

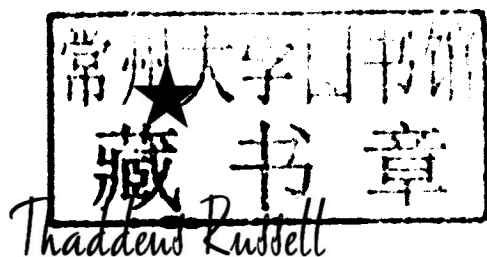
"Raucous, profane, and thrillingly original, turns the myths of the 'American character' on their heads with a rare mix of wit, scholarship, and storytelling flair."—Steven Johnson, author of *Everything Bad Is Good for You* and *The Invention of Air*

A **RENEGADE** HISTORY

OF THE UNITED STATES

THADDEUS RUSSELL

A RENEGADE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES



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*For Toby
and his freedom*



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Praise for
A RENEGADE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

“Thaddeus Russell is a troublemaker for sure. Whether you call his book courageous or outrageous, his helter-skelter tour through the American past will make you gasp and make you question—as he does—the writing of ‘history as usual.’”

—Nancy Cott, Jonathan Trumbull Professor of American History,
Harvard University, and author of *Public Vows: A History of Marriage
and the Nation* and *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*

“Thaddeus Russell has broken free of the ideological prisons of Left and Right to give us a real, flesh-and-blood history of America, filled with untold stories and unlikely heroes. No waving incense before the sacred personages of Washington, D.C., here. This wonderful book follows the best American traditions of iconoclasm and—what is the same thing—truth-telling.”

—Thomas E. Woods, Jr., author of
The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History

“Howard Zinn wrote *The People’s History of the United States*. But Thaddeus Russell has written the history of the American People Whom Historians Would Rather Forget: the whores, delinquents, roustabouts—the so-called bums and immoral minority who did more for our civil rights and personal freedoms than anyone could count—until now. There is no understanding of American feminism, sexual liberation, civil rights, or dancing in the streets without this careful analysis that Russell has put before us.”

—Susie Bright, syndicated columnist, author of *The Sexual State of the Union*,
and series editor, *Best American Erotica*

"A *Renegade History of the United States* takes us on a tour of backstreet America, introducing us to the rebels and prostitutes, the hipsters and hippies. The book tells good stories, all in the cause of illuminating larger historical struggles between social control and freedom, repression and letting go. Author Thaddeus Russell gives us a new pantheon of American heroes and argues that those who expanded the realm of desire—for sex, for drugs, for illicit experiences—were the very ones who created our liberties. This is a controversial book, but certainly not a dull one."

—Elliott Gorn, professor of American Civilization and History, Brown University, and author of *Dillinger's Wild Ride: The Year That Made America's Public Enemy Number One*

"This is a fun read that makes a serious point. Even drunkards, whores, black pleasure-seekers, gangsters, and drag queens have contributed to American culture, and sometimes in surprising ways."

—W. J. Rorabaugh, professor of history, University of Washington, and author of *The Alcoholic Republic*

Also by Thaddius Russell

OUT OF THE JUNGLE: JIMMY HOFFA AND
THE REMAKING OF THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS

Introduction

This is a new story.

When American history was first written, it featured and often celebrated politicians, military leaders, inventors, explorers, and other “great men.” Textbooks in high school and college credited those goliaths with creating all the distinctive cultural and institutional characteristics of the United States. In this history from the top down, women, Indians, African Americans, immigrants, and ordinary workers—in other words, most Americans—seldom appeared. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of scholars began to place labor leaders, feminists, civil rights activists, and others who spoke on behalf of the people at the center of the story. This became known as history “from the bottom up.” Yet more often than not, it seemed to me, the new stars of American history shared many of the cultural values and assumptions of the great men. They not only behaved like “good” Americans but also worked to “correct” the people they claimed to represent. They were not ordinary.

A Renegade History goes deeper. It goes beneath what the new “social history” portrayed as the bottom. It tells the story of “bad” Americans—drunkards, prostitutes, “shiftless” slaves and white slackers, criminals, juvenile delinquents, brazen homosexuals, and others who operated beneath American society—and shows how they shaped our world, created new pleasures, and expanded our freedoms. This is history from the gutter up.

A Renegade History also offers a different way of conceiving historical progress than is found in textbooks. The story of this country is not just one of struggles between rich and poor, white and black, men and women. American history was also driven by clashes between those interested in preserving community and those more interested in pursuing their own desires—the “respectable” versus the “degenerate,” the moral versus the

immoral, "good citizens" versus the "bad." This is the story of American civilization and its discontents.

