



REVIEW ESSAY

Freedom at the Center

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Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021)

Casey Nelson Blake, Daniel H. Borus, and Howard Brick, *At the Center: American Thought and Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020)

Of course it's brilliant. *The Free World* represents the hugely ambitious culmination of the efforts of a scholar of exceptional talent to explicate mid-century American culture, and to put it within a broad political and social context. With its immense attention to detail, *The Free World* frequently offers such fresh readings of a wide variety of topics that perhaps only subspecialists can profess to find familiar the evidence and interpretations that Louis Menand provides. It is emblazoned with bold personal opinions that keep the reader interested. *At the Center* is a very different book. It is a collective effort, and the authors seem to seek to avoid the kind of personalized style that Menand displays. But the effort that Casey Nelson Blake, Daniel H. Borus, and Howard Brick make to tie the disparate threads together distinguish *At the Center* from Menand's volume, and therefore offer an invaluable contrast. These books are aimed at different categories of reader, provide divergent temporal and geographic frames, and rarely overlap in attentiveness to the same material. Such variations can make for vigorous scholarly arguments about how to pack thought and culture into American historiography.

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The scale of *The Free World* is bound to be noticed immediately. The 727 pages of text are followed by nearly another hundred pages of endnotes which, if the print were made readable, would span the length of another book. The world of the title mostly refers to the superpower that suddenly loomed so large. But Menand also covers England, France, and to a lesser extent Germany, with a little of prewar Austria and the postwar Soviet Union to remind readers that images and ideas surmount borders. His gift for evoking those images and dramatizing those ideas is palpable, and he connects them to personalities with great vividness and force. Averse to superficial judgments, Menand loves to spin paradoxes. Orwell was “a

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writer who believed in honesty above all things ... [but] published under a made-up name" (41). James Burnham "went from revolutionary Marxism and Trotskyism to right-wing anti-Communism without passing through anything resembling liberalism" (43). Dwight "Macdonald's attacks on middlebrowism inoculated the *New Yorker* against the charge of being middlebrow" (679). If the primary task of an author is to propel the reader to keep turning pages rather than put the book down, then the stylishness with which Menand has crafted this book means that he has flat-out succeeded.

But his preface is better at describing what the subsequent chapters do not entail than at outlining the contours within which *The Free World* operates. The author does not seek to portray the "cultural Cold War," which he defines as "the use of cultural diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy," nor does he regard his book as a contribution to the study of "Cold War culture," which constitutes "art and ideas as reflections of Cold War ideology and conditions" (xiii). Instead, at the very least, *The Free World* serves as an admirable rebuke to provincialism. "The artistic and intellectual culture that emerged in the United States after the Second World War was not an American product," Menand writes. "It was a product of the Free World" (xiii). That claim requires him to go from the Leningrad of Anna Akhmatova to the Liverpool of the Beatles, from the refugees from the Third Reich to the American expatriates in the French Fourth Republic, even if huge chunks of the book are situated in New York City and environs. Menand's book combines wry detachment and infectious enthusiasm. He is a lucid exegete who records the invigorating energies of thinkers and artists, without ignoring their fallibility.

After all, Menand insists, postwar "ideas mattered. Painting mattered. Poetry mattered" (xii). But to whom? That is the inevitable question. Historians can easily think of all sorts of Americans and Europeans for whom neither art nor thought mattered—or at least did not matter more commonly or more intensely than earlier, for example. "People believed in liberty," Menand adds (xii). Even when a certain junior senator from Wisconsin gave his name to an -ism and an era? As late as January 1954, 50 percent of the public held a favorable opinion of Joseph R. McCarthy. Did the citizenry believe in liberty even when congressmen clamored for the chance to serve on the House Committee on Un-American Activities? Even when the lifting of passports and the denials of visas undermined the claims of cultural diplomacy and people-to-people interchange? And liberty for whom? As Menand well knows, white supremacy was mostly taken for granted, and made such a belief seem hollow—and he is attentive to the ways that midcentury notions of race affected the pursuits of truth and beauty. The claims made in the preface are untenable. They do not mar the plenitude and the sensitivity of the rest of *The Free World*.

