

THE AGE OF JACKSON: PREMISES, NATURE AND IMPACT
OF A CLASSIC

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INTRODUCTION

In December 1994, the *Journal of American History* devoted a monographic number to reflection on the state of the discipline. The publication made a significant contribution to the debate on American historical research which has been raging for some years now, sometimes transcending specialist realms and extending beyond the boundaries of the United States. Its point of departure was an analysis of the findings of a survey carried out the previous year among readers of the *Journal*, a prevalently American specialist public, but nonetheless representative of the international American studies community.

One of the most salient points which emerged from the questionnaires circulated was undoubtedly a certain two-faced attitude towards the diversity of areas of study and methodological approaches. Diversity is, in fact, a great resource for the extension of domains of research but also, especially in the United States, a source of excessive specialisation, of a fragmentation which has, *inter alia*, made it all the harder to formulate concise interpretations accessible to the general public. The answers of interviewees vis-à-vis their favourite monographs and the authors most influential in their training confirm perplexities about the direction historiography has been moving in recently. As David Thelen points out in his comment on the findings:

A diverse profession admires scholarship that tackles big questions, tries to synthesize experience from many realms, and communicates with an uncommon clarity and grace that wins both prizes and audiences beyond specialists in the topic. The popularity of these books illustrates that historians still value both synthesis and literary skill¹.

A surprising presence among the most frequently cited authors is that of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., whose qualities as a historian, political and social commentator and public figure interweave in a most singular way to make him one of the most influential players in US liberal circles since the war. In his career as a

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¹ D. Thelen, «The Practice of American History», in *The Journal of American History*, 81, 3 (1994): 933-960

participant scholar, the 'presentist' quality of his works suggests a constant propensity for cultural and political activism at loggerheads with the prevalent way of interpreting the historian's profession today, based as it is on a rigorous, highly sophisticated scientism which leaves little scope for non-academics to intervene.

Here I wish to analyse one of the masterpieces of Schlesinger the historian, *The Age of Jackson* (1945), a classic in which historiographical importance and public impact live side by side in exemplary fashion, offering food for thought on some of the most controversial problems of historiography in recent times.

Schlesinger's monograph on Andrew Jackson, president of the United States between 1828 and 1836 and a controversial popular hero of considerable evocative power, is without doubt his most important piece of historical writing. Published in September in 1945, it earned the then twenty eight-year-old historian son of a historian father the Pulitzer Prize (1946), the unanimous acclaim of all the most distinguished historians of the time and unexpected commercial success – the book selling many as 90,000 copies in its first year. In the decades that have passed since then, albeit dated, the study has never ceased to be a fundamental term of comparison. My study is split into four parts: the first speaks about the author's personal, professional and public life at the time in which he was writing the book; the second outlines the state of historiography and the climate within the realm of which the book was a part; the third is an analysis of the text with reference to its 'presentist' qualities; and the fourth discusses the work's impact on the scientific community and the general public.

I. SCHLESINGER in 1945

When *The Age of Jackson* was published, Schlesinger was still in Europe, a US Army corporal in the ranks of the Office of Strategic Services (Oss), the espionage organisation set up a few years previously by Roosevelt to meet the needs for intelligence imposed by World War II. The organisation's Research & Analysis division was packed with progressive academics 'doing their bit' for the war effort and succeeded in finding scores of recruits among the young research students and researchers at the Ivy league universities. For Schlesinger, active at Harvard in interventionist circles, his call-up in May 1943 – following a brief spell from 1942 at the Office of War Information (Owi) in Washington – came almost as a natural occurrence².

His plans for a book on Andrew Jackson had developed gradually from the publication of *Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim's Progress* (1939), his degree

² On the Oss: *The Secrets War. The Oss in World War II*, ed. G. C. Chalou, (Washington, 1992). On the relationship between the Oss and the academic world: B. M. Katz, *Foreign Intelligence. Research and Analysis in the Oss, 1942-45*, (Cambridge, 1989); R. Winks, *Cloak and Gown. Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-61*, (New York, 1987). On Schlesinger's experience: A. M. Schlesinger Jr., «The London Operation. Recollections of a Historian», in *The Secrets War*, ed. Chalou, 61-68

thesis in which he focused his attention on the intellectuals of the North-East in the mid-nineteenth century, and which earned him an enthusiastic review from Steele Commager in the pages of the *New York Times Book Review*. 1939 was thus the year which marked the beginning of the anomalous, lightning rise to fame of Arthur Jr, son of the distinguished Harvard historian, one of the pioneers of social history in the United States. In the same year he was also made a member of the Society of Fellows of the most prestigious university in the land, a role which guaranteed him a sort of three-year scholarship which allowed him to concentrate on his research work without the bother of attending courses and sitting doctorate exams. At first, 'Young Arthur' intended to write the biography of another Jacksonian intellectual, George Bancroft, one of the leading nineteenth-century American historians, of whom his mother, Elizabeth Bancroft Schlesinger, was a distant descendent. But right from the first steps in his research he began to broaden his horizons, and when the Lowell Institute in Boston invited him to hold a series of lectures in October 1941, the subject he chose to speak about was 'A Reinterpretation of Jacksonian Democracy'.

As we have already seen, when his fellowship at Harvard University expired, Schlesinger decided to join the army. From 1942 to 1944 he remained in Washington, first with the Owi and then with the Oss. It was in this climate of national mobilisation, waiting eagerly to leave for the European front, that Schlesinger gave over his weekends and more than a few nights to completing his book on Jackson, which he delivered to the publishers Little, Brown just prior to joining the Oss London office³.

II. THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SCENE AND THE CLIMATE INSIDE THE DISCIPLINE

Schlesinger's focus on the study of the 'eastern and intellectual dimension' in the Jacksonian era was the great insight which, by glorifying the democratic importance and profoundly questioning Turner's consolidated interpretation, made *The Age of Jackson* so explosively significant.

Traditionally, studies on the democratic hero of the first half of the nineteenth century had easily revealed glimpses of the political-cultural premises of which they were an expression. The 'Old Hickory' image had been originally coined by the Whig school of James Parton and William Graham Sumner, an offshoot of a certain 'patrician liberalism' which could not abide the decline in political life in the years immediately following the Civil War, and founded on the claim of the natural right of traditional elites to political and social leadership. Within this framework, typically Jacksonian features such as emphasis on popular sovereignty

³ E. A. Miles, «Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.», in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* - Vol. XVII (Detroit, 1983) 382-400; «The Age of Jackson», University of Texas TV lecture, John F. Kennedy Library (hereinafter referred to as JFKL), Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Papers (hereinafter referred to as Schlesinger Papers), Private Files, Box 6.

and the anti-oligarchic impact of the spoils system assumed an intolerably 'democratic' significance, aggravated by the crude egalitarianism of the 'aesthetics of politics' which Jackson introduced to Washington.

The first major revision took place at the turn of the century with the advent of progressive historiography and the turnaround inspired by Frederick Jackson Turner's celebrated essay on the central importance of the 'frontier' in American history. In the years of the so-called Progressive Age, not always consistent indeed sometimes contradictory reforming impulses interwove – this was the case of the proposals and policies formulated on the question of large-scale industrial concentrations – and were indeed capable of permeating vast areas of society and culture. The realm of historical research was no exception and from the last decade of the last century a new attitude towards the national tradition developed which led to an open reassessment of the Jacksonian period.

The key to this reappraisal was supplied by Turner himself who identified the source of inspiration of American democracy in the dynamic and vigorous society of the West, far away from the decadence of the East and, still more so, Europe. The Tennessee general was an expression of that society, a personification of the revival and rise of the common man, and for some decades historians described him as the bearer of a 'democracy' which did not issue from conflict between the classes or organised interests, but was instead to some extent a spontaneous expression of the American people. Thus, for Woodrow Wilson Jacksonian democracy was a moment in the process of renewal and nationalisation of the Jeffersonian tradition promoted by the 'West' and already started by Monroe's 'national republicanism'. Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager's classic (1942) also continued in the same tradition; they depicted Jackson as a direct expression of the popular classes on the other side of the Allegheny Mountains, even though he was also supported by workers in the cities in the East, and fitted him into the framework of antioligarchic democratisation triggered by the frontier⁴.

As we shall see, Schlesinger was clearly indebted to the progressive historiographical tradition, and at once faithfully reflected the conception of the discipline which emerged in the United States just prior to and immediately after World War II. In those years, whereas the debate on a possible American intervention in Europe divided Beard and his isolationist followers from an increasingly 'internationalist' majority, the antirelativist polemic offered another sign of the break in dominant historiographical paradigms and, indirectly, of the crisis of the progressive hegemony. The attack on relativism *à la* Carl Becker and the return to the historian's benchmarks of detachment and objectivity took place in a framework of cultural and political mobilisation which associated the first to the manipulatory needs of totalitarian regimes and turned the second into cornerstones of western thought. Within this framework, Popper's thesis of the evils of

⁴ C. G. Sellers Jr, «Andrew Jackson versus the Historians», in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 44, 4 (1958): 615-634; A. Nevins, H. Steele Commager, *The Pocket History of the United States* (New York, 1942), 180-196.

'ideology' and his vision of the clash between 'Free World' and 'Totalitarianism' were to prove highly influential, in history as in the social sciences.

During the war years, the assertion of the link between objectivism and the defence of the reasons of the United States and the West opened the way to close interaction between historians and power. The Oss was one of the privileged places for this interaction; inside the organisation often distinguished specialists supplied painstaking studies about the state of the countries at war in the belief that analytical rigour was much more functional to the cause than propagandistic zeal. Moreover, the involvement of historians in the foreign policy establishment, especially in government agencies such as the CIA and the Economic Cooperation Administration, survived the end of the conflict, and in this respect Schlesinger's story is not so much a curious anomaly as a typical and, in some ways, extreme case of a widespread tendency⁵.

III. THE BOOK: A PROPENSITY FOR PRESENTMINDEDNESS

In 1832 Andrew Jackson solved the tariff crisis between South Carolina and the federal government, setting himself up as an intransigent defender of national unity and thus obtaining partly new *super partes* prestige. At the end of his reconstruction of the episode, Schlesinger added: «It would not be the last time that conservatism, scared by national crisis, would shelter itself gratefully behind the vigorous leadership of a Democratic president it had previously denounced»⁶. The clear allusion here is to the great democratic leader who led his country out of the Great Depression and who, when the lines were being written, was steering it to victory in World War II. The reference to the present is more than episodic; Schlesinger explicitly makes his position clear in the preface, which is totally founded on the importance of the study of the past for understanding of today and for preparing for new hypothetical crises. And of course the present, besides being the terminal and potential gainer from reflections on the past is also the motivation and primary impulse for historical research.

