

American Historical Association

AHA Presidential Addresses

In Pursuit of an American History

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President of the American Historical Association, 1986

Annual address of the president of the American Historical Association, delivered at Chicago, Illinois, December 28, 1986. From the American Historical Review, Vol. 92, No. 1. (Feb., 1987), pp. 1-12.

Over the last twenty years, American history has splintered. Indeed, the fragmenting has become so obvious that it is a commonplace in discussions of the state of the American field.¹ The principal source of that disarray has been an explosion of historical information, particularly in social history. The seminal work on the history of slavery in the 1960s stimulated historians to take the same imaginative and probing approaches to the history of cities, blacks, Chicanos, Indians, immigrants, families, and women, and even to transform the history of the economy and politics. Groups and subjects ignored in traditional history suddenly became visible, clamoring for inclusion in a historical framework that once had no place for them. On one level, this informational explosion is what we expect in history, a subject well recognized for changing its content as the society it serves asks new questions and makes new demands. That is the good side of the splintering. On the less appealing side, we have no clear way of determining how this new knowledge will be integrated into what we call the history of the United States. Simply to tack the new information onto the old story disrupts the organizing framework and renders the new version disjointed and incoherent.

Perhaps the most successful and enduring of the framing interpretations for the United States was that created by the "Progressive" historians: Carl L. Becker, Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles A. Beard, and the literary historian Vernon Louis Parrington. The heart of their story was the conflict between democracy and privilege, the poor versus the rich, the farmers against the monopolists, the workers against the corporations, and, at times, the Free-Soilers against the slaveholders. That pattern of interpretation came under attack in the 1950s and has been falling into disuse ever since. Its successor, which has been called the "consensus" school of interpretation, had hardly been put into place before it was shot down by a profusion of new research emphasizing the divisions and conflicts in the American past and by actual social and political conflict in the American present of the 1960s and 1970s.

Thanks to the sophistication of the questions we now ask about the American past and the greater care we now take in arriving at answers, we know more today that is significant about the history of the United States than ever before. But the general history we purvey to our students and to the public lacks central themes or a framework. The history of the United States at the present time does not seek to answer any significant questions, such as those the Progressive historians posed when they, perhaps naively but certainly interestingly, asked how "the people" had been treated, or been frustrated, or had triumphed over the special interests. History today, to be sure, no longer seems simple to us; that is a measure of our achievement. But history serves a more vital social purpose than simply documenting the complexities of human behavior, although it certainly ought to do that. If we look to the purposes of history, I think we may discover a framework that not only encompasses the new information but also more effectively achieves those social ends that history alone can fulfill. I am recommending that we begin to shape our

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presentation of American history around the question, "What does it mean to be an American, that is, a citizen of the United States?" The word "mean" in this context, I hasten to add, should not imply what ought to be or who is a "proper" or "true" American. Rather, I use it in an effort to define us historically. The implicit, but operative, assumption is that Americans differ in some important ways from people of other nations.

The justification for following this line of interpretation rests on two purposes of history. These are not the only uses or purposes, and by advancing them I betray my personal biases. But biases are surely excusable in a profession that no longer expects objectivity. First, history is socially useful. To ask "Who are Americans?" is to raise a question of central importance to citizen and society alike. It is especially relevant to a nation as extensive, as diverse, as recent, and as susceptible to change as ours is. Second, our identity, whether national or individual, comes primarily from history, from the past. The present, after all, is merely a nation's skin, its body is the past.

Although most of you are probably not historians of the United States, virtually all of you are Americans, a fact that, I feel, justifies my pressing this argument on you. As you will recognize as I proceed, what I recommend here as an approach to the organizing of American history can easily be applied to the history of other countries. In any event, my suggestion is not as parochial as it may sound at first.