But what is its thesis? None emerges with any explicitness or emphasis. The architectonic shape of this book is difficult to discern. Compare Menand's *American Studies* (2002), in which he wrote at greater length, and from different angles, about some of the figures who populate his latest book: T. S. Eliot, Pauline Kael, Norman Mailer, and Richard Wright, plus the monthly *Rolling Stone*. But unlike *American Studies*, *The Free World* is not packaged as a collection of essays, even though each chapter is internally coherent and illuminating. Each is

in fact a discreet essay, with virtually no bridge before or after, and with no way to anticipate which chapter comes next, or why. For readers whose taste is classical, for scholars who expect the parts to constitute a whole, for anyone who seeks to make sense of an epoch, the absence of an organizing principle might even be upsetting. A couple of hypotheses can be suggested to account for the lack of a sustained argument.

One possibility is that the title may have been something of an afterthought. The notion of “freedom” is not—with any jackhammer consistency—widely distributed among the profiles of the primary and secondary characters in the book. Its index admittedly devotes a column (nearly half of a two-column page) to the instances of “freedom” (from academic to sexual, from the views of Hannah Arendt and Erich Fromm to those of Earl Warren and Richard Wright). But the most influential theorist of the postwar era to unpack the meanings and implications of freedom—Isaiah Berlin—plays no more commanding role in this volume than does anyone else, and perhaps a little less so than, say, Andy Warhol.

Because the adjective in Menand’s title can be taken as the driving force of what follows, a few omissions in the expression and exercise of freedom might be mentioned. Sidney Hook, an indefatigable champion of the “free world” in its conflict with Communism, gets only two brief references, although he published *Political Power and Personal Freedom* (1959) and *The Paradoxes of Freedom* (1962). They consolidated his status as a public intellectual who applied philosophy to politics. Menand rightly ascribes seminal importance to Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Yet “What Is Freedom?” is one of the half-dozen chapters in the philosopher’s 1961 volume *Between Past and Future*, and goes unmentioned. Menand displays a knack for making surprising links, as though the free world could be a small world too. Robert Rauschenberg, for example, was delighted to learn that Janis Joplin also came from Port Arthur, Texas. But why, then, does this book ignore perhaps the most famous song that she ever belted out, “Me and Bobby McGee” (1970), with its glum definition of freedom as “just another word for nothin’ left to lose”? She sang at the Woodstock festival in 1969, the year that another attendee, Abbie Hoffman, published *Revolution for the Hell of It* under a monosyllabic nom de plume: “Free.” Menand need not enjoy a monopoly when playing this game.

Even though his account of postwar America includes the civil rights movement, he doesn’t even mention the full title of the galvanic March on Washington (for Jobs and Freedom), nor the following year’s Freedom Summer in Mississippi, nor its embattled Freedom Democrats, who challenged the lily-white regular delegation at the national convention in Atlantic City. “Freedom” was a term that galvanized countless citizens across the color line. But historians of ideas are therefore advised not to position *The Free World* within the groove of such ancestral volumes as Arthur O. Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being* or Leonard Krieger’s *The German Idea of Freedom* or Lancelot Law Whyte’s *The Unconscious before Freud*. However captivating Menand’s book is, readers may be uncertain about which criteria led him to decide which topics to include.

If his reluctance to pursue a thesis gives *The Free World* a certain haphazard aura, an alternative hypothesis is more plausible, which is that the pattern is subtly implanted in the text anyway. The notion of “freedom” allowed for so many

different meanings, for so many different purposes, that no unifying pattern could cover so much diversity. The creative changes in Western and especially American culture were so enormous that a plurality of understandings of “freedom” frustrates the quest for any single cluster of definitions. So here are some that Menand extracts and, in the course of his chapters, explains. For philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote *Les chemins de la liberté*, and Simone de Beauvoir, freedom was authenticity. Because we human beings lack an essence, we are condemned to be free (67, 74). Merce Cunningham assigned himself the task “to free dance from the obligation to mean something, from the modern-dance commitment to expression” (248). Jasper Johns is quoted as offering the following rationale for works like *Flag* (1954–5): “I never want to free myself from images at all. I want images to free themselves from me ... I simply want the object to be free” (quoted at 266). In championing abstract expressionism, Clement Greenberg “meant that by getting rid of figural representation, abstraction had freed the eye,” Menand writes, allowing for the scrutiny of paintings “in purely visual terms” (594). Beginning with *À bout de souffle*, Jean-Luc Godard broke the rules and then “wrote a new rulebook,” Menand explains, and quotes the director as follows: “I need a certain freedom” (661).