One of the imperatives posed by the world crisis in progress, wrote

⁵ P. Novick, *That Noble Dream. The «Objectivity Question» and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 281-314.

⁶ A. M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson*, (Boston, 1945), 96-97. For Stephen Depoe, who has effectively analysed Schlesinger's rhetoric, the recourse to the analogy is a strategy typical of the perpetrator of *ideological history*, that is, in the perspective indicated by scholars such as Michael McGee, history which analyses events of the past to draw cues for the present and future. It is counterpoised to so-called *conventional history*: 'In conventional history, statements about the past function as the claim or conclusion in the argument. Conventional history involves arguments *about* history. In ideological history, statements about the past function as the ground or support material for other claims dealing with the present and future. Ideological history involves arguments *from* history.' Cfr. S. P. Depoe, *Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and the Ideological History of American Liberalism* (Tuscaloosa, 1994), 16-21, 35-36.

Schlesinger, was the redefinition of the meaning of democracy. For the historian, this did not entail the unlikely pursuit of «immutable moral abstractions of the democratic faith», but rather the study of the tangible working of democracy in the past, a condition not sufficient in itself but necessary to address to future challenges:

We do not yet know how in detail the American democracy will move to meet them; but this we do know, that, if it is to remain a democracy, its moods, methods and purposes will bear a vital relation to its attack on similar (if less intense) crises of its past.[...] History can contribute nothing in the way of panaceas. But it can assist vitally in the formation of that sense of what is democratic, of what is in line with our republican traditions, which alone can save us⁷.

More specifically, the second quarter of the nineteenth century, so full of upheavals in politics, society and the world of ideas, is, according to the author, significant for the present. Schlesinger makes plain his intentions from the outset by introducing a citation by Franklin D. Roosevelt on the actuality of Jackson. Indeed, the whole of his account may be read as a chronicle of the formation of modern American liberalism which, though it originates with Jefferson, only with the advent of Jacksonian democracy does find its core: namely, the strong government which intervenes in the economy and society to quell the growing power of the business community in the name of a coalition of groups and interests in which urban workers and intellectuals have a strong influence. With the advent of industrialism the decentralised agrarian path to democracy is no longer practicable and indeed, says Schlesinger, the abstention of central political authority plays into the hands of those who already hold economic power. Hence the central importance he attaches to the so-called 'Bank War', the Tennessee-born president's fracas with the Second Bank of the United States.

In his conclusion, a mixture of historical analysis, comment and prescription, the author sums up his own vision of the Jacksonian era and, above all, of its role in the process of transformation of the national reformist tradition. Once the era had finished, the notion of the strong role of the state was not codified nor did it acquire a permanent character, and following the Civil War the business world was able to use the antistatist power of the continuing 'Jeffersonian myth' against any hypothesis of political intervention. Only this century, with the domineering emergence of industrial and financial corporations has the myth been dispelled and understanding been reached of the fact that Jefferson's achievement of his purposes relied on the Hamiltonian instruments of strong government and state intervention. Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson opened the way, but it was above all with the New Deal that Liberalism matured and performed its stabilising function in an exemplary fashion: «[...] the object of liberalism has never been to destroy capitalism, as conservatism invariably claims – only to keep the capitalists from

⁷ Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, IX-X.

destroying it» recalls Schlesinger for the benefit of those who still blamed Roosevelt's presidencies for a sort of inadmissible subversion of the traditional relations between state and market.

Yet Schlesinger is also at pains to point out that the liberal reformer, strongly critical of the political leadership which the business world has offered every time it has been called upon to guide the nation, is equally hostile to any theory designed to construct some New Order, especially when that order starts out from radical protest against liberal democracy and capitalism. Once more the relationship between past and present is immediate and consequent for Schlesinger whose conclusion proposes a questionable analogy between nineteenth-century Utopian thought and the communist regime of the Soviet Union:

This essential conservatism of American liberalism brings it into conflict with the second antagonistic theory: the theory of socialism, which in the Fourierite form excited so many intellectuals in the eighteen-forties. [...] Yet the history of the past decade has perhaps made it harder to respond to its promise with enthusiasm. The search for a New Order is somewhat less expiring now that we have seen in practice what such New Orders are likely to be⁸.

Previously, in the brief chapter on 'Jacksonian Democracy and Utopia', Schlesinger had traced a dual line of demarcation between the tough work of politics and the 'flight from responsibility' of Utopia, between the realist, courageous commitment of liberal reformers and the fanciful dreams of the Fourierites. Sure enough, writes Schlesinger, the palingenetic vision of the second clashed with the demand for a ten hour day and the reform of the banking system of the former, just as the pattern of a harmonic pacified society was at loggerheads with the idea of 'class conflict', such a central feature to Jackson's language. It was above all in that crucial moment in national history that reciprocal extraneousness emerged between the sphere of utopia, intellectually attractive but irrelevant to the purposes of any real attempt at reform, and that of politics, to which attention now had to be directed:

Literary fashion has been a distorter of history. Much more important for the national democratic tradition than this intellectual dalliance with pseudo-reform was the tainted, corrupt, unsatisfactory work performed by Locofoco politicians: the emotions of Utopia have been admired long enough. It is time to pass along from the sideshows into the main arena and watch the men who were actually fighting the battles of reform in the place where they had to be fought. All the prose about brotherhood and the pretty experiments in group living made no conservatives sleep less easily at night. The politicians might have sold their souls to the Party, but at least they had something to show for it⁹.