If we take these two purposes of history as given, where do we go from there in seeking to describe what an American is? One way is to identify the nature of America today and then to trace through the past the sources of its present identity. I once took that route myself in trying to define how Americans came to be the way they are. The practice has been condemned as Whig history, but it does have the advantage of following the sound historical principle of process or continuity. It does little, however, to enlighten us as to what distinguishes us from other peoples. This weakness proved to be nearly lethal to many of the works of American studies that were influential in the 1950s. These studies assumed that, by closely examining some aspect of the American past, historians could identify the traits and values that characterized Americans. Thus articles and books on the American West, the American novel, American pastoralism, and the American cult of violence tumbled from the presses. If the point or outlook that scholars took to be American could be documented from American sources, then the identity of Americans had supposedly been delineated. But, by failing to look beyond the United States, these studies could not distinguish between those traits or developments that were peculiar to Americans and those that other peoples may have experienced.

When one advocates, as I do here, that the United States be compared historically with other societies, the specter of American exceptionalism inevitably floats before us. During much of our history, the idea that America was somehow outside European patterns of development was almost a truism, beginning with Crèvecoeur's famous question, "Who is this new man, this American?" and running through Crèvecoeur's "Amerika, du hast es besser" to Tocqueville's conclusion that Europe should look to America for a picture of its own future.² More recently, starting with Marxists in the early twentieth century, writers have increasingly abandoned the idea that America was an exception to European patterns of development, partly because exceptionalism called into question, at least for Marxists, the idea that there were universal laws of historical development, and partly because it encouraged American chauvinism. Marxists, to be sure, have not been alone in decrying American exceptionalism, especially during the Great Depression, when it seemed obvious that the United States was hardly an exception among the company of industrial nations of European heritage. As one recent critic of American exceptionalism remembered, such an interpretation of American history "made little sense" to him as a junior in college in the 1940s, since the depression's devastation of his family situation and the outbreak of war effectively belied the image of America as the "land of peace and economic plenty."³ The eclipse of exceptionalism was nowhere more clearly measured than in the assault in the scholarly literature during the 1940s on Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, which, of course, was an application of exceptionalism.

After World War II and during the cold war years, the idea of American uniqueness was reborn in the form of the concept of "national character," also of ancient vintage. During the 1930s and early 1940s, the assumption that it was legitimate to refer to the character of a whole people had come in for sharp criticism, principally because of the insistence by the German Nazis of the superiority of the so-called Aryan peoples and of Germans in particular. Although the idea of national character had been widely and freely, if loosely, used through a substantial part of the nineteenth century, it began to smack of extreme nationalism, racism, and German Nazism. The work that brought about a reversal in attitude toward the concept was David M. Potter's *People of Plenty*, published in 1954.

Early in his book, Potter spelled out why the idea of national character arose. "The history of American events would be devoid of intellectual challenge if it were merely a literal recording of any events that chanced to occur within American territorial limits. The purpose of history," he emphasized, "is not simply to show that events which might have happened to anyone did happen to

someone, but rather to explain why a special sequence of events befell a particular aggregation of people." He went on to say that, to accomplish this goal, the historian must find "what is distinctive in the circumstances, the condition, and the experience of the aggregation in question. But unique circumstances, conditions, and experiences are apt to produce unique traits and attitudes among the people as a whole. To recognize such collective traits and attitudes," he concluded, "is to embrace the concept of national character."⁴

Potter was defending the concept of national character, not exceptionalism. and with good reason. To ask what differentiates one people from another does not mean one has to insist on deviation from a norm, which is clearly implied in the term exceptionalism. In fact, a much sounder approach admits that each nation is unique or exceptional, that there is no general law of historical development, as Marxists implied when they coined "exceptionalism." Recently, for example, German historians have also been debating their version of exceptionalism: the concept of a German *sonderweg*, or "separate way." Like Turner's version of exceptionalism, the German *sonderweg* was once a positive idea, a way of asserting German national superiority. After 1945, the term took on a much less flattering meaning.⁵ In itself, the German *sonderweg* reminds us that, in various ways, the history of each nation is unique, which is but another way of recognizing the concept of national character.