The Free World dedicates entire chapters, like 10 and 11 respectively, to black liberation and to women’s liberation. The chapter entitled “Children of a Storm” profiles Wright, James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon—all of whom exemplified the emancipatory struggle either for Constitutional rights at home or for decolonization abroad. If there is an “and” rather than an “or” here, Baldwin can be identified as its voice. “America is the last stronghold of the Western idea of personal liberty,” he wrote from New York to a friend. “And I certainly think that this idea *should* dominate the world” (quoted at 420, Baldwin’s emphasis). The CIA certainly thought enough of the radiance of this ideal to sponsor the Congress of Cultural Freedom. Menand’s “Vers la libération” starts with the inescapable feminists (Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan), but then profiles Susan Sontag, who personified the “free-floating intellectual.” Sontag felt free to absorb the widest swath of cultural expression while also unburdening herself of what she deemed Matthew Arnold’s anachronistic idea of culture. On- and off-screen, Brigitte Bardot exuded freedom too, according to Beauvoir (or at least Menand doesn’t contradict her). And when *Time* commissioned a Rauschenberg collage to enhance a cover story on the impact of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the title of the piece was “The Shock of Freedom in Films” (681). *The Free World* is enriched with such meanings.

Here are other illustrations. Menand notices that Martin Luther King’s oratory before the Lincoln Memorial deploys the term “freedom” far more than “equality,” perhaps because he grasped that the former can entail a quest for the latter. Unless all citizens can as equals invoke their rights, they are *not* rights, Menand states; they are privileges (380–81). One might add that “freedom” was powerful enough to be perverted during the pandemic in the United States, where the word often meant the refusal to be vaccinated. In such a nation, the case for equality can gain less traction. In John F. Kennedy’s eloquent inaugural address as well as in his electrifying speech in West Berlin, he very frequently used “free” and its variants (not equality), Menand observes, by which the president meant both free elections and free markets (334). Nor need freedom of speech—the first of the Four Freedoms—be

confined to political speech. Menand's chapter on "Concepts of Liberty," for example, shows how the two versions of political speech that the essays of Isaiah Berlin made indelible could be amplified. The First Amendment could be expanded to protect the fictions of Henry Miller and of *Fanny Hill*. The chapter on "Consumer Sovereignty" traces the destructiveness that Nazi Germany inflicted during the Battle of Britain to the academic appreciation a decade later of the prospects for prosperity, with studies of advertising implying the hope for freedom from want. Menand thus permits the numerous manifestations of "freedom" to seep into the text without making much of a point of how the concepts and interpretations differ from one another. So polysemous a term might have been little more than a "slogan of the times," so he invites his readers to figure out the definition for themselves (xiv).

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The Free World is about three times longer than the 253 pages of text that constitute *At the Center*. Menand therefore has the benefit of exploring topics in far greater depth, with all that it implies for nuance and modulation. *At the Center* is judicious rather than dazzling. It is presumably bucking for classroom assignments, for giving students born as late as the twenty-first century an entrée into postwar American culture. Blake, Borus, and Brick are expected to satisfy the requirements of the series to which this volume contributes, a general introduction to "American Thought and Culture." (Brick also serves as coeditor of the series.) *At the Center* briskly covers an enormous range of expressiveness, as recorded from the conclusion of one war in Asia to the onset of another. The chronology of the book is roughly from 1945 until 1963, a framework that Menand largely respects. But he chooses to dip much further back in time, whether examining the origins of the Fugitives and Agrarians in the 1920s and 1930s, or going back to 1913, when Marcel Duchamp achieved fame, or even into the mid-nineteenth century when citing the friendship of Heine and Marx. The coauthors of *At the Center* dare to assert that their very disparate material can cohere around a single theme. "If there was a predominant tone or style to American thought and culture in the mid-twentieth century," the coauthors declare, it was "what we call an inclination to 'centering'" (2). They mean "rendering experience [as] something stable, balanced, whole, and focused on commonly recognized realities" (2). The word that used to be applied to this phenomenon was "conformism." The trio quickly concede however, that in the postwar era "there was also a significant undertow running in a different direction" (2). That is an important concession, even as they focus on the forces of unification rather than the threats of instability. The marrow of consensus is what *At the Center* hopes to identify as central to postwar values.