Here we begin to get a glimpse of a model which Schlesinger was to develop

⁸ Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 522.

⁹ Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 368. The term 'Locofoco' refers to the radical faction of the Democrat Party in New York, which from 1835 protested against the predominance of the apparatus of Tammany Hall.

to the full in *The Vital Center* (1949), the manifesto of postwar American liberalism. Vis à vis the egoistic short-sightedness of the business world and the dangerous doctrinairism of the revolutionary left, pragmatic pluralist liberalism was alone in guaranteeing that the domestic and international crisis of the thirties and forties could be overcome. Yet what is most important here is the central importance of political action with respect to withdrawal from the responsibilities of the present. Schlesinger confirms the fact without uncertainty, especially with reference to one crucial group in particular – that of intellectuals.

In *The Age of Jackson* the relationship between intellectuals and public life is analysed on the basis of the premise that in every 'revolutionary' period the world of culture keeps its distance from the established order and tends to opt, more or less directly, for change. At all events, this premise betrayed the author's preference for a present-minded conception of the intellectual's profession and to a definite stand if not to direct participation in political choices.

In his view, the Jackson era was no exception: writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, poets such as Walt Whitman, historians such as George Bancroft, polemicists such as Orestes Brownson and many others still were inebriated by the new climate that reigned in Washington, often holding public appointments. Nonetheless, other important men of letters refused to take sides openly for or against the changes that were taking place. It was in writing about them that Schlesinger transcended historical analysis to take a clear stand. Like the Utopians, he blames the transcendentalists of Massachusetts for a pursuit of perfection which he ultimately saw as tantamount to a flight from the responsibilities of politics; he describes Ralph Waldo Emerson as being ambiguously suspended midway between awareness of his own role as a citizen and incomplete acceptance of its implications:

politics represent his greatest failure. He would not succumb to verbal panaceas, neither would he make the ultimate moral effort of Thoreau and cast off all obligations to society. Instead he lingered indecisively, accepting without enthusiasm certain relations to government but never confronting directly the implications of acceptance. [...] The steady wisdom of the sage of Concord faltered, in this one field, into sentimentality.

The second passage, which closes the part of the book dedicated to the philosopher of nineteenth-century American liberalism has the ring of an unappealable sentence – as does his comparison between Whitman and Thoreau, it too concerned with the attitude to the obligations of the present:

The impulse of Whitman was healthier for the social state. His life was spent in an exultation in the potentialities, and a scourging of the failures, of democracy. If the state was not to be a semihuman tiger, with its heart taken out and the top of its brain shot away, it would probably be due more to the Whitmans than to the Thoreaus¹⁰.

It is worth noting of course that there is no a priori equation between the

¹⁰ Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 382-390.

intellectual's direct participation in public life and the presentmindedness of his works. Nonetheless, Schlesinger himself relates the conditioning of the political-cultural context to the research subjects of scholars, as well as to their choice to participate or abstain: «They are filled with a pervading sense at once of alienation and of longing, which, one way or another, controls their work, *directly if they are political writers*, obliquely and at many removes if they are poets»¹¹.

It is the life of Schlesinger himself, so often involved in the political life of the nation, which throws more light on the matter. The scholar, and the historian in particular, assumes his responsibilities both by siding explicitly with one party or another and by analysing the past with an eye on the present.

IV. SCHOLARLY AND PUBLIC IMPACT

In September 1952, Schlesinger, involved in Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign as a political adviser and a leading member of his brain trust, was viciously attacked by the conservative *Boston Herald*. The article opened by quoting passages, out of context and used in a philologically incorrect way, from *The Age of Jackson*: for example, «The chief enemy [...] of (American) liberty [...] is likely to be [...] the business community» or «it is this moment of crisis which can unite the weaker groups and frighten the business community sufficiently to bring 'liberalism' to power?». The aim of course was to discredit the democratic candidate by instrumentalising the work of one of his leading collaborators. The McCarthy years were at their height and the writer of the article blithely commented that

These are not, as you might suppose, quotes out of Marx's 'Das Kapital', although the influence of Marx is obvious and strong. Nor are the above statements part of any anti-American manifesto, although the ingredients of such a manifesto are there [...]. What is, then, that we must read into the Stevensonian future? There is an authoritarianism here – a program of action in favor of the Left Wing – which Americans will want to hear more about before they are ready to vote¹².

The fact is that *The Age of Jackson* was in no way Marxist, and still less un-American. It was instead a breakaway from the prevalent progressive interpretation in so far as it placed at the centre of the reform process not so much a fuzzy, somewhat mythical concept of the 'American people' nor what was seen as the intrinsically renewing thrust of frontier society, but rather the working classes of the large cities of the North-West. With the almost unanimous support

¹¹ Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 369 (my italics). The passage opens the chapter on 'Jacksonian Democracy and Literature' and is part of the description of the relationship between intellectuals and revolution.

¹² «Harvard Historian's Volume on Jackson May Offer Clues», in *Boston Sunday Herald*, 14 September 1952.

of intellectuals, these classes had triggered social conflict unprecedented in national history, overlooking the demand for social respectability typical of the twenties – their mobilisation over education is one example of this – and focusing on the socio-economic inequality between ‘producers’ and ‘non-producers’ generated by industrial society’s first tentative steps. According to Schlesinger, that conflict had managed to translate into social reform and democratisation thanks to the decisive role of Andrew Jackson’s leadership, which emerges from the concerted nature of the work as the keystone of that period of history inasmuch as it adapted the Jeffersonian tradition to the needs of social re-equilibrium imposed by industrialism. In Schlesinger’s account, the ‘war’ against the large-scale private financial concentration of the Second Bank of the United States has a paradigmatic value in so far as it represents direct state intervention against large-scale monopoly and, at once, the capacity of the politics and the leader to interpret the needs of the common man and arouse participation ‘from grass roots level’.