Some historians spurn nationally organized history because it is outdated, indeed, moribund, in the face of the pervasive and overpowering forces of technology, urbanization, and industrialization that they perceive as homogenizing the societies of our planet. "The real trend of American history," wrote Laurence Veysey, ". . . is toward a loss of whatever distinctiveness the society once possessed. . . . For over a hundred years, and in some respects for much longer, the merger of America into a common pattern of modern life has been the great underlying tendency."⁶ On a narrowly practical level, this rejection of national differences seems premature, in view of the difficulties even the advanced industrial nation-states of Europe are experiencing in trying to create a truly common market, not to mention a common parliament. Industrialism may once have been thought to make internationalism inevitable, but, as Ernest Gellner has pointed out, the spread of industrial culture has probably done more to entrench nationalism than any other single force.⁷ On a more theoretical level, historians in particular ought to be suspicious of any notion that implicitly denies the role of the past in shaping the present, as Vesey's remarks seem to do. The past as a mold of the present should not be written off just because the forces of modernity seem pervasive. Experience warns us that the past penetrates the present whether we like it or not. No nation escapes its past even when it deliberately seeks to transcend it, as in the ideological revolutions in Russia in 1917 and China in 1948. Nor does a nation necessarily lose its past when foreign conquerors attempt to obliterate it, as the history of Poland reminds us. The ways in which a people adapt to the forces of modern technology or organization are, surely, the product of their history.

But, some of you will undoubtedly object, why should we study how national societies differ from one another? Does not such a procedure overemphasize nationalism and other forces that divide rather than unite peoples? Professional students of nationalism themselves have raised these objections. "I make no secret of my belief," wrote Boyd C. Shafer some years ago, "that nationalism, especially when carried to extremes, leads to war and destruction." Shafer looked forward to the day when it would be shown "that men in every nation are basically more like men in other nations than they are different" and that their "*human* likenesses are possibly much more significant than their *national* differences." It is worth recognizing, nonetheless, as Marc Bloch emphasized half a century ago, that the identification of differences is a primary reason for historical comparison. Through this process, we learn what national events or developments require explanation and how we might explain them.⁹ More important, nationalism, though rightfully charged with many sins, is a deep-seated institution of our time, shaping and vivifying the lives of people throughout the world.¹⁰ We can write history that implicitly denies or ignores the nation-state, but it would be a history that flew in the face of what people who live in a nation-state require and demand. As Potter wrote, the "study of the American people holds little intellectual attraction if the American people are merely an undifferentiated mass of humans fortuitously located in America."¹¹ We want to know what there is about them that makes them Americans. If we historians fail to provide a nationally defined history, others less critical and less informed will take over the job for us.

A further objection needs to be addressed. Does not the approach I am suggesting ignore conflicts within American society? Was it not this very neglect of internal differences that delivered the *coup de grâce* to the "consensus interpretation of American history in the 1960s? And has not that lack of recognition of conflict been a legitimate objection to the concept of national character? Conflict or diversity need not be ignored in the approach I am suggesting. On the contrary, any divisions within the nation, by invoking comparison with other countries, would be given a historical measure instead of a subjective one. For example, by comparing cross-nationally the activities of labor unions and radical groups or the extent and character of urban riots over a period of time, we would avoid the ahistorical subjectivity inherent in making judgments about the degree of class consciousness in this country, judgments that are implicitly comparative but which are arrived at

from within the experience of the United States. Indeed, studies of social mobility in the United States, on which much scholarly energy has been expended, have suffered from a lack of just this kind of cross-national comparison. Only comparison, after all, can answer the question that prompted the investigations in the first place, namely, was America the land of opportunity that the national myth proclaimed?¹²

It is often said that an emphasis on differences between one national experience and another, such as I am proposing, encourages national hubris. A danger does lurk here but not an inescapable one. We need to recall that the comparative method is used just as often by critics of a given society as it is by those who would extol it. The comparative study of race relations has certainly not resulted in a new sense of pride for Americans. If both critics and champions of a nation use comparison, there is a very good chance the story that emerges will indeed have the critical bite indispensable to any sound national history.