On one side of this struggle, *A Renegade History* groups together people we normally think of as fundamentally different. The founding fathers, abolitionists, great capitalists, socialist revolutionaries, suffragists, the Ku Klux Klan, New Dealers, civil rights activists, and conservative leaders all held or sought power, which meant they also sought social control and therefore worked to limit the personal liberties of their constituents. Every one of these groups of "good" Americans strongly promoted the work ethic, condemned sexual freedom, and decried the decadence of consumerism. So there has always been a conflict between these power-seeking moral reformers and the "lowbrow" culture of saloons, immigrant and black resistance to work, shopping, dance halls, rock-and-roll, and the ever-advancing sexual revolution.

Because this book is a renegade history, it spends as much time in the street, the bedroom, the movie theater, and the saloon as it does listening to speeches. You will see inside brothels and gay nightclubs. You will see the secret parties held by slaves and understand why so many refused to leave the plantation when they were freed. You will see people avoiding work, fighting cops, and fornicating shamelessly. You will see prostitutes ruling over men. You will see Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants dancing like blacks before they became white. And in every instance, you will see American freedom expanding.

At the most basic level, this book is about the fight that political philosophers have always identified as the central conflict in human history: that between the individual and society. Thus far, scholars have shown little interest in finding this conflict in American history, and even less interest in the kinds of individualists who are at the center of this book.

The leading historians of early America brilliantly narrate the dynamic tensions between settler and Indian, democrat and monarchist, slave and master, merchant and craftsman. But often not a single prostitute, ruffian, drunken laborer, bawdy pirate, slacking laborer, or shiftless slave makes an appearance in their books, even though such people filled the streets of American cities. The great historians of the colonial and revolutionary periods have given us masterful analyses of the transatlantic economy, the class basis of the revolutionaries, and the ideological origins of American

democracy. But too often they are uninterested in the ways in which individual freedoms were constrained in the service of democracy, and how, despite its place as the “capital of liberty,” America developed a national culture that was more sexually restrained and work obsessed than Victorian England.

The pivotal events of the nineteenth century have been similarly whitewashed, especially (and ironically) in the telling of black history. Unfortunately, because the historians who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s were so eager to make the masses into heroes, they did not see that it was precisely the nonheroic and unseemly characteristics of ordinary folks that changed American culture for the better. Historians of slavery rarely acknowledge that slaves and their descendants were the vanguard in the struggle against Victorian repression. Instead textbooks show African Americans of the era as the hardest-working, thriftiest, most sober, and family oriented of all Americans.

In the telling of the history of the West, “bottom-up” scholars replaced the silly romanticism of older historians with a far more intelligent and hardheaded narrative of American expansion. But now we have scores of books in which the story of the West is an unrelenting litany of oppression, exploitation, and genocide, in which ghost towns, bleak Indian reservations, depressed barrios, and strip mines dominate the scene. None of this is “wrong,” but it surely reduces human experience to its most unpleasant aspects. More importantly, it neglects the remarkable freedoms and pleasures that miners, lumberjacks, railroad workers, prostitutes, Indians, blacks, Mexicans, and Chinese enjoyed—often together, in the same rooms—in the lawless, wide-open towns of the American frontier.

The historians who created women’s history were especially egregious in the silencing of “bad” behavior. Following the first and second waves of feminists who inspired them to write the history of women, the women’s historians of the 1970s and 1980s seldom mentioned sex and fun, and they were loathe to credit lower-class women for leading the consumer revolution that brought a new world of pleasure to America.

Of course, there are now many historians who study popular culture, lowbrow entertainment, and the people of the streets, but I am always dismayed to find that they treat every saloon, high-heel shoe, or rock song as something *else*. If they are sympathetic to the people who consumed

them, such things are remade into "resistance" against oppression or "collective alternatives" to capitalist individualism. God forbid they could be simply and only "fun." Historians hostile to popular culture—who are far more numerous—dismiss it as part of the "culture of consumption" that was forced on the masses by advertisers, who were labeled by one historian as "the captains of consciousness." Though billions of Americans have gained real pleasure, radically improved their lives, and determined the production of goods by what economists call "voting with one's feet," nearly all histories of consumerism are negative. Allegedly "progressive" scholars write as if they are unaware that bourgeois moralists of the nineteenth century were the first to criticize the "base" desires and "unseemly" spending habits of the masses.

Sex—the act, not the biological category—was *never* discussed during my training as a historian and in only a tiny few of the hundreds of books, ostensibly devoted to the history of the human experience, that I read for my PhD. It always struck me as curious that psychologists had been saying for a century that sexuality informs all of our social activities and that people are obsessed with sex, but historians rarely mentioned it. Mammoth textbooks covering the entire span of American history ignore what people apparently were doing and thinking every day. Similarly, in standard histories, violence is carried out only by armies, police, strikebreakers, and racists—not by "the people" for their own good. And crime, in particular the small-time street crime that was always part of the fabric of ordinary people's lives, and which enlarged so many of our freedoms, rarely makes the cut as "important" history.

