



**An Eye-Opening View from the
'Dark Side'**
a review by Dick Burkhart of
**A Renegade History
of the United States**
By Thaddeus Russell (2010)

This populist book by an eminent historian, full of pointed quotes, takes on the moralizing establishment, past and present, especially in regard to African Americans. After all, one way or another, blacks were always at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the subject of this book. Take, slavery – the ultimate indignity, the very image of brutality. Or was it?

In fact, I came away admiring not just the resilience, but the smartness, of many slaves. They knew they were valuable property and took full advantage of that fact to work at their leisure, to ward off the worst abuses, even to retaliate against overseers who got out of line. Not exactly the one-dimensional view I got from the recent movie about Harriet Tubman. Instead, interviews in the 1930s with elderly former slaves revealed how life got harder for them after slavery ended in 1865. Meanwhile free white settlers were working their butts off on small subsistence farms, amazing European observers.

Even more astounding, many of the freedoms we enjoy today were pioneered by disreputable working people during the Revolutionary War. In the big cities of that era, taverns proliferated, along with heavy drinking, dancing, sex, interracial and gay relationships, and more. This scandalized the Founding Fathers, who feared such lazy, libertine people would be incapable of self-governance. So they promoted a renewed hard-working Puritanism throughout the 19th century, exemplified by Ben Franklin's aphorisms.

Then there were the immigrant groups who arrived as despised, lazy, drunkards, of inferior intellect – first the Irish, then Jews, then Italians. All at first comingled with blacks at the bottom, generating much of today's heritage of popular music and dance, starting with the black-face Irish minstrels of the late 19th century. Then it was a Jews and blacks alliance that created ragtime and blues. Then southern Italians, who were viewed as almost as black as Africans, helped create jazz. But all these groups were called derogatory names until they decided to assimilate. What I found very sad was that this meant turning against, not just their roots in free-wheeling music and dance, but also against their black brethren.

The latter part of the book takes on the consumer revolution and the movements for civil rights, gay liberation, and feminism. Here it sometimes becomes a little murkier as to who is renegade and who is establishment. Martin Luther King, for example, is portrayed as an establishment figure in the African-American community of the South, though nationally he's always been regarded as the premier leader of the renegade blacks of that era. Instead working class blacks are documented as fed up and prone to violence, with King succeeding precisely because he was the voice of moderation ("Letter from Birmingham Jail"), like a "Good Cop / Bad /Cop" scenario. Likewise, union bosses come off as establishment when renegade workers walk out on wildcat strikes.

"Rednecks" portrayed themselves as renegades against condescending elites but fiercely defended the traditional establishment values of "nation, family, and work". And country music went from renegade to patriotic. Hippies also portrayed themselves as renegades but retreated to rural communes, whose survival depended on the traditional establishment value of hard physical work a traditional sexual division of labor.

By the end of the book I got the feeling that it would be possible write several, quite different and illuminating renegade histories of the US, with many people switching roles within their own lifetimes.