

## EDUCATION

### A Confederacy of Dunces

by Philip Jenkins

The task force claims to have participated in the conviction of 305 defendants connected to 224 arsons or bombings. As the task force points out in a news release, his arrest rate of 36.2 percent is more than twice the national average for arson cases. About one-third of the 948 arsons tracked by the task force since 1995 involved black churches. But the task force does not claim to have a complete list of church arsons. It is probable that churches suspecting a racist motivation were more likely to report their losses to the task force than ones that suspect mundane vandalism.

Even in the South, there is no evidence from the task force that black churches were more vulnerable than white churches. According to the task force, 44 percent of church arsons in the South were at black churches, and 56 percent were at white churches. But approximately 40 percent of Southern churches are predominantly black.

Of the 136 people arrested for arsons at black churches, 85 were white, 50 were black, and one was Hispanic. Thirty-seven whites were charged with hate crimes because there was evidence of a racial motivation for their attack upon black churches. Only six of those 37 had ties to an organized hate group. The majority of church arsonists of all races seem to have been motivated by pyromania, vandalism, burglary, or insurance fraud.

It's hard to call the church-arson story of 1996 a complete fraud. Yes, black churches were burned and continue to burn. And yes, some arsonists have been motivated by racial hatred. But there is no compelling evidence to show that black churches were any more vulnerable to attack over the last decade than non-black churches.

The arson story was created, in part, by a failing church group trying to revive its sagging political and financial fortunes. But the NCC remains on the brink of collapse. One of its final legacies may be the creation of a myth that needlessly incited racial fears and raised millions of dollars under false pretenses.

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The death of a social movement is an instructive and sobering phenomenon. After years of greatness and influence, an idea eventually sickens and dies, until its adherents are reduced to a pathetic handful. Somewhere in history, there must have lived the last Albigensian, the last Ranter, the last native practitioner of ancient Egyptian religion. Somewhere in the not-too-distant future, this select band of ultimate diehards will be joined by yet another, when Marxism breathes its last. And while I do not know the name of the last Marxist, I can, with some confidence, identify the profession of this heroic loser: He or she will unquestionably teach humanities at an American university—and almost certainly in the history department.

Academic historians rarely make much impact on the wider world, which explains why the public at large generally pays so little attention to their weird and wonderful tribal practices. Over the last year or two, however, historians have ventured beyond the forest clearing and into public view, and the sight has been something to behold. I suppose the new age started in the mid-1990's with the controversy over the Smithsonian's scheme for a revisionist exhibit of the *Enola Gay*, which condemned the U.S. decision to drop the atomic bomb. Crucial to the controversy was the exhibit's insanely inaccurate projection of the number of casualties the Allies were likely to incur in an invasion of Japan. The Smithsonian said the figure for American dead would be "only" about 30,000, while most competent scholars suggested figures closer to a half-million. Though the exhibit was (very properly) closed down, the affair lingers in liberal mythology as a victory by ignorant racist yahoos over sound scholarship.

Shortly afterward, the once-respected scholar John Hope Franklin agreed to chair President Clinton's ludicrous inquiry into American race relations, which was deputized to explore any av-

enues whatever, as long as they placed enough emphasis on white guilt and provided ammunition for expanding affirmative-action policies. (You remember the "National Dialogue.") Then, vast numbers of historians chose to sign Pro-Clinton petitions during the impeachment crisis, all basically swearing to assertions about the origins of impeachment that were contrary to fact. In 2000, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) went into a spasm of New Left revivalism when it turned out that the group had chosen to hold its annual convention at the Adam's Mark Hotel in St. Louis, although the hotel chain was under attack over dubious charges concerning civil-rights violations.

The 2000 election really brought the professors out of the woodwork when Princeton professor Sean Wilentz organized breathless anti-Bush petitions that even middle-of-the-road liberal media thought hysterical. (The fate of American democracy allegedly stood or fell on whether Florida's Palm Beach County was allowed to vote again, presumably until a Democratic majority was secured.) Most recently (in January), almost 500 historians signed a petition shrieking about the Bush victory and complaining that the majority on the U.S. Supreme Court "acted as it did in order to install a Republican president and to expand its political position on the Court." The historians professed themselves "outraged and saddened at this wound inflicted upon American democracy." The letter was signed by some of the biggest names in the field, including Lizabeth Cohen of Harvard, Todd Gitlin of New York University, David Brion Davis of Yale, George Frederickson of Stanford, and—of course—the ineffable Wilentz. Incidentally, all of those named are not only solid historians but can actually write very well, and, presumably, can read.

Several observations come to mind about these eruptions: Most obviously, the fact that historians can make such screaming misstatements about a well-known contemporary event casts an utterly damning light on their critical abilities to explore the remoter past. All the readers of the election protests lived through the events concerned and have at least as much knowledge of what went on as the professors. Wilentz and his merry men are not claiming that they had personal access to secret documents from the World League of Racists, Homophobes, and Other Bad People, order-

ing the U.S. Supreme Court to fix the election for Boy George. They are just relying on media sources, the same as the rest of us. If they are willing to base themselves entirely on one-sided *parti pris* documents to reconstruct the affairs of *anno* 2000, what earthly hope do we have that they will be more perceptive when studying the issues of 1800 or 1900, let alone any earlier period?