The authors intriguingly notice, for example, how the exaltation of the normal, the homogeneous, and the holistic is shown in the frequent use of the definite article in book titles. This was an era replete with works like Lewis Mumford's *The Condition of Man* (1944), Geoffrey Gorer's *The American People* (1948), *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) of Theodor Adorno and collaborators, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) of Lionel Trilling, *The Family of Man* (1955) of Edward Steichen, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) and the Swiss

photographer Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959). *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) famously charted "the changing American character." But the definite article also obscured the recalcitrant demands of particularity. The spirit of generalization that the coauthors highlight risked the omission of limitations and peculiarities. For example, David Riesman and his collaborators were quick to acknowledge that the mid-century changes occurred primarily among white upper-middle-class or middle-class urbanites and suburbanites. Betty Friedan made so much of the blues that afflicted Smith College alumnae that she left *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) open to a similar criticism. The ostensible proclivity of postwar writers for that definite article thus betrayed the complications that very close scrutiny of a phenomenon might reveal.

On the other hand, the case for the universalizing tendency that the coauthors cleverly make to characterize the era can be pushed too far. Gunnar Myrdal published *An American Dilemma* in 1944. Although Alfred Kinsey's two reports did not adopt the definite article in the title, they were especially vulnerable to charges of skewed sampling. *At the Center* could enlist Menand in highlighting the pertinence of commonalities. "The ideological differences between the two major political parties were minor, enabling the federal government to invest in social programs," he states (xi). Shared beliefs helped stabilize the social order when liberals belonged to the Republican Party and conservatives could be Democrats. The two terms of the Eisenhower administration consolidated rather than subverted the New Deal. The last presidential election within the chronological framework of *At the Center* was 1960. The election marked the closest popular vote, and the narrowest mandate, of the twentieth century.

The trio heroically advance a conceptual claim. But its application falters, because the sheer diversity of the historical record cannot be squeezed within the boundaries of the center. An opening chapter, for example, on "American Hegemony and the New Cosmopolitanism," veers from Henry R. Luce's editorial on *The American Century* to the absorption of refugee psychoanalysts, and then to the formation of journals that ranged from Max Ascoli's liberal magazine *The Reporter* to Paul Robeson's radical newspaper, which was tellingly entitled *Freedom*. More relevant to the theme is the second chapter, which charts the emergence of American studies as a field. Although *American Quarterly* was founded in 1949, the central figure in "Inventing America, Again," is F. O. Matthiessen, who committed suicide the following year, when his own leftism—his allegiance to Christian socialism—fell victim to the pressures of the Cold War. Matthiessen is mentioned only in passing in *The Free World*—as an anthologist of poetry. Poetry mattered. Perhaps his grim fate cannot be squared with the emphasis upon freedom.

But the close readings evident in *American Renaissance* demonstrated that the New Critics (to which Menand devotes much of a chapter on "The Free Play of the Mind") exerted no monopoly on illuminating methods of interpreting literature. Matthiessen's progressivism also contrasted with the conservatism of southern-born scholars like Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate. The chapter in *At the Center* on "History and Antihistoricism" tackles "historicism"—the belief that history has a teleology, that the movement from past to future can be foreseen. Historicism as the coauthors define it obviously collides

with the idea of freedom. By tracing the revolt against such determinism in thinkers like Arendt, Karl Popper, and even Reinhold Niebuhr (who wanted the Christian view of the Second Coming to be distinguished from the ebb and flow of historical events), *At the Center* therefore joins *The Free World* in locating the resistance to determinism.

