

The concluding chapter on the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., as a national holiday is a legitimate topic for this book, but Wiggins refrains from speculating on what impact, if any, the King holiday might have on emancipation celebrations in the future. Supporters of the holiday have interpreted it as a black national holiday, a day to commemorate the life of King, or a day for the nation to reflect on goals of equality, freedom, and justice—goals that King embodied in his life and work.

PETER C. MURRAY, until recently a faculty member at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, now teaches history at Methodist College, Fayetteville, North Carolina. His research areas include Afro-American religion, and he has published articles on the desegregation of the United Methodist church.

Selvages & Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture. By Michael Kammen. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987. Pp. xv, 336. Illustrations, notes, figures, index. \$24.95.)

Word has it that positivism (defined as the discovery of universal laws) is in retreat in the social sciences. Indeed in the writing of history, explains Michael Kammen in the first and most impressive essay in his new collection, positivism never served as more than an auxiliary methodology, which means, of course, that few historians ever had much confidence in the capacity of history, or any of the social sciences for that matter, to discover a general pattern to human behavior. This tendency of historians to limit the claims for their discipline pleases Kammen. He is as wary of the pretensions of Marxists and cliometricians as he is of any over-reaching effort to close the process of historical discovery. In light of this conviction he considers a number of broad issues. He asks first, in what sense is history a way of learning and knowing and then what are the uses of history?

It must be said that the answers are not ultimately consoling. We can apparently know a great deal. "History is a powerful, often reliable, necessary, and distinctive way of knowing" (p. 61). The caveat here ("often reliable") is not, it seems, epistemological. It stems rather from the difficulties inherent in any empirical discipline that must function under the impediments of incomplete information and imperfect human application. In a more general sense, however, Kammen offers only "candid skepticism" (p. 62) that gives him a certain satisfaction in knowing but no assurance. We can know nothing "definitively." The process is what matters most not what the process may yield. Kammen may wish to eschew epistemology but ultimately he cannot avoid it. He seems to be arguing that if positivism in the form of universal historical laws is not defensible then the alternative is skepticism in which all conclusions are provisional. A stark choice indeed, which makes one wonder why we should choose one side of the theoretical di-

lemma over the other. Should we not consider even the skepticism itself provisional? And what determines Kammen's choice of one historical conclusion over another if they are all equally provisional?

Despite its provisionality, history does have its uses: it provides humanity with self-knowledge, hence with stronger self-identity; it supplies moral knowledge for the making of informed value judgments; and it establishes relationships among past, present, and future. Further, history should make us more cognizant of the similarities and differences among human beings, call attention to the nonrational and irrational aspects of human behavior, and illuminate the problems of causation and social change. In a practical world it will make us more critical when the powerful manipulate the past for partisan purposes. Finally the study of history should make humankind more discriminating in weighing the significance of relationships and events. The point is not to quarrel with any of these uses of history. Even if one might quibble with one or the other of them or add others that seem more compelling, it remains clear that, whatever internal justification might be found for history, as an intellectual discipline it is partly instrumental. Of course it does not defy logic to be both a skeptic and an instrumentalist, though the two positions do tend to undermine each other. History justified by its utility derives scant support from a body of knowledge that is relentlessly "uncertain, contingent, inconclusive" (p. 42), and provisional.

So much for theory. Fortunately Kammen has no trouble in translating metahistory into a collection of informative and engaging essays. He is, apparently, a prodigious reader; hence, his essays provide a brisk and compelling tour through the historiography of the last generation with side trips into past epochs and other disciplines. He is touching and humane in his description of the misgivings, intellectual and psychic, that have affected more than one prominent historian. He sweeps through the fashions in recent history writing, passing judgments both moderate and convincing. The danger, he notes, is that methodology, even a useful one, should displace history. Two historians of a previous age, one neglected somewhat more than the other, Moses Coit Tyler and Johann Hui-zinga, benefit from fresh evaluations. In these two essays and throughout the volume, Kammen makes use of the papers of noted historians and scholars. The portraits as a consequence go much beyond the usual historiographical treatment. In two other pieces, one on the idea of the life cycle and the other on the Hudson valley, he demonstrates the importance of iconographic evidence for understanding the past. Kammen has a lively and ranging mind, and even his occasional writing never fails to instruct even while it entertains.

BERNARD W. SHEEHAN is professor of history, Indiana University, Bloomington. His writings include *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (1973). He has written widely on the subjects of American Indian-white relations and the image of the Indian.