

tact” as the defining characteristic of the American frontier does not lead Nobles to neglect the old story of “how the West was won.” That saga is also told, from the opening gambits of colonial times through the tragic endgame on the windswept Great Plains. By the time the frontier was consolidated into the American nation-state, every group—the Sioux, the Dakota, the French, the Spanish, the British, the Mexicans—had lost something. As indicated in its double-sided subtitle, this book would acknowledge the fact of Euro-American triumph without falling into the trap of Euro-American triumphalism.

The only lapses in the book are Nobles’s occasional preaching about Euro-American sins—as if the grim events, fairly related, did not speak for themselves—and his occasional genuflections before contemporary pieties. One example: after describing the tendency of Indian men to treat their women as beasts of burden, he adds, a bit nervously, that “after all, Europeans were themselves hardly in the vanguard of gender equality.” (If they were not, then one wonders who was?) Fortunately, such lapses—the stigmata of our era’s anxiously revisionist historiography—are rare. Not only does Nobles synthesize the fruits of an enormous body of scholarship, he writes graceful, even elegant prose that occasionally sparkles with wit, as when he refers to the relationship between the United States and the post-revolutionary Lone Star Republic as a state of “suspended annexation.”

—Wilfred M. McClay

**THE DENG XIAOPING ERA:
*An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese
Socialism, 1978–1994.***

By Maurice Meisner. Hill & Wang.
544 pp. \$30

The current faith that market economies inevitably foster democracy comes in for hard scrutiny in this study of China under Deng Xiaoping. Meisner, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, grants that China has made spectacular economic gains since Deng came to power in 1978. But the social effects of this particular “great leap” have been calamitous.

Meisner argues that Deng’s dismantling of the centrally controlled economy has

failed to create a bourgeois class that is independent of the state and therefore potentially capable of building a new civic culture. Instead, economic liberalization has benefited chiefly “officials or the relatives and friends of officials.” Reformed China, he writes, is not a “socialist market economy” but “bureaucratic capitalism.” While he does not dispute the dramatically improved standard of living of vast numbers of ordinary Chinese, Meisner also notes mushrooming inequalities and injustices: millions of workers deprived of their “iron rice bowls” (job security), hundreds of millions of uprooted peasants converging on cities in search of work, frightful levels of workplace regimentation and exploitation, and rampant corruption.

Meisner’s hope, dashed by Mao and Deng alike, was that China would become a socialist democracy stripped of any Leninist overlay, and this preference frequently colors his analysis. For instance, when he claims that the new Chinese “capitalist class” is “perhaps unique in world history” because it is not “firmly rooted in private property,” the reader is left to wonder whether such a class can truly be called capitalist. Meisner’s description of the Democracy Movement of 1989 is vivid and accurate. But when he quotes the demonstrators calling themselves *shimin*, or “city people,” he assumes that most belonged to the urban working class. Many demonstrators, though, were government employees, and some were members of the Communist Party. *Shimin* was an all-embracing term, “we” the people against “them” the government.

Meisner rightly admires the political awakening and moral courage of the ordinary citizens of Beijing. He notes that, to many, “democracy” meant less a particular form of government than freedom from the bureaucratic tentacles of the state. (“Democracy,” one participant told me at the time, “simply means fair.”) Can China ever build the institutions and political culture capable of supporting democracy? Meisner makes no predictions. But this excellent book makes the sobering case that if democracy ever does arise, it will not be from China’s new class of bureaucratic capitalists but from the ranks of the discontented and disenfranchised.

—Anne F. Thurston