I suggest, then, that we put the history of the United States quite self-consciously, and as consistently as the overall historical account permits, into comparative perspective. This method requires that we raise our eyes from the narrow American scene and ask if what happened here may have differed from what happened elsewhere, and, if so, why? Seeking differences will not overturn the traditional story, for the continuity between past and present. how the past became the present. will remain as pertinent as ever. But comparison will emphasize aspects of our past that may have gone unnoticed before, just as it will call for explanations where none was thought necessary before. The purpose, I emphasize, is not to praise us but to understand who we are. By asking what is American about us, we will also begin to construct a framework that could provide the integrating pattern or synthesis that, at the moment, seems to elude us. In effect, we will be reversing the process that Turner followed when he *assumed* the differences between American and European history and then called on the frontier to account for them. I am suggesting instead that we ascertain what is distinctive about the United States in the surest way we can: by finding out how we have differed from others.

How should the comparison be carried out? With what countries, for example, should the United States be compared? The comparison should be neither random nor global. Comparisons have traditionally been with Europe, more specifically, Western Europe, for most American immigrants came from that region, and almost from the beginning. Americans have sought, in one way or another, to differentiate themselves from Western Europeans. Comparisons would not necessarily be with all of Western Europe but only with those nations that seem to have shared with us the same historical developments. The purpose of comparison would be to see aspects of our history that differ where we might have expected similarity. For example, the character of American politicians, the nature of our political parties and constitutional practices, the extent of suffrage and popular participation, might be compared with those of England, from which our own political and constitutional practices largely derive. Similarly, our processes of economic growth might be compared with those of Germany, a nation that, like the United States, came late to industrialization.

Some differences in economic development are already known and are suggestive: the absence in Europe of an antitrust movement comparable to that in the United States and the absence in the United States of a socialist movement comparable in strength and influence to those in most Western European nations. This second difference can be further explored by contrasting the fragility and narrow base of the American labor movement over the past century with the experience of organized labor in most industrial states of Western Europe. State-owned economic enterprises are common in Western European economies while almost absent in the United States, another difference in economic life that seems worthy of detailed comparative study.¹³ Most significant, the possibility exists that, behind these differences (once they are examined together and in detail), we may identify national values that can be legitimately described as "peculiarly American."

European societies are obvious comparisons for this purpose but so are the nations of the New World, for they share with us a European heritage and a novel environment in the western hemisphere. This basis of comparison with the New World has been drawn on before, notably by Latin Americanists such as Herbert Eugene Bolton and Frank Tannenbaum.¹⁴ Most recently, comparisons of slavery in the United States with that in some of the nations of Latin America have yielded valuable insights into the special character of bondage in the United States. Only a beginning has been made in exploring the differences in the reactions of Europeans in the New World to open land, or the frontier. Turner accurately singled out the frontier as a prime source of American identity but for the wrong reasons. He was right, not because the frontier explained us, as he contended, and not simply because its absence from the history of modern Europe differentiated us. He was right because the frontier experience in the United States differed from that in Canada and in Latin America. We know from comparison with Canada, for example, that the long, drawn out, and bloody conquest of native peoples that stained the history of the United States during the nineteenth century had no counterpart across our northern border. When we ask why the difference, we begin to recognize what is distinctively American about our ways of settlement, our forms of

frontier government, and our practices of federalism, a recognition that without comparison would have escaped our attention.¹⁵ That in Latin America there are no equivalents of Daniel Boone and Kit Carson and that *frontera* carries none of the meanings and connotations that cluster around "frontier" alerts us again to the different character of the American frontier and the forces that went into the making of Americans.¹⁶ The peculiarly American values that may lie beneath these and other differences can only be uncovered by looking again at the frontier but this time in comparison with the ways other societies confronted open land and native peoples.

