

A People's History of Science

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Clifford, D. Conner. 2005. *A People's History of Science: Miners, Midwives, and "Low Mechanick"s*. New York: Nationn Books. ISBN 1-56025-748-2. xiv+554 pp.

The 'Science Wars' in Anglo-Saxon Academia stemmed from the notion that historians of science had taken as one of their main aims the critique and destruction of the privileged character of scientific knowledge. By portraying scientists as interested players who themselves use a wide variety of human means to make their theories and practices dominant, and to give themselves prestige and power, many writers of the past few decades have elicited outraged responses from certain members of the scientific community, who quite naturally saw such studies as a possibly threatening trend. However, the giant size and economic importance of contemporary science protects it effectively from being harmed by the pesky gnat of critical history and broader science studies, and newly-trained scientists in the main digest a version of the 'scientific method' that is a kind of high school version of logical positivism. Nonetheless, this critical turn has produced some wonderful scholarship, even if the revisionist images of science it has articulated remain largely invisible to scientists themselves. The question of how to communicate key features of this scholarship to a broad audience naturally poses itself to authors writing synthetic works on the history of science, technology, and medicine.

Clifford Conner's approach in this *People's* history is to follow in the footsteps of Howard Zinn, author of *The People's History of the United States*. Zinn, a good old-fashioned leftist who visited Hanoi with Daniel Berrigan and played a role in the Pentagon Papers affair, took history from below as his fundamental method, and the subtitle of Conner's work reveals his own debt to this approach. The result has a kind of nostalgic interest. Much of the scholarship Conner uses to create his people's history is itself profoundly indebted to Marxist ideas, albeit indirectly. Conner remains solidly embedded in the older paradigm, as

his credit to the originators of his approach —Boris Hessen and Edgar Zilsel— shows. His argument, that science rests on a base of craft and practical knowledge, stretching into prehistory and with the artisan as the emblematic proto-scientist, certainly has much merit in particular cases, and his presentation rests on the basis of much decent scholarship. The book is accessibly written at an early undergraduate level, well-illustrated, and equipped with a good bibliography and index.

Perhaps unfortunately, the material treated is selected specifically to highlight the basic thesis that science needs to be transformed to serve the interests of the people, and that “modern science will continue to be blindly destructive as long as its operations are determined by the anarchism of market economic forces” [p. 499]. The chapter titles reveal the general direction of the discussion: ‘What ‘Greek Miracle’?’, and ‘Who Won the Scientific Revolution?’ for example. The book resonates with dark statements about various aspects of science, and the conclusion to be drawn is spelled out:

The sexual imagery of penetrating, torturing, and enslaving Mother Nature should not be dismissed as harmless figures of speech unrelated to the way seventeenth-century gentleman scientists perceived the world. The subordination of women was an essential component of their worldview [...] [p. 364].

Another:

[Prince Henry the Navigator]’s purpose, though refracted through the crusader’s ideology of holy war against the Muslim world, was colonial conquest and imperial glory [...]. Henry did not create the important scientific knowledge for which he is often praised; he bought it. And even that gives him too much credit [...]. Some of it he stole, and in the most brutal manner [p. 192].

Of course there is a great deal of truth in these and other passages, and there is a lot of merit in drawing the attention of readers who are unaware of this and similar matters to the results of recent scholarship. It is particularly refreshing to see Martin Bernal’s discussions of the racist nature of nineteenth-century classical scholarship recounted, controversial as they are. But it is unfortunate that the controversial nature of more of the research presented is not highlighted, since it seems to me that this weakens the impact of the book for the thoughtful reader.

This reviewer has a great deal of sympathy for an account that draws attention to the accomplishments of not-so-famous or unidentifiable ‘scientists’ of the past. And the depiction of the interests and values of the players along with their learned achievements is valuable, and certainly deserves to reach a broad audience. The unrelenting political tone of the work, while it may inspire some leaders, will in my

view largely preach to the converted. Nonetheless, I think Conner's book could be useful as an alternative reading in a history of science survey course. Ultimately, though, I think an account that used as a basis more recent frameworks for the analysis of society—more Wallerstein, less Marx, for example— would prove more useful for the twenty-first century reader.