

Sample ID/Proposition/Question Response # 2

Consensus History

Consensus History, a term coined by John Higham, was the dominant historiographical approach from the late 40s to the late 60s. Though never as monolithic as the name “consensus” suggests, Consensus historians such as R. Hofstadter tended to focus on elites or the most dominant group in society (white males). In doing so, they posited, that throughout America’s past, most Americans had embraced liberal capitalism with the consequence that there had been relatively minor conflict within American Society. Indeed, most consensus historians appeared to celebrate America’s past as they diminished the importance of conflict in the nation’s history. By the late 60s, influenced by the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, a younger group of scholars (H. Zinn for example), many of whom came from social backgrounds—working class, ethnic, black, and female—unlike previous generations of historians, challenged the consensus historian’s dismissal of conflict in American history. Adopting a neo-Progressive approach (named after the early 20th century Progressive historians), many 60s historians argued that conflict had been a central feature of the American past; that many ordinary Americans had never embraced liberal capitalism or other beliefs of the dominant society; and that racism, exploitation, and class oppression had been the rule rather than the exception. A subgroup of these neo-Progressive historians, New Social Historians (L. Levine for example), began writing history from “the bottom up,” that is investigating the actual experiences, actions, and beliefs systems of ordinary people. Though Consensus History is to this day the most popular form of history produced and consumed outside of academic circles, neo-progressive, particularly social history is the most popular approach within the scholarly community. This has led to conflicts over what is the most appropriate form of history to be taught in the schools as exemplified by the Standards Controversy of the 1990s.