Perhaps the least coherent and least distinctive chapter in *At the Center* examines “The Decentered Search for the Centered Self.” The ubiquity of theories of the self and its manifestations makes it tricky to specify where a center might be. The self can also be found on the periphery. The coauthors analyze the works of social scientists (Riesman, Margaret Mead, Ashley Montagu) and of psychologists and therapists (Fromm, Erik H. Erikson, Paul Goodman), and throw into the mix the classic Westerns like *High Noon* and *Shane* and the recordings of a crooner (Frank Sinatra). But this chapter is open to the criticism that such topics could easily be placed elsewhere. Chapter 5 gets far closer to the thesis of *At the Center*. “Inclusion and Its Discontents” registers the absorption of the labor movement into an increasingly affluent society, and notes the switch from the sense of an overwhelmingly Christian society into paeans to the Judeo-Christian tradition. More than any other volume, Will Herberg’s *Protestant Catholic Jew* (1955) accomplished this feat of incorporation, and described how the three biblical faiths largely abandoned historic animosities for the sake of postwar comity. He too extended a little too far the yearning for generalization, because this classic of religious sociology failed to detect any meaningful distinction within Protestantism between whites and blacks. (Two years later the Southern Christian Leadership Conference would be formed. Southern Baptists were notably unresponsive.)

From the perspective of later decades, the lacunae and the obtuseness regarding race look the most baffling and the least savory feature of mid-century America. When the coauthors plow through the series in *Partisan Review* devoted to “Our Country and Our Culture,” they realize that “no one even mentioned ‘our Negro population’ until Max Lerner did so one hundred pages into the symposium” (61). Among the most striking claims that *At the Center* makes, to corroborate its thesis, is that black culture was rather smoothly subsumed in American culture. A singular set of beliefs, expressions, values, and customs, inherited from Africa forward through Jim Crow, did not exist. That opinion was broadly shared; see Myrdal, Wright, and E. Franklin Frazier, as well as Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey’s *The Mark of Oppression* (1951) and Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963). At the center was only American culture, which creative blacks enriched insofar as they were allowed to. This chapter inevitably addresses the impact of jazz (in the person of Miles Davis) and of rock ‘n’ roll (Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry). In popular music *The Free World* here diverges, by underscoring the rise of the Beatles. One advantage of Menand’s transatlantic scope is his shrewd remark that “when white American musicians performed songs associated with Black artists, it seemed an act of appropriation; when British musicians did it,” he quipped, “it was regarded as an act of *hommage*” (323).

The chapter on the avant-garde (“Modern Enactments”) most fully overlaps with *The Free World*, by portraying such figures as Jackson Pollock, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham. Both volumes pay tribute to Black Mountain College, a synonym for experimentation but also an institution too precarious in its financial

arrangements to survive past 1957. *At the Center* includes a section on architects (like Louis Kahn) who are absent from Menand's account of modernism in the arts. His own analysis of the legacy of art critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg is characteristically cogent, and both books reckon with the influence of Arnold Schoenberg. *The Free World* takes Andy Warhol seriously; *At the Center* ignores him completely. This chasm—perhaps of taste, although not of judgment of historical importance—cannot be bridged. Both volumes find common ground, however, in ascribing significance to Allan Kaprow. He is granted close to a dozen pages in *At the Center*, and about half that number that depict his “Happenings” in *The Free World*. Neither book deals with the critical reckoning with what was once called “highbrow” or “long-hair” music. In the assessment of serious contemporary music, no counterparts emerged akin to Greenberg and Rosenberg. That asymmetry must be deemed a testament to the marginal role that the performances as well as the appreciation of the work of living, active composers occupied in American culture.

Chapter 7 (“Thinking Globally”) is the finest example of how the coauthors meet the challenge that the genre of their book poses. They are obligated to cover the bases—such as the claims of American exceptionalism, the rise of area studies in the academy and the emergence of anticolonialism in foreign policy. Yet the trio must also differentiate *At the Center* from other, presumably rival texts. The coauthors do so through the prism of the career of Cornell's George M. Kahin. He started out with an interest in China, by studying with John King Fairbank at Harvard, then broadened his interest in Asia by studying with Owen Lattimore at Johns Hopkins, and then specialized in the evolution of Indonesia toward independence. Kahin's early opposition to US military intervention in Vietnam made him a symptomatic postwar academician, whom the book subtly pairs with Herman Kahn, who calculated the prospects of apocalypse were the Cold War to veer out of control. The illuminating cameo of Kahin hints at what could have been done—as in *The Free World*—with biography, space permitting.