The book influenced the historiographical debate for some time. From the late forties an interpretative hypothesis was proposed based indirectly on Schlesinger’s work – albeit arriving at very distant conclusions. I refer to the ‘entrepreneurial thesis’ developed by scholars at Columbia University and expounded in its most classic, convincing form by Richard Hofstadter in *The American Political Tradition* (1948).

The way was opened by Bray Hammond in his savage attack on *The Age of Jackson* in the May 1946 issue of the *Journal of Economic History*. Besides accusations of pro-Jacksonian bias, of poor documentation on economic history and clumsy analysis of the Second Bank affair, Hammond also complained that what he saw as Schlesinger’s undue emphasis of the link between the Jacksonian movement and labour overshadowed the strongly business-minded, entrepreneurial character of the former. Another contribution to the debate followed in December of the same year at the annual conference of the American Historical Association, where Joseph Dorfman, a famous Columbia University economist, squared up to Schlesinger with a paper which was later published in the *American Historical Review* as ‘The Jackson Wage-Earner Thesis’. In the paper, Dorfman criticises the importance Schlesinger attached to the radical movements of the thirties and forties, and casts some doubts on the ‘anticapitalist’ nature of figures and movements which deserved, if anything, to be termed ‘antiaristocratic’, and on the nature of organisations which, denominations and pro-labour rhetoric apart, were ultimately pro-business in composition and demand. All of which had important consequences for the public significance of interpretation *à la* Schlesinger, since, according to Dorfman, the strong business element behind Jacksonian democracy distinguished it sharply from the radicalism of the New Deal years, which really was fuelled by wage-earning urban workers, and hence weakened the link between past and present¹³.

¹³ «Mr. Schlesinger properly emphasizes the fact that Jacksonian democracy reflected Eastern as well as Western influences, but it seems to me that he errs in associating the Eastern influence with labor alone and not with business enterprise. There was no more important factor in the Jackson movement than the democratization of business, which ceased thenceforth to be the *métier* of a predominantly

Other interventions along the same lines followed in the late forties and early fifties, most of them questioning the intensity of the link between Jackson and the labour organisations. But, as we have said, it was Hofstadter who harnessed these single contributions into a new view of the Jacksonian age, assimilating and at once overriding the turnaround inspired by Schlesinger. His view fitted in with criticism of the frontier thesis; the 1928 elections had already shown how the consensus for the popular hero who had beaten the British at New Orleans came from all over the country – New England excepted. The ‘war’ over the Second Bank of the United States had unveiled the contingent character of support for Jackson from states of the West; whereas they were hostile to Nicholas Biddle’s bank, demanding an expansive monetary policy after the agrarian tradition, the president attacked the symbol of the interests of the North-East moneyed aristocracy from anti-inflationary positions that were widely shared by the urban middle classes and wage-earning workers concerned at the rising cost of living.

This is where the breakaway from *The Age of Jackson* began. In the coalition of interest groups which formed around the man from Tennessee, a predominant role was played, according to Hofstadter, by those who expected to enter the expanding capitalist market and, by placing the onus of their life’s work on free enterprise, embodied the average American. Jackson himself, viewed by many as an emblematic figure of rugged, egalitarian pioneer America, was actually a more complex character, living the aristocratic life of the Southern gentleman and taking risks in the world of business. Speaking of Jacksonian democracy, Hofstadter wrote that

it was essentially a movement of laissez-faire, an attempt to divorce government and business. It is closely commonly recognized in American historical folklore that the Jackson movement was a phase in the expansion of democracy, but it is too little appreciated that it was also a phase in the expansion of liberated capitalism. While in the New Deal the democratic reformers were driven to challenge many assumptions of traditional American capitalism, in the Jacksonian period the democratic upsurge was linked to the ambitions of the small capitalist.

This was another way of criticising the analogy between the reform phases of the 1830s and 1930s. Franklin D. Roosevelt was active in a decade in which

mercantile, exclusive group, or commercial aristocracy, as it was in the day of Hamilton, and became an interest of the common man. This process of democratization went hand in hand with the rise of laissez faire», B. Hammond, «Public Policy and National Banks», in *Journal of Economic History*, 6 (1946): 79-84. J. Dorfman, «The Jackson Wage-Earner Thesis», in *American Historical Review*, 54 (1949): 296-306. In Schlesinger’s immediate reply, some lines are explicitly given over to the question of the work’s value for the present: «As for the relationship between the Jackson period and later reform movements, *The Age of Jackson* surely claims no more than a political and psychological resemblance. In both the Jackson period and the New Deal, for example, strong liberal leadership mobilized the other sections of society against domination by the business community. I cannot imagine anyone foolish enough to argue resemblances in the realm of economic policy, and certainly *The Age of Jackson* does not do so. Is one to understand that Mr. Dorfman would dispute the political resemblances?» in *American Historical Review*, 54, 2 (1949): 785-786.