The recent upsurge of activism among the workers, peasants, and professors indicates a distressing herd mentality, a willingness to sign basically anything that comes from History Central, so long as it gives people the sense that they are fighting the good fight. The event arouses a powerful temptation to wreak upon historians the same dirty trick that a mischievous soul performed upon the British Young Liberals in the 1970's, persuading most of the party's annual convention to sign a heartfelt declaration of support for the oppressed people of the Republic of Santa Clara. (Since no such state exists, the Santa Clarans are, perforce, not oppressed.)

Just what is wrong with the historical profession? I can give a short answer: Particularly in American history, the profession is dominated by people whose ideas were formed in the social struggles of the late 1960's and early 1970's, and who have not noticed that the world has since changed. Obviously, a large proportion of the current historical profession grew up after the Nixon years, but they remain true to what seems to them a golden age of activism. Accordingly, their response to events is largely Pavlovian, and they are still trying to answer questions that were not terribly relevant even in 1970. For example, we might look at Elizabeth Cohen, the first name on the recent election petition. Her major book is called *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, 1990), and it assembles a good deal of useful information. Her theme, however, is that vital issue that so greatly agitates the American masses at the start of the 21st century—namely, class formation. The same riveting theme stirred Wilentz to write his best-known work, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (Oxford, 1986). It's a good read despite the sub-Marxist intellectual framework—certainly not *because* of it.

Once we realize that many American historians have not progressed intellectually beyond 1974 or so, we can easily ap-

preciate their areas of concern. Race, above all, agitates them: In their minds, it has only been five or ten years since the Selma march, and black Americans are still pretty much where they were during the King years. Given this sense of drama and urgency, it is not surprising that racial themes permeate their literature. Also—remember, we are still mentally in the Nixon years—there are all sorts of new and thrilling debates concerning women's liberation, and even gay liberation. (Tired? Who said these themes were tired?)

If you think I'm exaggerating, just look at a typical year's output of the *Journal of American History*, the official organ of the OAH, published in four hefty numbers annually. The March 2000 issue devoted half its space to a round table on the theme of ethnicity and race, with such groundbreaking studies as "Japanese American Resettlement and Community in Chicago 1942-45." All the articles in the June issue were about ethnicity, race, and slavery, and a special section celebrated the lifetime achievements of Herbert Aptheker, the unrepentant doyen of American communist historians. September brought a refreshing change of theme, with a focus on "gender" issues, feminism, contraception, and theories of masculinity. Readers feeling deprived of their regular racial fix would have been delighted to pick up the December issue, with its major study of race and slavery. Specifically, this number devoted a round table to the question of whether Cinqué, leader of the legendary *Amistad* slave revolt, was himself a slave trader. The issue was topped off with an article examining "the new disability history," which is currently enjoying something of an academic vogue.

The journal's emphases are neatly epitomized by the front covers of the year's four issues, which depicted Los Angeles's Little Tokyo; an African-American teacher in a one-room schoolhouse; a cartoon about Victorian feminist and birth-control advocate Victorian Woodhull; and an outrageously idealized Cinqué. In the eyes of the historical profession's establishment, that seems to represent a pretty complete spectrum of American life, past and present. Is there anything or anyone they might have omitted here?

Nor are these weird concentrations peculiar to the JAH. If anything, the rather more prestigious *American Historical Review* (AHR) is even quirkier. Highlights

of their 2000 issues include one massive "forum" section on "gender" and masculinity in Chinese history; another forum on contemporary histories of slavery and a lengthy article on Maya revivalism that was largely a puff piece for the contemporary Zapatista rebels in the Mexican province of Chiapas.

Putting the main journals together, we can see that "mainstream" American history today—what successful historians actually do—is overwhelmingly concerned with what would once have been viewed as the extreme margins: radical and feminist history, racial and sexual minorities, and other marginal groups. There is nothing wrong with any of these interests (heaven knows, I myself work a great deal in the margins, and indeed beyond them) but the problem comes when the margins are seen as the whole of the American experience. It's even worse when historians adopt such an activist stance toward their subjects. They are not writing the history of contraception, which anyone will admit is an important topic, but rather studying how women struggled heroically against male oppression. (I offer a representative quotation from one article in the September 2000 issue of JAH, p. 459: "Such letters offer more than a touching tribute to the determination of women and men in late nineteenth century America to restrict their fertility.") Especially in racial matters, history is recounted in starkly ideological terms, with heroes and villains, good guys and bad guys. Competing views are not simply excluded; they are left unconsidered. History is a weapon for social activism, and historians are soldiers in the liberation struggle.

Given the power of the social mythologies through which American history is read (and misread), we can scarcely wonder at the joy with which practitioners greet anything that can be taken, however implausibly, as a repetition of past horrors. The Adam's Mark affair? A chance to stand again at Selma. The 2000 election? We'll fight *Dred Scott* afresh, and this time, we'll win. Just don't bother me with facts: I'm an American historian.