But let me make one thing absolutely clear. This book does not advocate a renegade revolution. Were the heroes of this book to take control of society, it would be a living hell. No one would be safe on the streets, chaos would reign, and garbage would never be collected. The social guardians are enemies of freedom, but there is no claim here that they are morally wrong. They chose to take the role they believed was best for them, a decision I would like to treat as autonomous of moral claims. More importantly, they provide essential functions that nearly all of us value: safety, security, and clean streets. The argument here is not that "bad" people should replace the disciplinarians but that in American history the struggles between the two have determined the breadth of personal liberty. I make no claims for other parts of the world, where at times renegades have

overwhelmed the guardians of order, but in this country the more “bad” people existed, resisted, and won, the more freedom was expanded.

As you read this book, you might count the number of previously illicit pleasures and freedoms pushed forward by renegades that you now either cherish in your own life or desire to have. Let their struggle with civilizers be eternal. But let us all see how they have made the land of the free, free.

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Part One



MAKING RENEGADES
INTO AMERICANS

★ 1 ★

DRUNKARDS, LAGGARDS, PROSTITUTES, PIRATES, AND OTHER HEROES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

In the spring of 1777, the great men of America came to Philadelphia for the fourth meeting of the Continental Congress, the de facto government of the rebel republic. When they stepped from their carriages onto the cobblestone streets, they could see that they were in for a very long war. New York had already been lost to the British, armies of redcoats and Hessian mercenaries were poised to cut off New England, and British plans were afoot to conquer Philadelphia and crush the rebellion. Thousands of troops in the Continental army had been lost to typhus, dysentery, smallpox, starvation, and desertion. They were outnumbered and outgunned. But it was not just the military power of the kingdom that worried the leaders of the American War of Independence. There was a far more sinister and enduring enemy on the streets they walked. "Indeed, there is one enemy, who is more formidable than famine, pestilence, and the sword," John Adams wrote to a friend from Philadelphia in April. "I mean the corruption which is prevalent in so many American hearts, a depravity that is more inconsistent with our republican governments than light is with darkness."

Adams was right. Many, and probably most, inhabitants of early American cities were corrupt and depraved, and the Founding Fathers knew it. Alexander Hamilton called the behaviors of Americans "vicious" and "vile." Samuel Adams saw a "torrent of vice" running through the new country. John Jay wrote of his fear that "our conduct should confirm the tory maxim 'that men are incapable of governing themselves.'" James Warren, the president of the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts and a Paymaster General of the Continental army, declared during the Revolution that Americans lived "degenerate days." As the war with the British thundered on, John

Adams grew so disgusted at what he saw on the streets that at times he believed Americans deserved death more than freedom. Their dissolute character “is enough to induce every Man of Sense and Virtue to abandon such an execrable Race, to their own Perdition, and if they could be ruined alone it would be just.” Adams feared that after winning independence, Americans “will become a Spectacle of Contempt and Derision to the foolish and wicked, and of Grief and shame to the wise among Mankind, and all this in the Space of a few Years.” In September of 1777, with the British army under the command of General William Howe on the verge of conquering Philadelphia, Adams told his wife of his secret wish for America to be conquered. “[I]f it should be the Will of Heaven that our Army should be defeated, our Artillery lost, our best Generals kill’d, and Philadelphia fall into Mr. Howes Hands, . . . It may be for what I know be the Design of Providence that this should be the Case. Because it would only lay the Foundations of American Independence deeper, and cement them stronger. It would cure Americans of their vicious and luxurious and effeminate Appetites, Passions and Habits, a more dangerous Army to American Liberty than Mr. Howes.”

But what the Founding Fathers called corruption, depravity, viciousness, and vice, many of us would call freedom. During the War of Independence, deference to authority was shattered, a new urban culture offered previously forbidden pleasures, and sexuality was loosened from its Puritan restraints. Nonmarital sex, including adultery and relations between whites and blacks, was rampant and unpunished. Divorces were frequent and easily obtained. Prostitutes plied their trade free of legal or moral prescriptions. Black slaves, Irish indentured servants, Native Americans, and free whites of all classes danced together in the streets. Pirates who frequented the port cities brought with them a way of life that embraced wild dances, nightlong parties, racial integration, and homosexuality. European visitors frequently commented on the “astonishing libertinism” of early American cities. Renegades held the upper hand in Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Charleston, and made them into the first centers of the American pleasure culture. Rarely have Americans had more fun. And never have America’s leaders been less pleased by it.

But the Founding Fathers invented a way to make Americans think fun was bad. We call it *democracy*.