market opportunities were tight and this enabled politics to play an unprecedented role in the economic sphere. Andrew Jackson, on the other hand, had to deal with a demand for political and economic democratisation which had generated his own rise to power. The link between the two phases was thus superficial, despite the fact that in both cases the country's economic elite clashed with a composite coalition of other sectors of society¹⁴. Hofstadter, like Schlesinger, opens his analysis of the period with the specific interests of given social groups. It is his tribute to an 'economic interpretation' which progressive historiography had applied to decisive moments in national history, such as the constitution and the Civil War, but not to Jacksonian democracy. Once more? 'labour thesis' and 'entrepreneurial thesis' converged in the attitude to the city-country nexus in so far as analysis concentrated on first and assigns secondary importance to the second, such a central point in Turner. The central importance of *The Age of Jackson* was thus acknowledged by a scholar as distinguished as Edward Pessen, although he dissented radically from the book's thesis of the democratisation in progress in those years and of Jackson as a hero and representative of 'the people'.

More recently, the affirmation of social history has meant that the classic periodisations of history into presidencies and the individual protagonists of the political scene has been transcended; now, in view of the attention devoted to subordinate groups, it is difficult to ignore the conspicuous limits of Jacksonian democracy, two of the cornerstones of which were slavery and the elimination of the native population. Nonetheless, the now somewhat widespread tendency to consider the market revolution as a key to the decades leading up to the Civil War somehow testifies to the actuality of Schlesinger's contribution – at least in terms of the importance he attached to the interplay of economic interests. It is indicative how, in an attempt to give a synthetic, didactically effective definition of Jacksonian democracy, Sean Wilentz has, to some degree, introduced to the context of the most up-to-date historiographical trends some elements of the two forties classics that I have spoken about here¹⁵.

¹⁴ R. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), 57-86. Cf. p. 466 for an explicit acknowledgement of the importance of *The Age of Jackson* as a critique of the frontier thesis.

¹⁵ «Critics have paid indirect tribute to *The Age of Jackson* by dealing with the era largely in terms of the issues and questions posed by its author.» Cf. E. Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Homewood, 1969), vii. «Not everyone benefited equally from the market revolution, least of all those nonwhites for whom it was an unmitigated disaster. Jacksonianism, however, would grow directly from the tensions it generated within white society. Mortgaged farmers and an emerging proletariat in the Northeast, nonslaveholders in the South, tenants and would-be yeomen in the West – all had reasons to think that the spread of commerce and capitalism would bring not boundless opportunities but new forms of dependence. And in all sections of the country, some of the rising entrepreneurs of the market revolution suspected that older elites would block their way and shape economic development to suit themselves.» Cf. S. Wilentz, «Jacksonian Democracy», in *The Reader's Companion to American History*, eds. E. Foner and J. A. Garraty (Boston, 1991), 582; Wilentz, «Society, Politics and the Market Revolution 1815-1848», in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia, 1990) 51-72. Of the most period important works on the period in question I

Immediate reactions to Schlesinger's book provided a foretaste of its medium/long-term impact. When, in the autumn of 1945, *The Age of Jackson* appeared in the bookshops at the price of five dollars, consensus was virtually unanimous. The first, authoritative praise, that of Schlesinger's father, arrived of course in advance: «I have at last read your manuscript. Let me say emphatically that you have the making of a really important book. These chapters show insight, originality and freshness of approach». Just a few months later he was to add:

You have written a superb book. It is a new kind of history, joining intellectual and political history in what I hope may be permanent wedlock. You have digested an immense amount of material and shown complete mastery of it. Moreover, the style flows easily and is at the same time distinctive¹⁶.

What is most striking is the magnitude of the consensus which the book received among specialists, in newspapers, in weekly magazines and among readers. The two most important specialist journals, the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* and the *American Historical Review*, reviewed it in spring 1946, when it was already a bestseller. The reviewers, Roman J. Zorn e Russel B. Nye, underscored respectively Schlesinger's breakaway from Turner and the importance of the pages dedicated to intellectuals in which, as we have seen, the author's willingness to get involved in public was seen almost as a guiding criterion for his review of the leading cultural figures of Jacksonian America. The only clear divergence in judgement concerned Schlesinger's propensity to write history with an eye to the present. If for the MVHR his attempt to conjure up a Jacksonian 'New Deal' denoted his partisanship, for the AHR his liberal orientation was no obstacle to a proper interpretation of the reformist tradition from Jefferson to Jackson, which contributed to make *The Age of Jackson* 'the most stimulating historical writing of the past decade'¹⁷.

Of course daily newspaper and weekly magazines had preceded academic periodicals. In mid-September the book received excellent reviews from the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New Yorker*, and the young author, who was still in Europe, was informed by his father in the following terms:

These reviews interest me particularly because they express the point of view of the lay public, and it is evident that the writers were bowled off their feet. Even the so-called unnecessary detail, which the scholarly public will place great store by, did not daunt them.

recommend: G. Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era, 1828-48* (New York, 1959); L. Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (New York, 1969); R. V. Remini's trilogy, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (1977), *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (1981), *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845* (1984)

¹⁶ Letters from Arthur M. Schlesinger to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, 19.1.1943, 30.4.1944, in JFKL, Schlesinger Papers, Private Files, Box 23.

¹⁷ *American Historical Review*, 51, 6 (1946): 510-513; *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 32, 4 (1946): 590-592.

It looks to me as though you are certain of a big audience of both Greeks and barbarians; and, of course, it is the barbarians who have the long purses¹⁸.