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# In The Dark

by George McCartney

## Dinner Is Served

The original newspaper advertisements for *Hannibal* (director Ridley Scott's adaptation of Thomas Harris's novel) displayed a ghoulish-looking close up of the eponymous protagonist, a more-than-usually mad psychiatrist who has an unfortunate penchant for dining on his patients. In the person of Anthony Hopkins, Hannibal the Cannibal glared at us malevolently, a crazed smile creasing his aging face.

A week into the film's run, however, the picture changed. Now, we see Hopkins standing by a candlelit dinner table regarding Clarice Starling (Julianne Moore), the FBI agent with whom he's conducted a cat-and-mouse relationship since they met in *The Silence of the Lambs*. She sits across from him in an elegant evening dress as he thoughtfully prepares her meal. Despite his evident attention to her needs, she stares past him into the middle distance, seemingly indifferent to his labors. It might as well be a scene from *The Remains of the Day*, in which Hopkins played the perfectly servile butler—a man self-effacingly dedicated to caring for his masters. Now, we may assume his masters are MGM studio executives—if not the paying public at large. They have ordered him to whip up a little something to set their jaded palates a tingle once more. The resulting concoction involves a particularly outré variant of cannibalism that has sent audiences out of the theater indiscreetly abuzz (hence the new ad). Rather than think it a liability, MGM has chosen to take full advantage of this widespread disclosure of the film's denouement. "Come back for a second helping," one version coyly urges.

If you happen to be among those still unfamiliar with the film's excesses, you may want to skip the next five paragraphs, since I will be addressing them in some detail.

Scott's previous film, *Gladiator*, contained plenty of violence, but it was all a matter of sleight-of-hand suggestion carried off ingeniously with quicksilver editing. Here, however, he has called upon his special-effects technicians to shove

## Hannibal

Produced and Distributed by  
Dino De Laurentiis and MGM Studios  
Directed by Ridley Scott  
Screenplay by David Mamet  
and Steven Zaillian  
from the novel by Thomas Harris

## Last Resort

Produced by the British  
Broadcasting Corporation  
Directed by Paul Pavlikovsky  
Screenplay by Rowan Joffe  
and Paul Pavlikovsky  
Released by The Shooting Gallery

blood and viscera in our faces. As in the novel, Dr. Lecter comes out of retirement to revenge the sullied honor of his reluctant protégé, Clarice. At considerable risk to himself—including being set upon by a herd of flesh-eating hogs—he finally accomplishes his gallant mission. He captures (and terminally discomfits) Clarice's arch-tormentor, Paul Krendler (Ray Liotta), whose offenses are as much political as criminal.

In order to advance his own interests, Krendler, a careerist in the Department of Justice, planted evidence that compromised Clarice's professional integrity and forced the FBI to suspend her. Worse, he's made unwanted passes at her and disparaged women in general, claiming they're better suited to taking dictation than conducting investigations. Further, he assumes Lecter is "queer" because he's interested in such "artsy-fartsy stuff" as chamber music and Renaissance painting. For these crimes, Krendler gets his head handed to him—literally. First, Lecter drugs him, then saws off his skullcap. Next, he sits Krendler down to a dinner of morsels taken from his own brain. With each slice of gray matter removed from Krendler's head, the unfortunate agent loses more and more of his mind, until he begins jabbering crudely and breaks into a childlike rendition of "Swinging on a Star." This grisly scene is staged to make Lecter's revenge on behalf of his Clarice seem both laudable and amusing. Although there were

screams and groans at the showing I attended, I also heard chuckling and even a smattering of applause. Of course: Here was a homophobic male chauvinist being literally reduced to the idiot he had already proved himself to be culturally. There's modern justice for you! Hate-criminals, beware!

There is something fundamentally askew about this narrative's premise: Dr. Lecter is a monster who murders wantonly, but we are encouraged to admire him. The word "monster," by the way, appears in the novel when the narrator grandly informs us that

there is no consensus in the psychiatric community that Dr. Lecter should be termed a man. He has long been regarded by his professional peers in psychiatry . . . as something entirely Other. For convenience they call him "monster."

Harris, of course, has another term in mind. He's made Lecter a superman in the Nietzschean sense: an individual who exists far beyond the petty parameters of good and evil. Yes, he kills, but his victims are invariably contemptible. They're men who lack cultivation, especially regarding their relations with women. There's the wretched Krendler, for one; but we are also treated to his opposite, a middle-aged Italian policeman (Giancarlo Giannini), married to a much younger woman whom he indulges uxoriously for fear of losing her. Each, in his own way, has objectified women and therefore deserves death at Lecter's avenging hands. The doctor, you see, is an aesthete who can't abide unseemly behavior. He is also a man of uncompromising taste (so to speak). He once killed an inferior flute player in the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra to make room for someone more talented. As a playful grace note, he fed the musician's remains—suitably disguised—to the orchestra's board of directors.

What are we to conclude? That being guilty of bad manners and exhibiting poor taste are capital crimes? Sounds like a higher order of fascism, a call to cleanse

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