



# Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World

*Eric Foner*

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**Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World** Eric Foner

**"Who Owns History?" testifies to Eric Foner's lifelong personal commitment to writing histories that advance the struggle for racial equality and economic justice.** —David Glassberg, *The Sunday Star-Ledger*

History has become a matter of public controversy, as Americans clash over such things as museum presentations, the flying of the Confederate flag, and reparations for slavery. So whose history is being written? Who owns it?

Eric Foner answers these and other questions about the historian's relationship to the world of the past and future in this provocative, even controversial, study of the reasons we care about history—or should.

## Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World Details

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## From Reader Review Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World for online ebook

### Tabitha says

I wanted this book to be better. Its title intrigued me by verbalizing a question in which I had long had interest. Its an old standard that history is written by the victors, but as we progress to a society whose minorities will ultimately outnumber the historical majority, how can history be reclaimed? Its an incredibly important question, but not one ultimately answered in this book. Instead, Foner has compiled several of his previously-written essays into a single volume. They are all, to be sure, interesting reading, but as a whole the book only dances around the question the title poses. No answers are to be had within its covers, ultimately making this a disappointing read.

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### Sally Sugarman says

This is an excellent book. It is a series of essays primarily written in the 90s but certainly quite prescient about what is happening now. Foner's area is Reconstruction and he notes how it has been distorted. He sees the race issue as central to what the United States is. We have periods like Reconstruction followed by Redemption where the gains are undone in support of the status quo and of white males. Much of this book reminded me of George Carlin's line about the United States being built by slave owners yearning to be free. The Constitution was compromised from the beginning with the three/fifths decision, giving the South unwarranted power. He has a wonderful essay on who is an American, showing how the definition of who was a citizen was constantly restricted, no Indians of course, no blacks, no Asians and now no Hispanics. Women were reluctantly given the vote. The Civil War was really about slavery and the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments were one of the best actions in our history that was fairly quickly undone, particularly by the Supreme Court that has usually acted as the most conservative element of the government, always siding with the powerful and the white male. Civil rights legislation quickly devolved into concern about "reverse discrimination" against whites. With rare exceptions the Supreme Court has ruled against the people, just as the Citizens United ruling did. To make the 13th and 14th amendments about the personhood of corporations is a travesty. Foner does a great job in dissecting Ken Burns' Civil War documentary where blacks hardly exist. It was just a family quarrel and the honorable warriors on both sides reconciled in 1913 while Woodrow Wilson ordered the segregation of federal offices in Washington D.C. At the end of the Civil War instead of opting for freedom, the country reverted to its worst instincts. The westward expansion was Imperialism at its worst and when we had secured our Manifest Destiny, we went after world imperialism with the Spanish American War. Earlier in the book, Foner talks about what happened to history when it became social history and included other groups of people. History is not a question of facts but of interpretation and of what facts are noted. He has a fine essay about why there is no socialism in the United States and suggests perhaps we are ahead of the game as the flaws of socialism began to show up around the rest of the world. He does note that freedom means different things to people. For most Americans it focuses on the second amendment right to bear arms. A lot of people thought that we did not have socialism here because we did not emerge from a feudal class society, others that the frontier was always the safety valve. Foner's father and uncle were fired from their teaching jobs because they were members of the Communist party. Ironically, Hofstadter who was Foner's dissertation adviser was hired into Foner's father's job at City College. Hofstadter was not a great lecturer but an excellent adviser and one of the outstanding historians of his generation according to Foner who recounts his own journey becoming an historian. Foner also has a few interesting essays on how other countries rewrite their histories such as Russia and South Africa. The process of reconciliation in South Africa was a way of keeping the whites dominant after apartheid was over. It was called transitional history where the new group did not seek basic

change, but an accommodation with the powerful. Foner notes that the quarrel in the U.S. over the history standards is a part of the same way of creating a history that will keep the country together even if it is at the expense of the less powerful. He says that some of our progress in the fifties and the sixties was in contrast to what Hitler had done. We were representing freedom (that word again) in contrast to the Nazis. However, Foner does not mention the internment of the Japanese which will always be a blot on our history and which the other book about rewriting history as a result of World War II also did not mention. And we did drop that second bomb on Nagasaki. What does it say about us that we are the only country ever to have dropped not one, but two, atomic bombs on civilian populations? Obama is sort of like Reconstruction. After him we will go back to our worst instincts. Foner is clear that race and slavery is so much a part of who we are that not to face it is to risk not understanding this country at all.

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### **Billy Marino says**

More accurately a 4.5-4.75

This book wasn't exactly what I expected via the title. As other reviewers have mentioned, I think maybe it's a bit misleading, mainly because it's not a book that sets out to answer that question, but rather it's a collection of speeches/essays that Foner has delivered in the 1990s that all in some way reference that question and its possible answers.