With this work Schlesinger effectively laid the bases for a dialogue with the general public which was to prove enduring and intense, so much so that it triggered a latent conflict between the author and the orthodox academic community which became open in 1965 with the publication of his book on Kennedy's presidency. To a certain extent the problem was solved in the late sixties, when Schlesinger's writing became more and more bound up in current affairs, losing almost entirely the scholarly air of his first efforts. Yet, as we have seen, *The Age of Jackson* was very well accepted not only by the academic community but also by the press.

The first to speak was Allan Nevins in the *New York Times Book Review*, who after pondering upon the novelty of Schlesinger's interpretations also stressed its importance for the present. Schlesinger saw in Jacksonian democracy the start of the state intervention in the economy as a means of maintaining equilibrium, subsequently to be reiterated by Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and made it a model of liberalism for the future. Nevins did not criticise the operation since he saw Schlesinger's partisanship as being easily offset by the style, originality and solidity of the documentation.

Soon after, it was the authoritative progressive historian Merle Curti who paid tribute to the young prodigy from Harvard, this time without reserve and above all for the presentmindedness of the book:

Schlesinger [...] has not only written a first-rate and eminently readable book for scholars: he has at the same time produced a book which American liberals should welcome for the light it throws on the past, present and future of democracy. Mr. Schlesinger, in a greater measure than is common among historians, writes with an eye on our time and on tomorrow. He is of course thoroughly aware that the tensions and struggles of the Jacksonian era were far simpler than those of today. Yet he succeeds in writing a history which is a useful instrument for understanding the conflicts of American life today and, perhaps, for directing them towards peaceful, intelligent and democratic solutions. [...] Not only can weary and bewildered liberals learn much from the pages of 'The Age of Jackson'; they should find their faith in democracy as an instrument for action today renewed, deepened and extended.

In this review in *The Nation* Curti expresses some of the cornerstones of the progressive conception of science and history – didactic intent, pragmatism – and at once reveals the link which joins Arthur Junior to the generation and the teaching of his father.

Oddly enough, the other great liberal weekly, *The New Republic*, which in the course of 1946 published the book in abbreviated form, asked another youngster

¹⁸ Letter from Arthur M. Schlesinger to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., 15 September 1945, JFKL, Schlesinger Papers, Private Files, Box 23.

with a bright future, Richard Hofstadter, to write the review. He too joined the chorus by praising its scholarly rigor, and surprisingly adding that:

One turns with relief from more partisan myth-making histories in the manner of Claude Bowers to a study so much concerned with the larger problems of historical causation and powered to such an unusual degree by a capacity for analytical thinking:

The presentist significance of the work recurs constantly in comments reviews. Thus George F. Milton asserted outright in the *Saturday Review* that «the interpretation of the past in the light of the moods and movements of the present is implicit in really useful history», adding that, «The age of Jackson has many resemblances to the age of Franklin Roosevelt». From London, Denis W. Brogan in the *Times Literary Supplement* made more of a problem of the allusion to the present which, under the surface for most of the book, emerges explicitly in the final chapter, suspended, as we have seen, midway between a genealogy of American liberalism, a manifesto of its historical role and an optimistic utterance directed at the present day:

There are among us academic historians of the greatest acuteness, learning and probity who will regard this appeal from the present to the past, this search for the light, even if it be only the light of analogous experience, as a kind of treason to the craft. [...] But the men and women out in the world who want something more than the cold comfort of historical technique will find in this brilliant reconstruction food for thought.

The 90,000 copies it sold during the first year confirmed the capacity of *The Age of Jackson* to stimulate the curiosity of the general public.

But there were also jarring notes. According to *Time*, the book was an apology for the *New Deal* disguised as a reinterpretation of the Jacksonian age, an albeit brilliant attempt to find a link between the contradictory political and theoretical legacies of Jefferson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. This position was not surprising, coming as it did from one of the leading periodicals of Henry Luce's publishing colossus¹⁹. It was, above all, Bray Hammond with his openly critical review in the *Journal of Economic History* who introduced points that were later developed, as we have seen, by scholars at Columbia University.

The book also spelt sensational success for its author. His Pulitzer Prize was officialised in '46, but there had been talk of his winning it for months²⁰. This was

¹⁹ A. Nevins, «At the Roots of Democracy», in *New York Times Review of Books*, Sep. 16, 1945: 1, 26; M. Curti, «Jacksonian Democracy», in *The Nation*, Oct. 20 1945: 407-408; R. Hofstadter, «Democracy in the Making», in *The New Republic*, Oct. 22 1945: 541-542; G. F. Milton, «A Straight Look at Old Hickory», in *The Saturday Review*, Sep. 29 1945: 10-11; D. W. Brogan, «General Jackson: Rehabilitation», in *Times Literary Supplement*, Dec. 15 1945: 589-590; «The Old Deal», in *Time*, 22 Oct. 1945: 103-104, 106. With regard to Hofstadter, it is worth pointing out that in *The American Political Tradition*, written three years later, he refers directly to Hammond's position (p. 466).