The frontier is one situation in which comparison with New World nations would help to identify those elements that went into the making of an American nationality. Equally distinguishing is another, the presence of slavery, which set apart the United States not only from Europe but also from those Latin American nations in which slaves were as economically and demographically important as they were in the United States. By bringing Africans to the colonies, slavery left an impress on the social, economic, and cultural history of this country that, even with limited comparison, hints at underlying values and traits unique to Americans. No other society in the western hemisphere in which black people were introduced in bondage equals the record of racism of the United States. No other New World country instituted the social and legal segregation of blacks from whites that, until recently, was endemic here. Although at this point we cannot be sure, it also seems likely that no other New World country counted anything near the almost 2,000 lynchings of blacks recorded in the United States between 1882 and 1902.

Yet, at the same time, no other new world country has mounted a revolution like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. The contrast is most obvious when the sounds of that upheaval are placed beside the almost total silence on the question of racial prejudice in Brazil, where, even today, only weak and peripheral organizations speak out against the racial discrimination that the social order has long ignored and frequently denied.¹⁷

More important is the recognition that the Civil Rights revolution was not simply a modern outburst of rage against injustice. Its roots ran deep into the American past. Throughout our national history, the role of black people has been a social issue of import, even though hostility of whites toward blacks has, at the same time, been almost an American trademark. Some white Americans always stood with black Americans and denounced racial hostility as un-American. Again and again in the course of our history, the place of blacks in U.S. society has been a subject of dispute and debate. During and after the American Revolution, the question of race divided Americans. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it disrupted the Union and transformed the South and, in the second half of the twentieth century, tore apart the nation's cities and reordered its social agenda. Political leaders from Thomas Jefferson to Lyndon Johnson have had to confront it, while American prophets from Anthony Benezet in the eighteenth century to Martin Luther King, Jr., in the twentieth have used their moral eloquence to keep us from forgetting it. The salience of the issue cannot be explained by force of numbers. All through our history, no more than one American out of eight has been black and often fewer than that. The special place of blacks in the American past is further highlighted when we recognize that no comparable concern was displayed toward the struggle of women for political and social equality. Unlike blacks, women have been left, until very recently, to fight their own battle.

An additional sign of the special role of blacks in the making of America is the distinctive cast that blacks have given to American culture by insisting on being a part of it, as, for example, American Indians have not. Blacks have advanced our economy, inspired our literature, energized our reforms, shaped our music, and redirected our politics. The special place of blacks in our national culture and the accompanying ambivalence of whites toward blacks. that odd combination of appreciation and hatred. are not easy to explain, but, as Gunnar Myrdal contended over forty years ago, they still seem distinctively American.¹⁸

Deliberate historical comparison would surely throw new light on the meaning of the ethnic diversity that has long been regarded as distinctively American. It is true that England has had its massive Irish immigration and Germany its Polish, but it is the New World countries, with their heavy dependence on European immigration, that offer the most fruitful way of determining if the ethnic past of America is in fact distinctive. We already know that the range of immigrant nationalities and the total number who came to the United States distinguish us from the other nations in the western hemisphere. It is also true that the United States received a substantially greater proportion of European immigrants than any other nation. At the same time, however, the proportion of immigrants in the population of the United States was less than that in several other nations that received immigrants.¹⁹ Yet historians frequently point to the high proportion of foreign-born people as an explanation for the several upsurges of nativism, or opposition to immigrants, in the United States. Comparison with South American societies that received large numbers of immigrants but experienced very little nativist activity might be revealing, not only in regard to the reception accorded foreigners in the United States but also in ascertaining the roots and meaning of American nativism. At least two recent studies, for example, have concluded that

opportunities for and acceptance of Italian immigrants were better at the turn of the century in Argentina than in the United States.²⁰ Comparisons of the social reception and public policies on immigration in the United States and other New World countries would let us ascertain if there was indeed anything that could be termed American about our response to immigrants.