The coauthors confront the chronological framework of the series that *At the Center* inhabits in Chapter 8 (“A Phase Change”). “One might think of our view as a ‘long 1950s,’ but we would rather not,” they rather uncomfortably write. “Decades, despite their convenience, are not the best historical markers, and ‘the fifties’ is so burdened with contrasting nostalgia and recriminations that, as a historical concept, it might as well be surrendered” (235). This analytical abandonment is peculiar, coming from contributors to a series that makes a valid heuristic point by dividing the national experience into decades. Borus earlier authored a volume explicitly covering two decades (1900–20), which he framed in terms of “multiplicities”; and Brick portrayed the 1960s in this very series. For this volume they seem to be adopting the position of Menand, for whom a debate about decades holds no interest. Yet the sense that the 1960s importantly differed from the 1950s is difficult to jettison, and *At the Center* identifies three texts that straddle the two decades. Conceived in the context of one decade, Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) helped inaugurate new outlooks and even new policies. A fourth text might have been picked as well. In *Blues People* (1963), LeRoi Jones asserted that the great migration to the North

meant that “the *Negro*, now, becomes more definitely *Negroes*” (quoted at 245, Jones’s emphasis). Without a significant black electorate in the North, the Democratic Party would have remained subjected to the southern veto. Without liberals in pivotal positions in the federal government, the civil rights movement might have been crushed. Jones’s repudiation of that definite article (and of his birth name) marked an era that was moving past the 1950s, no matter how “long” its duration is judged to be.

Consider *West Side Story*. A still from the 1961 Hollywood adaptation of the 1957 Broadway musical is the sole illustration on the cover of *At the Center*. In what way does *West Side Story* exemplify “centering”? To be sure, at the very end, the rival gangs come together to bear the corpse of Tony, who has paid with his life for his love of Maria. But what C. Wright Mills called “the American celebration” of the 1950s is hardly exemplified in the violent conflict between the Sharks and the Jets, which has turned the streets into a battlefield between Puerto Rican newcomers and white ethnics vowing to defend their turf. In *West Side Story*, the age of consensus looks more like a killing field, with order maintained not through shared interests or the formation of polyarchy but with the billy clubs of policemen. A few earlier musicals had identified the discrepancies of democracy, revealing that practices fell short of ideals. But no previous musical had ever brandished such pointed criticism of systematic bigotry as the aria to “America” (even if, in the movie, the women rebut the anger and cynicism of the men). By injecting ethnicity into the plot lifted from *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* upended undifferentiated whiteness as the default position on race, even as the hidden homosexuality and bisexuality of the creative geniuses offstage and off-screen can now be read as complicating assumptions and expectations of the era as well. And because the cover photograph depicts the dancing of the Puerto Rican women, even questions of gender could get pushed forward. They alone are visible. *West Side Story* arrived too early for the cocreators to imagine that a romantic lead might be black. But though books shouldn’t be judged by their covers, *At the Center* often looks more like decentering.

The coauthors’ commitment to their thesis turns out to be rather sporadic and half-hearted anyway. The quest for unity and an inclusive wholeness “could be at work at once, or not at all,” at mid-century, the trio acknowledge. They admit that “alternative views that preferred unfocused variety of expression or welcomed destabilizing challenges to settled ways also had their champions” (250). The coauthors even concede that “centeredness in thought and things was always more a matter of aspiration than fact in the mid-twentieth century” (250). In magnitude the forces that would sabotage the stability of the 1950s in the succeeding decade were formidable. But perhaps because two of the coauthors have probed the evolution of the American left, *At the Center* does locate signs of progressivism even during the 1950s. (Blake published *The Beloved Community* in 1990, and Brick and Christopher Phelps published *Radicals in America* in 2015.) For instance, the maverick Marxist C. L. R. James gets nearly five pages in *At the Center*, but none in *The Free World*. Ditto Eleanor Flexner and Gerda Lerner, who offered innovative courses in women’s history during the period from 1949 until 1954. The two scholars served on the faculty of the Communist Party’s Jefferson School of Social Science in New York City. (Would any institution on the left now see fit to honor the slaveholding third president?) Anthropologist Regina (Gene) Weltfish

