

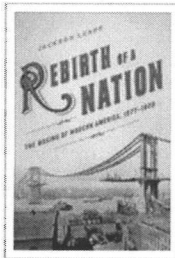
REVIEWS

- THE DAILY REVIEW
- CURRENT REVIEWS
- MORE REVIEWS

JUL 17 2009

Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920 by Jackson Lears

John Summers



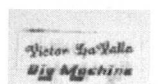
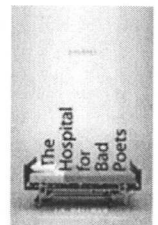
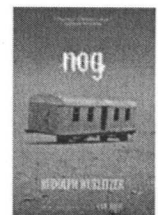
Rebirth of a Nation is ambitious in conception, sharp in tone, stylish in composition, erudite in argument, and unified by the force of conviction. It continues the project that Jackson Lears has been pursuing since his first book, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981), then in *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (1994) and *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (2003). These books purport to uncover the origins of our times, or, as the subtitle of the new volume puts it, "the making of modern America." *Rebirth's* epigraph, from Melville's *Benito Cereno*, evinces the tragic sensibility informing the project, the concern for the frailty of the American soul in contention with modernity: "Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come."

Rebirth begins with the Compromise of 1877, which initiated ironic reversals of African-American freedom, and ends with Woodrow Wilson's failed and foolish effort to engineer a global peace. Lears calls this half century "the age of regeneration," when white men of both the North and the South created a redemptive myth of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, which robbed emancipation of its promise and exalted an ethic of hyperactive manliness that became a parody of republican valor. Lears sees past the bluster of leaders like Theodore Roosevelt—"the poster boy for white-male renewal"—and finds nihilism and ennui. He depicts the late nineteenth century as a series of crises, metaphysical as well as political, rooted in the memory of the war's savagery, which mooted every inherited moral code. The uncertainty inherent in turn-of-the-century scientific and philosophical discoveries dashed the very idea of a fixed moral code. Many Americans felt adrift.

The book's argument finds its center in Protestant spirituality, with its stress on conversion: The "evangelical idiom of corruption and regeneration," Lears writes, was "adaptable to an endless variety of circumstances." Neurasthenic women sought regeneration in what they called "real life." Young men drifting into the professional class suspected themselves of softness—until they discovered college football, weight lifting, and bodybuilding. (These seem harmless enough, but Lears thinks they belong to the same ethic of manly valor that wiped out the last of the Plains Indians in 1890.) The magic of money "evoked dreams of sudden self-transformation" both because of and in spite of the late nineteenth century's long agricultural depression. Everyone from Henry Adams to Harry Houdini felt fascinated by force and magic, power and escape. A minor cast of important Americans, including William Jennings Bryan, Jane Addams, and William James, developed a humane form of heroic rebirth. Some Progressives and Prohibitionists pursued a discourse of "social regeneration" by linking state action with personal salvation, clearing the path for the modern welfare state.

Lears ends as he began, yoking his theme to organized violence. The Great War, he argues, was not a political contingency but the obvious and natural climax of the "millennial nationalism" that had already sent American ships, guns, and men to Cuba, Mexico, and the Philippines. By 1900, this regenerative militarism chased "the dream of a messianic destiny for America, a nation bound to play a redemptive role in the sacred drama of world history." Yet the meaningless slaughter in Europe during World War I killed off what remained of the old faith in progress and left the United States with a foreign policy that could not tell the difference between real interests and slights to national honor.

"All history is the history of longing," Lears writes in the book's opening sentence. Whether he is skewering the "manic-depressive psychology of the business class" or attributing middle-class panic over masturbation to "a broader psychology of scarcity," he treats culture as collective



President Obama is reading NETHERLAND and you should too!

Intelligence without stuffiness, opinion without compromise. Like a good dinner party, Bookforum

is spirited
and satisfying.

—Jhumpa Lahiri

Subscribe
to Bookforum
and get
5 issues
for \$16

psychology. Lears offers a diagnosis of American nervousness, tracing the origins of what Christopher Lasch termed "the minimal self," the soul beleaguered by crisis, surviving what William Appleman Williams called "empire as a way of life."

Lears, full of high purpose, is not a slave to method. He collapses distinctions between public and private, conscious and unconscious, and high, low, and middlebrow culture into a singular, undifferentiated mass of evidence. Everywhere he looks, he sees the signs and symbols of rebirth, which remains a trope rather than a principle of historical selection. *Rebirth*, *renewal*, *revival*, *regeneration*, and *revitalization* are used interchangeably, imprecisely.

The book's politics are clear enough. Lears stands with blacks, women, farmers, and artists against the "ruling class," the "elite," and "middle and upper-class Americans of all regions." It is heartening to read a history professor who has not forgotten how to be outraged. And it is always good to see that old bully, Theodore Roosevelt, kicked in the balls.

John Summers is the author of Every Fury on Earth (Davies Group, 2008)

[ADD A COMMENT](#) [SHARE THIS](#) [PERMALINK](#)