Finally, one difference that seems to identify us but which has rarely been studied comparatively is religion. On the face of it, religion is a distinguishing characteristic of Americans. Today, according to recent public opinion polls, we are the most religious people in the Western world.²¹ Religion, usually in the form of Puritanism, has been amply acknowledged in our traditional history. This early Protestantism undoubtedly separates us from any nation to the south of us and from most of those across the Atlantic. I am thinking, however, of more enduring aspects of religious life, those that are still operative, such as the principle of separation of church and state, the wide diversity of sects in the past and present, the voluntarism of Protestant churches, and the relatively recent and massive growth of Catholicism and Judaism. Nor should we forget the founding within our boundaries of two world religions. one frontier and one urban in origin: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Church of Christ, Scientist. Such obvious differences suggest that cross-national comparisons of public religious policy, church organization, and the place of religion in the social order would tell us much about what it means to be an American.

The limits of your patience and the extent of my ignorance do not permit me to spell out here other ways we might learn about what it means to be an American, if we would look beyond our borders and shores. Some limited comparative studies in a variety of fields already promise that systematic comparison will provide fresh and revealing ways of defining Americans. We know, to mention four recent examples, that big business came to the fore in the United States long before it did in the first home of the Industrial Revolution,²² that American wives were much less likely to work outside the home during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than were wives in Britain,²³ that public education encountered almost no objections in the United States as compared with the stiff, vocal resistance it met in England,²⁴ and that reformers during the Progressive era in the United States were much less theoretical than were their counterparts in Britain.²⁵ Until we look outside ourselves, we neither know who we are nor what we need to account for in our becoming Americans. The job of comparison is, to be sure, arduous and continuous, though, as Fritz Redlich reminded us some years ago, comparison need not be entirely or mainly archival work.²⁶ Much secondary literature already exists from which valuable comparisons may be drawn.

If we begin to look at our history as comparatively as we can, it will place us, sometimes with pride, sometimes with embarrassment, and sometimes with shame, in the midst of other nations' histories, clearly identifying who we are. Inasmuch as all nations require a past to obtain the identity history alone can provide, this approach is applicable to any nation. It is, however, especially appropriate to Americans. Our ethnic, racial, and religious diversity help to define us as a people, but diversity, by its centrifugal nature, continually threatens to attenuate, even to dissolve the identity it helped to define. To shape our past around the ways in which we differ from other peoples will assist us in escaping that danger while articulating what it means to be an American. Finally, in pursuing our historical identity, we obtain a framework that can encompass and integrate the new knowledge garnered from the explosion of research in the last two decades. This pursuit will gain for us a history that is distinctively American, not simply because it happened to us, but because it did not happen to others.

Carl N. Degler

Notes

1. See, for example, Herbert G. Gutman, "The Missing Synthesis: Whatever Happened to History?" *Nation*, 233 (November 21, 1981): 521, 553. 54; "Interview with Herbert Gutman," *Radical History Review*, 27 (1983): 217. 22; Olivier Zunz, "The Synthesis of Social Change, Reflections on American Social History," in Zunz, ed., *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), 60, 80; and Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History*, 73 (June 1986): 120. 36. European historian Peter N. Stearns has suggested that the disarray extends beyond American history. See his "Social History and History: A Progress Report," *Journal of Social History*, 19 (Winter 1985): 319. 34. I fully recognize that other peoples in the New World have as good a claim to be known as Americans as the citizens of the United States. I have nevertheless followed throughout this essay the standard practice of referring to the history of the United States as "American" because only that term can describe the people of the United States. No one, so far as I know, has suggested an alternative term, such as "United Statesian." [[back to text](#)]

2. Tocqueville apparently believed that the term "exceptional" would apply to the United States

even when compared with later societies: "The position of the Americans is . . . quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one"; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Phillips Bradley, ed., 2 vols. (New York, 1948), 2: 36. 37. [[back to text](#)]

3. David W. Noble, *The End of American History: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Metaphor of Two Worlds in Anglo-American Historical Writing, 1880. 1980* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1985), 141. Interestingly enough, Daniel Bell's effort to declare an end to exceptionalism did not quite succeed when he considered the American political system. See his "The End of American Exceptionalism," *Public Interest*, 41 (Fall 1975): 222. 24. [[back to text](#)]

