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**Review of Contosta, D.R. (2017) America's needless wars: cautionary tales of US involvement in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq**

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Using Maoist terminology, Garvin favoured the ‘radical, revolutionary line of resistance’ in the black freedom struggle over a ‘gradualist approach, tactical accommodations, and compromises with the structure of power’ (p. 174).

These black travellers shared a common conviction that ‘China’s socialist experiment and its brand of Third World Marxism... offered them one, though not the only, utopic model of economic democracy, mass political participation, and antiracial global modernity’ (p. 6). In addition, Frazier argues, their construction of China was also based upon gendered discourses. They either praised China’s progress toward gender equality under Communism, or used gender-specific constructions to promote their international struggle against white supremacy. By imagining China as an alternative model, these black travellers ‘challenged the primacy of liberal democracy and free-trade capitalism as dominant ideology and model of modernity and sociopolitical economic development around which to organize U.S. life and the postwar international order’ (p. 5). Meanwhile, Frazier argues that they were aware of the shortcomings and inconstancies in China’s claim of racial equality, but they believed such problems did not outweigh the positive shifts China was engendering in the global struggle against white imperialism. However, as China improved relations with the USA in the 1970s, the Chinese model became less and less attractive as it ‘betrayed’ the global anti-racial struggle by making a deal with the USA.

While Frazier’s book is based on solid and meticulous research, it does not offer enough analysis of the impact of those radical constructions of China on the actual Civil Rights Movement, and the analysis of the Chinese government’s discursive construction of race is sometimes oversimplified. However, *The East is Black* is overall an insightful book for undergraduate and graduate courses.

### **Mao Lin**

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David R. Contosta, *America’s Needless Wars: Cautionary Tales of US Involvement in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq*, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 2017; 189 pp.; US\$24.00 hbk; ISBN 9781633882898

David R. Contosta has written an account of ‘America’s needless wars’ aimed at a popular audience. By exploring US military misadventures in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq, he hopes to promote reflection on the similarities between these conflicts so that the pattern which led to them might be avoided in the future. A short introduction and conclusion bracket a book which is mostly made up of narratives of the three wars interspersed with brief reflections on the parallels between them.

Contosta begins the book by remembering his childhood during the Cold War, when he was raised to believe ‘God was on America’s side’ (p. 9). Continued education in US history rendered this view untenable, so instead he turned to a form of ‘American exceptionalism’: ‘I really wanted my country to represent “a new order of thing”’. Still, continued study and teaching of US history left

him a 'disappointed idealist', seeing how his country fell short of his ideals (p. 12). One way in which this was clearly the case was these three 'needless wars', which were fought when 'true national security was not at stake' (p. 12). Despite the low stakes, the moral and actual costs were high: millions killed and maimed, billions of dollars spent, and 'national well-being undermined' (p. 167).

Who to blame? Contosta focuses on:

the decision makers, namely presidents and their political allies, [who] acted out of ignorance, arrogance, and unreasoning fears, combined with partisan gamemanship and the failure of media to inform the public accurately about the drive to war and its possible consequences. (p. 14)

The media was either cowed or persuaded into supporting war because 'failure to fall in line with calls for war might well be bad for business' (p. 15).

The narratives of the three wars that Contosta provides are conventional and will likely contain no surprises for the specialist. Still, it would be uncharitable and inappropriate to criticize the book for the necessary brevity and simplification of its case studies, given its intended audience is clearly not scholarly. Rather, the book should be evaluated as an educational tool aimed at the lay reader and at students of American history in the early years of their labours. Viewed in this way, its narrative chapters are pleasant to read and educationally useful. The focus is more on the build-up to these three wars than it is on the execution of the wars themselves, and in the case of Iraq, coverage of the latter topic seems exceedingly brief. The narrative form also leads to some loss of analytical and comparative depth.

More seriously, some important questions are raised without being given their due answers. Contosta frequently remarks on the immoral nature of these wars and calls them 'stains on the fabric of American life' (p. 17). But when it comes to assessing the morality of the decision makers who launched them, he demurs that they did not have 'evil intentions' (a point on which I agree), and adds in the same sentence that US leaders did not wish 'to see thousands of people killed and maimed' (p. 17). Yet, as he reminds us elsewhere, the real death toll in these wars was millions, not thousands, and we cannot help but suspect that this deceptive reduction in order of magnitude was necessary to render the sentence writable. It is precisely the tragedy of the USA's wars that millions die despite the fact that the conflicts are begun with what seem the most idealistic of intentions – such as liberating Cuba from Spanish oppression, saving Vietnam from Communism, and spreading democracy in the Middle East. Yet moral blame for millions of deaths in wars of choice clearly must lie *somewhere*.

Although not 'evil', the author says that presidents launched these wars 'in the best interests of their parties or re-election prospects – not the best interests of the American people' (p. 92). But this may let 'the people' off too lightly, and minimizes the broader social, cultural and political dynamics which enable these recurrent wars. It is precisely the system of parties and elections which is supposed to ensure foreign policy is indeed run in the best interests of the American people.

As Contosta notes, the public itself was frequently gripped with war fever in the cases he investigates; why else would presidents fear the electoral consequences of shrinking from war? This blaming of political and policy elites and exoneration of 'the people' strikes a familiar note in our current age of populism, but perhaps it is too kind to 'the people'. A fuller exploration of the relationship between society, culture and war in the United States would get to the heart of the question this book poses but does not answer: why does America not learn from its 'needless wars', and why does it keep starting new ones? The answer would be hard to hear, but it would be instructive for this book's readers. It might even produce yet more 'disappointed idealists'.

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James Hinton, *Seven Lives from Mass Observation: Britain in the Late Twentieth Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016; vii + 207 pp.; £25.00 hbk; ISBN 9780198787136

In *Seven Lives from Mass Observation* James Hinton returns to the theme of his last book, *The Mass Observers*, published in 2013, which explored the Mass Observation project in its early years. This new book focuses on seven people who corresponded with the version of the Mass Observation project revived by David Pocock in 1981 and then run by Dorothy Sheridan from 1990. Across the book, seven biographies are used to interrogate major themes from the last three decades of the twentieth century. Affluence, social conflict, de-industrialization, politics and class all make an appearance, while gender, sexuality and emotion take centre stage as the brightest and most dramatic sites of change in the social and cultural lives of these mass responders.

The opening chapter outlines the value of these testimonies, placing them in the context of the social upheavals of Britain's twentieth century. Having all been born between 1921 and 1934, the seven participants Hinton focuses on (four women and three men) were, like most participants in the post-1981 project, over 50 by the time they began their correspondence. Hinton argues that age gave them the time and perspective to produce fuller, richer and more considered contributions than their younger counterparts. Their lives also spanned the years of the inter-war depression, war, reconstruction, affluence, cultural 'revolution' and finally the advent of neo-liberalism. Hinton argues convincingly that these phenomena are often understood through youth, but that the old also make history.

Chosen to illustrate how they made that history are a limited sample: the wife of a small businessman, a schoolteacher, a social worker, the wife of an RAF pilot, a mechanic (later a manager), a lorry driver and a banker, all apparently heterosexual, all white, all originating from South England and all but two remaining there. The bulk of the research is drawn directly from responses to Mass Observation directives with occasional assistance from additional material, either submitted to the archives at Sussex or sought out by the author. From these materials, Hinton crafts biographies spanning the participants' lives, including reflections