²⁰ In a letter from his father we read: «Paul Buck is going to write Jim Baxter and exhort him and Ford to by-pass me on the Pulitzer awards. With no possible competitor in sight as yet, I don't see how

just one moment in a rising crescendo of popularity and prestige. Between 1946 and 1947 Schlesinger wrote innumerable articles, largely on current affairs and politics, in periodicals such as *The Nation* and *Partisan Review* and popular magazines such as *Life*, *Fortune* and *American Mercury*. The Guggenheim Foundation awarded him a scholarship for his research on Roosevelt and, more importantly, in the spring of 1946 Harvard offered him the post of associate professor in its history department. Schlesinger, who was not yet twenty nine and had not as yet decided whether to continue as a free lance writer in Washington or attempt other paths, eventually returned to Cambridge to embark on an academic career, not without nostalgia for the political and social ferment of the capital²¹.

CONCLUSIONS

In the 20 years that followed Schlesinger continued in his rise alternating between historical research and work as a publicist, propagandist and adviser for the Democrat Party. He arguably became the postwar American liberal with the greatest public impact.

The premises, nature and results of his first important book, *The Age of Jackson*, highlight traits that were to characterise his entire career. I refer in particular to the connection between his appeal for realism and 'toughmindedness' as a general attitude for intellectuals and citizens alike, which recurs frequently in the book, and the propensity to take part in public life directly which distinguished a whole generation of scholars, and which emerges with singular continuity in Schlesinger. Christopher Lasch in *The New Radicalism in America* analysed the relationship in a manner that continues to be convincing today: the success of sceptical, pragmatic realism and the cult of hardboiled rhetoric among postwar liberal intellectuals are functional to their pursuit of social affirmation, the attainment of prestigious status, publicly recognised as such and as far as possible from the old images of the alienated dissident or the 'mad professor'. It was with Kennedy and Kennedyism that intellectuals as a class reached their destination and were able to celebrate their stylistic – that is, rhetorical – affinity with the brilliant young president who liked to surround himself with the best minds of the Ivy League, the refined and the chic. Again according to Lasch, all this was to the detriment of the detachment that is a *sine qua non* for the performing of a truly critical function vis-à-vis society and power²².

In this context, it is necessary to stress the paradigmatic character of Schlesinger's story. The ideologist of the New Frontier, in the early sixties the master of ceremonies at the marriage between the White House and the academic

they can fail to respond» in letter from Arthur M. Schlesinger to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., 15 September 1945, *cit.*

²¹ Miles, «Schlesinger»: 386; interview with Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., New York, 6.12.1996.

²² C. Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America (1889-1963). The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York, 1965), 286-322.

elite, in the mid-forties had been one of the forerunners of a new way of interpreting the profession of the intellectual. *The Age of Jackson* is without a doubt a child of its time in its criticism of Utopianism, 'sentimentalism' and indifference to public life and in its praise of participation and action, at once helping to outline a model of interaction between intelligentsia and politics that was to predominate in the postwar United States for some time.

As to Schlesinger's work as a historian, the recent spate of reflection on the past outside traditional academic circles has triggered a debate inside the historical profession on the so-called 'public use of history', that is to say, as in Nicola Gallerano's definition, on the interpretation of the past promoted by the media or cultural associations, political parties and so on or by specialists who reach the general public through the mass media or popular publications. With a broad generalization, we can say that the debate has developed into two rather contrasting directions.

Most historians seem to agree with Jurgen Habermas' argument in favour of a net separation between history narrated 'in the third person' by the historian and the 'first person' history of those with explicit didactic or even political aims. Only by rigidly respecting this distinction could it be possible to avoid the risk of easy, sometimes dangerous revisions, as the case of the discussion on Nazism (which Habermas refers to) would appear to demonstrate.

Gallerano advances an alternative hypothesis which, in view of Schlesinger's case, sounds more persuasive; he argues that a relationship 'at once of conflict and convergence' exists between the two ambits, and that the public use of history is not necessarily instrumental and manipulatory and, indeed, may favour the participation of citizens in historical reflection. The reason for this possible interaction between scholarly research and public discourse lies in the nature of the discipline, which was born with Thucydides with a strong penchant for 'public utility', which maintained this perspective until recent times and is still devoid of a 'strong scientific statute' and a specialist language that might limit access to outsiders²³.

The Schlesinger of *The Age of Jackson* seems to corroborate this hypothesis, sketching a special public role for the historian which makes him stand out from intellectuals *en masse*.

His nature of 'humanist' historian, sceptical to the statistical and quantitative approaches originating from the social sciences, using non specialist language and backed by an unquestionable literary talent and a propensity to write about the characters and great figures of political history, helped make Schlesinger a successful author, capable of combining research and teaching at Harvard, cultivated reflection in the *Partisan Review* and contingent political comment in the *Ladies Home Journal*. More specifically, his book on Andrew Jackson which,

²³ Nicola Gallerano, «Storia e uso pubblico della storia», in *L'uso pubblico della storia*, ed. N. Gallerano (Milano, 1995), 17-32; Jurgen Habermas, «L'uso pubblico della storia», in *Germania. Un passato che non passa*, ed. Gian Enrico Rusconi (Torino, 1987), 98-109.

at the epilogue of the Roosevelt era, reiterated the issue of confidence in the great democratic leader as a cue for a new phase of reform, received a welcome which denoted his capacity to interpret the prevailing climate in public opinion. *The Age of Jackson* was also an effective reappraisal of an important politician of the past, which is one of the reasons why it can fit in with Gallerano's idea of 'public use of history', which often entails 'rehabilitations' of great relevance to the present. This type of use of history may be correct and even of great historiographical worth, as in the case in point, it may lead to popularisation or it may degenerate into manipulatory propaganda.