4. David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954), 29. 30. The sociologist Alex Inkeles has continued to emphasize psychological traits in delineating national character. See his essay, "Continuity and Change in the American National Character," in *The Third Century: America as a Post-Industrial Society*, Seymour Martin Lipset, ed. (Chicago, 1979), 390. 416. [[back to text](#)]

5. For recent literature on the *sonderweg* debate, see Theodore S. Hamerow, "Guilt, Redemption, and Writing German History," *AHR*, 88 (February 1983): 53. 72; Robert Moeller, "The Kaiserreich Recast? Continuity and Change in Modern German Historiography," *Journal of Social History*, 17 (Summer 1984): 655. 83; David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984); and Hans-Ulrich Wehler's review of the German edition of Blackbourn's and Eley's book, in *Merkur*, 35 (May 1981): 478. 87. [[back to text](#)]

6. Laurence Veysey, "'The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered,'" *American Quarterly*, 31 (Fall 1979): 477. [[back to text](#)]

7. "The nationalist principle as such, as distinct from each of its specific forms . . . has very very deep roots in our shared current condition, [and] is not at all contingent, and will not easily be denied"; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983), 118. [[back to text](#)]

8. Boyd C. Shafer, *Faces of Nationalism: New Realities and Old Myths* (New York, 1972), xiii, 340. Emphases in original. [[back to text](#)]

9. Marc Bloch, "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," in *Enterprise and Secular Change: Readings in Economic History*, Frederic C. Lane and Jelle C. Riemersma, eds. (Homewood, Ill., 1953), 507. [[back to text](#)]

10. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 56, 125. [[back to text](#)]

11. Potter, *People of Plenty*, 29. Thomas Bender, who also is interested in the creation of a fresh, interpretive synthesis of American history, concluded that national history is not likely to disappear in the near future. "Professional history has been institutionalized on the basis of national cultures as well as states," he wrote. "Anyone with a sense of history must recognize that such associations are contingent, but there is little evidence at the moment of the emergence of any new transnational cultural or political formations to sustain a history that will transcend nations"; Bender, "Wholes and Parts," 125. [[back to text](#)]

12. One German historian who has a strong interest in the investigation of social mobility has complained that U.S. historians began to lose interest in the question of social mobility when their studies began to reveal more social mobility in the American past than they had anticipated. See Hartmut Kaelble, "Foreword," *Journal of Social History*, 17 (Spring 1984): 406. For a statement on the unfinished state of comparative studies of social mobility, especially between the United States and European societies, see Kaelble, *Historical Research on Social Mobility: Western Europe and the USA in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1981), 34. 57. [[back to text](#)]

13. A table in the *Economist* for December 21, 1985, p. 72, shows that, among seventeen industrial nations, the United States was unique in having a dearth of state-run economic enterprises. Other New World countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and even Canada were conspicuous in their departures from the U.S. pattern. [[back to text](#)]

14. The explanations are advanced in Mary Floyd Williams, *History of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1851: A Study of Social Control on the California Frontier in the Days of the Gold Rush* (Berkeley, Calif., 1921), 424. 27, and Paul F. Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865. 1885* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1955), chaps. 5 and 12. [[back to text](#)]

15. It is worth noting that Bolton's use of comparison was quite the opposite of Tannenbaum's (and mine). Bolton was interested in identifying similarities, Tannenbaum in differences. [[back to text](#)]

16. Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1978), 11, 158. 59. A Briton, Hennessy identified a specific value of North-South comparisons when he pointed out that, if such comparisons were made, "there may be a better chance of getting [British] students to realize that the United States is a foreign country and not just an eccentric version of the British experience"; p. 5. [[back to text](#)]

17. See, for example, the recent survey of Brazilian race relations and organizational opposition to racial discrimination in Pierre-Michel Fontaine, ed., *Race, Class and Power in Brazil* (Los Angeles, 1985). [[back to text](#)]