With that being said, I thoroughly enjoyed this read! The majority of the essays exemplify Foner's uncanny ability to convey incredibly complex histories in fairly simple language, and explain why they're relevant to our lives today. I think a lot of this stems from his focus on specific words, or rather ideas, such as "freedom," "citizenship," "Americanness," etc. that provide fantastic through-lines for understanding these complex historical realities as they trace to the present.

Interestingly, because many of these essays are now two, even three decades old, they are great reads for both the histories he's presenting, and for our understanding of the period he wrote them in. There's a sort of unfortunate reality in these pages as well, which is that I can picture using a handful of these essays in a classroom today, not only because of the great historical information provided, but also because many of the issues at the time of their writing are still pertinent today, if not more so.

Overall, I've found this to be a great summer read post a rigorous MA program, because it worked as both an enjoyable leisure read and provided great intellectual stimulation.

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### **Mark Cheatham says**

I don't share Foner's political views, but he is an excellent historian. A challenging book.

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### **AskHistorians says**

Foner's short essays are very readable and span some time of this thinking. Particularly insightful for a historian first contemplating the role of contemporary events and historiography, Foner's essay on his trips to





<https://thanaya.blog/2018/12/31/whoow...>

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### **Vince says**

Eric Foner is a good writer and he is one of my favorite living US historians. But like most collections of essays, some of them are going to be of less interest than others. For myself I thought his critique of Ken Burns' epic tv series "The Civil War" is excellent and by far the best of the bunch - 5 stars on its own. "Why is There No Socialism In America" is also good, looking at how this question has been answered by historians over the years, but it is based on a talk he gave in 1984, so is a bit dated, Socialism in the US being virtually extinct in the Age of Reagan, but certainly getting more attention today. "Who Is An American" is also excellent, where he discusses the changing interpretations of that statement over the life of the nation. And a couple of the other writings I didn't bother to read - picky, picky. That's the nice thing about a library book.

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### **Bryan Alkire says**

Uneven some essays are still relevant others dated

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### **Andrew says**

A great collection of essays. Actually, it's a thematically tighter and more sustained collection than most—unsurprising, I guess, given how consistent Foner has remained throughout his career.

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### **Grace Song says**

This book includes 8 essays by Foner on what history is and what history means to him. Enjoyable and solidified my reasonings on why I study history.

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### **Otto says**

A thoughtful collection of essays about the uses and abuses of history. Examines the legal, political, and social need to examine and redefine the past in various societies and time periods.

"A new future requires a new past."

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### **Mark says**

If you are intrigued but intimidated by historians, then this is a wonderful starting place. Eric Foner is, as far as I'm concerned, one of the best historians working today, and this book of essays gives some fascinating

insight into how the historians work within their craft.

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## Sean Chick says

I am sad I will not likely live to see the day this book is considered an artifact, for this is a perfect summation of the left progressive interpretation that dominates professional history. Indeed, Foner speaks of current scholarship's consensus with the same kind of assurances that reminds you of the "unsinkable" Titanic, his main remorse coming from the fact that the uninformed rubes have not entirely decided the left interpretation is correct. Calls for dialogue are really just a cute way of whining that others do not agree with you and may need more consultation and "education."

I can give the devil his due. Foner is a good writer, very perceptive at times, and I am admirer of his earlier work. Yet, for a man obsessed with race, class, and gender (in that order) it is interesting that he cannot see the poverty of not including conservative voices in an understanding of history. It makes the essay on Russia really compelling. He hears opinions about Lincoln that are outside the St. Abraham tradition, and he is a bit appalled. I found it refreshing.

I favor the left, but I like more intellectual debate than the academy can handle. Such blind spots make part of the book amusing and sad given current affairs, and also prophetic. Foner is sadly correct about the erosion of civil rights by the Supreme Court, yet he also does not see how scholarship such as his divides Americans and gives us Trump, who is only the overture to our collapse. So in 50 years, when New Orleans is no more and we have fought that civil war Foner and his ilk so crave, how will this book be seen? As not left enough for failing to be even kinder to Marxism? As limited for not bringing up a few token women? An artifact of a leftist degeneracy that destroyed America? I guess it depends on who wins, the radical left or the racist right, but either way they will have their revisions of history, for all revision is at heart is deciding which parts to ignore. Foner is as guilty as the men he condemns. For one, he seems to think the Civil War was not about union and nationalism, despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary; Union newspapers, soldiers, and politicians brought up union and nation more than slavery. For that lack of self-awareness, I cannot recommend this book.

To Foner, who should own history is clear enough: leftist progressives. It is a limited and dull answer, and the failure of that answer to deal with issues, such as freedom of speech, class, and economics, is being played out before our eyes.

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