideologue—that is, a captive of ‘the ideology of lucidity.’

The challenge is to engage, to captivate, even enthrall the reader. (Catherine Drinker Bowen kept a sign posted on her desk: ‘Will the reader turn the page?’ I also think of W. H. Auden’s admonition to the graduating class at Harvard in 1946: ‘Thou shalt not sit/with statisticians nor commit/a social science.’) I want my readers to hear and feel the voices. I want them to feel the past, to feel the past in ways that might be genuinely disturbing. I want them to feel those blues coming down like showers of rain.

With his demonic songs and guitar licks, bluesman Robert Johnson conveyed what it was like to live with fear, uncertainty, betrayal, and daily terrors in the Jim Crow South, with terrors impossible to escape.

I got to keep moving, I got to keep moving  
 blues falling down like hail  
 blues falling down like hail  
 Uumh, blues falling down like hail  
 blues falling down like hail  
 and the days keeps on ’minding me  
 there’s a hellhound on my trail,  
 hellhound on my trail,  
 hellhound on my trail.

On September 11, 2001, those hellhounds forced all Americans, white and black, to recognize what it was like to live with terror—an experience, a history black Americans know all too intimately, as they have lived it and continue to live with its legacy.

If Americans needed any further reminder of that legacy, Hurricane Katrina provided it. In a city where 28 percent of the people lived in poverty, 84 percent of them black, Katrina lifted the

veil from the usually ignored divide between the poor and the wealthy, black and white. What we were seeing left little to the imagination: the poor had been left to be washed away. 'Is this what the Civil Rights Movement fought to achieve?' a black observer asked, 'a society where many black people are as trapped and isolated by their poverty as they were by legal segregation laws?' Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, I received an e-mail message from someone I had never met. He had once used *Been In the Storm So Long* in a history course he taught. He said it helped to set a tone for the semester by compelling students to see history as a series of complex, often human interactions. Why did he write now? 'I have been struck in recent weeks by the efforts of poor, largely black families dispersed without their control, trying to find family members, trying to reconstitute families, struggling over what is meant by "property" in such a situation. It all reminded me of that historical moment that you captured so well in your book.'

If black people have once again been left vulnerable and on their own, abandoned and propertyless with nowhere to go, *Been in the Storm So Long* remains a forceful reminder that after the Civil War, this nation walked away from the human devastation it had sustained and protected, and rejected any suggestion that it be held accountable for centuries of unpaid forced labor, or that positive government might be required to correct habitual inequality. The nation walked away and left tens of thousands homeless, penniless, vulnerable. One hundred and forty years later, the bottom line is still there.

'Been in the Storm So Long,' a nineteenth-century black spiritual, appears at the very beginning of the book. The next volume in the trilogy would be called *Trouble in Mind*. That blues song, like the African American odyssey, encompassed enslavement, a tortured freedom, a new beginning in the North, and both triumphs and retreats. The song began as a slave spiritual, and in 1860 would have sounded like this:

I am a-trouble in de mind.  
 O I am a-trouble in de mind.  
 I ask my Lord what shall I do,  
 I am a-trouble in de mind.

It reentered folk tradition in the late nineteenth century as country blues, reflecting the restlessness of a new generation, the first born in freedom.

If I'm feelin' tomorrow  
 Like I feel today  
 I'm going to pack my suitcase  
 and make my getaway

'Cause I'm troubled  
 I'm all worried in mind  
 And I never been satisfied  
 And I just can't keep from cryin'.

With the Great Migration, in the twentieth century, the song moved up North, along with hundreds of thousands of black southerners, and it would be revived in a new setting, in an urban and industrial setting:

Well, trouble, oh, trouble  
 Trouble on my worried mind.  
 When you see me laughin',  
 I'm laughin' just to keep from cryin'.

Some years later, rapper Chuck D. of Public Enemy would add his own refrain:

I got so much trouble on my mind  
 (On my mind)  
 I refuse to lose

Here's your ticket  
Hear the drummer get wicked.

It is all very different. It is all very much the same. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is a different America, and it is a familiar America. Asked to assess the legacy of the civil rights era, a black veteran of the Movement responded in 1985:

In the 1960s, Bull Connor threw us in jail, sicked dogs on us, turned the water hose on us. Today Birmingham has a black mayor. Last year he picked me up at the airport and gave me a key to the city. But in the shadow of City Hall I saw black people still living in slums. Downtown I met blacks of the expanding middle class. In the shadows of Downtown I observed a growing underclass. Everything has changed, but nothing has changed.

Everything has changed. But nothing has changed. That remains a bitter truth—and a continuing challenge.

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BY LEON LITWACK

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