18. Myrdal provided a striking measure of the American concern when he wrote, "Wandering around the stacks of a good American library, one is amazed at the huge amount of printed material on the Negro problem. A really complete bibliography would run up to several hundred thousand titles. Nobody has ever mastered this material exhaustively, and probably nobody ever will. The intellectual energy spent on the Negro problem in America should, if concentrated in a single direction, have moved mountains"; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols. (New York, 1944), 27. [[back to text](#)]

19. J. D. Gould, "European Inter-Continental Emigration 1815. 1914: Patterns and Causes," *Journal of European Economic History*, 8 (Winter 1979): 604. [[back to text](#)]

20. Samuel L. Barry, "The Adjustment of Italian Immigrants in Buenos Aires and New York, 1870. 1914," *AHR*, 88 (April 1983): 281. 305; and Herbert S. Klein, "The Integration of Italian Immigrants into the United States and Argentina: A Comparative Analysis," *AHR*, 88 (April 1983): 306. 29. In the absence of any systematic comparative study, an emphasis such as David A. Hollinger placed on the relatively high degree of ethnic acceptance in the United States is questionable. We just do not know that Americans are more accepting than other immigrant societies are until we make the comparisons. Hollinger, "Two Cheers for the Melting Pot," *democracy*, 2 (January 1981): 89. 97. [[back to text](#)]

21. John M. Benson, "The Polls: A Rebirth of Religion?" *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 45 (Winter 1981): 578, 582. [[back to text](#)]

22. See Alfred B. Chandler and Herman Daems, eds., *Managerial Hierarchies: Comparative Perspectives on the Rise of the Modern Industrial Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 3, 36. 39; and especially the essay by Morton Keller, "Regulation of Large Enterprise: The United States Experience in Comparative Perspective," 161. 81. [[back to text](#)]

23. In his comparative study of Pittsburgh and Birmingham, England, Peter Shergold noted that married women in the British city were four times as likely to work outside the home as wives in Pittsburgh were. Less than 50 percent of unmarried women under the age of twenty in Pittsburgh were employed as against 89 percent in Birmingham. Shergold, *Working-Class Life: The "American Standard" in Comparative Perspective, 1899. 1913* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1982), 74. 76. Michael Katz, *People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 273, noted that only 2 percent of married women with husbands present were employed as against 28 percent in Preston, England. Richard J. Evans noted another striking difference between women in America and women in other countries: "The feminist movement in the United States began earlier than elsewhere; and by the end of the nineteenth century, the Americans' domination of international feminism was unchallenged"; Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840. 1920* (London, 1977), 44. [[back to text](#)]

24. Carl F. Kaestle, "Between the Scylla of Brutal Ignorance and the Charybdis of a Literary Education: Elite Attitudes toward Mass Schooling in Early Industrial England and America," in Lawrence Stone, ed., *Schooling and Society: Studies in the History of Education* (Baltimore, Md., 1976). [[back to text](#)]

25. Morton Keller, "Anglo-American Politics, 1900. 1930, in Anglo-American Perspective: A Case Study in Comparative History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22 (July 1980): 458. 77; and Melvyn Stokes, "American Progressive and the European Left," *Journal of American Studies*, 17 (1983): 3. 28. As Ross Evans Paulson's book, *Women's Suffrage and Prohibition: A Comparative Study of Equality and Social Control* (Glenview, Ill., 1973), makes evident, a cross-national study of temperance would give us novel insights into one of the most important aspects of American reform. [[back to text](#)]

26. Fritz Redlich, "Toward a Comparative Historiography, Background and Problems," *Kyklos*, 11 (1958): 385. 87. As Redlich pointed out, some historians have been so committed to archival work that they "have tended to forget that work in archives is not the purpose of historical research but a means toward the end of describing, explaining, and, as I would add, 'understanding' the historical process"; p. 385. [[back to text](#)]

Last Updated: August 8, 2012 4:53 PM

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