helped to demolish the superstitions of race before the Red Scare curtailed her career; Menand mentions her too. *At the Center* plays fair, by the way. The coauthors do not neglect conservative thinkers like Friedrich von Hayek, Leo Strauss, and Richard Weaver—but in this context they skip Walter Lippmann. His intellectual journey from socialism during the Great War to conservatism during the New Deal and beyond would have crisply encapsulated the search for order at mid-century. In 1955, when Lippmann reformulated the case for natural law in *The Public Philosophy* (that definite article again!), he testified to the yearning to flatten temporal differences beneath the rubric of eternal verities.

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The contrast between the two books under review should not be overstated. For instance, they both examine the stunning popular success of *The Family of Man*. For the trio, the exhibition serves as a flashpoint of universalism, with birth and death and everything in between stripped of the specificity that distinguishes human beings. We are not only products of nature but also progenitors of culture—or, rather, cultures. Edward Steichen's brother-in-law, Carl Sandburg, provided the text for the panel that visitors read, a proclamation that “only one man in the world [exists] and his name is All Men. There is only one woman in the world and her name is All Women” (quoted at 135). Sandburg knew better, or at least once did. In Menand's Chapter 7 (“The Human Science”), *The Family of Man* represents an occasion to diagnose structuralism. Its emergence, resulting from the creative collaboration of linguist Roman Jakobson and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, suggests like little else the challenge of placing thought in one decade. Structuralism is universalist in aspiration too, of course. “Language exists so that words can be exchanged,” Menand declares. “Kinship systems exist so that women can be exchanged” (208). The self that cannot be satisfactorily confined to only one chapter in *At the Center* is what structuralism converted into the most fundamental binary of all: “I/not I” (208). Stopping around 1963, the coauthors feel no obligation to explain deconstruction, a phenomenon that reached American campuses a little less than a decade later. But Menand is more than up to the task. If the mandate of a liberal education is to instill skepticism, he writes, then “deconstruction simply added language to the list of things we should not take for granted” (511). Neither of the volumes under review seeks to intervene in academic debates over postwar culture—Menand because he aims at the serious general reader rather than specialists, the trio because they want above all to inform the young about what their grandparents bequeathed.

The Free World and *At the Center* both begin with the commitment to the doctrine of containment and end with the its misapplication—or so George F. Kennan would come to realize. He certainly denied that a policy conceived at the onset of the Cold War to meet the geopolitical threat of the Soviet Union was intended to cover the conflict in Indochina. But in January 1961, when Kennedy heralded his presidential inauguration as “a celebration of freedom,” the new commander in chief wildly overpromised how the USA would adhere to Kennan's doctrine. Kennedy vowed that his administration would “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival

and the success of liberty.” A little more than four years later, the first American combat troops landed near Da Nang, which Menand suggests was a plausible continuation of “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” (1947). A tiny Third World nation like Vietnam, the coauthors conclude, would implausibly “rock the stability of US hegemony” (252). Menand ends his book by noting that the American military defeat was followed, over the course of the next two decades, by another calamity—the flight of refugees from Communist tyranny plunging to their deaths in the South China Sea. Given that humanitarian and political disaster, does that mean that the proponents of containment had a point? If, in the aftermath of withdrawal, the Communist regime showed its systematic suppression of freedom, what happened to the American love of that idea? Menand presents no direct answers to such questions, although they stem from the ideal of freedom to which Americans once subscribed—or so his book argues.

A substitute to Menand’s ending might therefore be respectfully proposed. Because his book licenses a loosening of the chronological boundaries of “the free world,” why not jump ahead to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall? That dramatic destruction certified the victory of the West in the Cold War. A reunited city of Berlin celebrated at the end of 1989 with a concert. The conductor was American-born and entirely American-trained, which proved that his native land had “arrived” musically. (Those women on the cover of *At the Center* also happen to be dancing to his score.) In conducting Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Leonard Bernstein felt free too. He even switched a key word in Schiller’s poem that the composer had incorporated (roll over, Beethoven), so that the ode to *Freude* instead became the very apt *Freiheit*.