



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Fusing and Refusing American Nationalism

Susan Curtis

American Quarterly, Volume 54, Number 2, June 2002, pp. 317-324 (Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/aq.2002.0013](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2002.0013)



 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aq/summary/v054/54.2curtis.html>

Fusing and Refusing American Nationalism

SUSAN CURTIS
Purdue University

***American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century.* By Gary Gerstle. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. 444 pages. \$29.95 (cloth).**

IN THE LATE 1980s, A PERIOD MARKED BY CULTURE WARS AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL upheavals, Americanists in a variety of disciplines began calling urgently for what Thomas Bender called “a new synthesis” of American history.¹ The explosion of scholarship on communities defined by—and divided by—race, ethnicity, gender, class, and ideology had resulted in a greatly expanded awareness of particular experiences in a diverse nation, but it left many scholars with the uneasy sense that something was missing—some overarching way of talking about the American past. The reading public bypassed shelves of books written by academic specialists in favor of popular—frequently military and political—histories and History Channel-style public programming, leading some to conclude that the kind of projects undertaken by academics had rendered them irrelevant in the public sphere.² In spite of the mountains of journal articles, biographies, and monographs devoted to recovering and repositioning the lives, beliefs, and endeavors of men and women on the margins, undergraduates continued to identify the same traditional American heroes (mostly white and male) as the most important shapers of the nation’s life.³ Indeed, at all levels of education, battle lines were drawn over the appropriate content of American history.

Susan Curtis is professor of history and chair of the American Studies Program at Purdue University. She is the author of *The First Black Actors on the Great White Way* and *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin*. She is currently working on a study of Lester A. Walton and the American century.

In the following decade, a spate of works took up the challenge of constructing narratives that would address the felt need for synthesis and simultaneously incorporate the insights of this rich body of work. Ronald Takaki invited readers to peer into a “Different Mirror,” and Priscilla Wald probed “cultural anxiety and narrative form” as critical aspects of the process by which Americans constituted themselves in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. David Roediger, George Lipsitz, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and others placed race at the center of their work as constitutive of American democracy and culture.⁴ These broad efforts have neither obviated nor displaced particularistic studies, but they have provided valuable frameworks within which such studies can be contextualized.

Gary Gerstle’s *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* offers another way of thinking about the relationship between “wholes and parts” by examining nationalist discourse in the century just concluded. It also sheds light on the reasons for the historiographical shift. Influenced by the work of scholars noted above plus Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Gerstle examines two streams of thought that “animated the nation’s communal imagination” (5)—civic nationalism and racial nationalism. The civic nationalist stream, he argues, flows from founding ideals expressed in documents such as the Declaration of Independence that affirm equality, fundamental rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and confidence in the people to govern themselves democratically. Racial nationalism, he insists, flows from an equally venerable tradition of thought embedded in the Constitution and the 1790 immigration law. This ideal imagines the American nation in racial and ethnic terms “as a people held together by common blood and skin color and by an inherited fitness for self-government” (4). Gerstle shows how both nationalist conceptions shaped the thinking of twentieth-century leaders from Theodore Roosevelt to Bill Clinton and consequently how both found expression in public policy and social reform movements. The result is a deeply textured and insightful reading of a complicated era in U.S. history.

One of the many virtues of this study is Gerstle’s refusal to caricature either nationalist strain. The racial nationalism of Theodore Roosevelt, for example, bears little resemblance to the rabid white supremacist vision of groups like the Ku Klux Klan. TR believed racial hybridity—the mixing of diverse racial stocks—invigorated the United States, but his vision did not include all racial stocks. Indeed, he willfully

diminished the role played by the black Ninth and Tenth Cavalries and Twenty-fourth Infantry in the battles for Kettle Hill and San Juan Hill in the 1898 war with Spain when he published his history of the Rough Riders in *Scribner's* magazine in 1899. At the same time, in the spirit of civic nationalism, Roosevelt appointed William D. Crum, an African American, to the collectorship of the port of Charleston, South Carolina, and he dined with Booker T. Washington in the White House, both to the fury of southern whites. This last deed, for which white southerners never forgave him, inspired hope among black Americans mired in the nadir of disfranchisement, Jim Crow, lynching, and debt peonage. Scott Joplin's lost opera from 1903, *The Guest of Honor*, and his composition *The Strenuous Life* (1902) suggest a desire to valorize TR for his commitment to equality and social justice and a willingness to overlook the racial nationalist content of his thinking and of his policies as president.

It is in thinking about instances like Joplin's gestures that the force of Gerstle's analysis becomes clear. TR, like all of the figures Gerstle studies, advanced both racial and civic nationalism. To ignore one in favor of the other is to underestimate the resilience and persistence of both ways of imagining America and to misrepresent the context in which historic battles for civil rights or immigration policy took place. Throughout *American Crucible*, Gerstle masterfully keeps both racial nationalism and civic nationalism in play in order to insist upon the inseparability of these two potent strains of thought. Though he does not invoke W. E. B. Du Bois's famous term, "double-consciousness," the effect of his analysis is similar to Du Bois's. Du Bois, of course, described a weird sense of self experienced by Negroes in America, forced to measure their "soul[s] by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." This aspect of "double-consciousness" is not the issue. Du Bois goes on to write: "One ever feels his two-ness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts[,] two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."⁵ Substitute "a civic nationalist, a racial nationalist" for "an American, a Negro" and "one body politic" for "one dark body," and you can get a sense of the tensions between the two forms of nationalism and the potential for explosive conflict they hold in American life.

In the first seven chapters of *American Crucible*, Gerstle focuses on war and immigration policy as key sites of nationalist thinking.

Whether as a test of national vigor or as an opportunity to fight for the core ideals of civic nationalism, war calls forth the articulation of bedrock principles, and immigration policy taps into nationalist concerns about who can/should become citizens. Examination of each lays bare the imbrications of racial and civic nationalism. Thus Woodrow Wilson's agenda of "peace without victory" and fighting a "war to end all wars" arose from civic nationalist ideals, but maintaining racially segregated training camps and units and limiting military engagement under U.S. commanders to white soldiers reflected the powerful grip of racial nationalism on the imagination of those in power. Both civic nationalism and racial nationalism figured into postwar immigration restriction as well. The increasingly stringent restriction policy and the establishment of quotas were intended to stem the tide of foreign-born radicals from southern and eastern Europe, many of whom were Jewish, on the grounds that racially and ideologically they were unfit to become American citizens. The same forces that saw literate foreign-born radicals as a threat to American political and economic institutions sought to weaken progressive-era legislation designed to rein in the worst excesses of corporate capitalism. The combination of a chastened working class, unfettered business activity, and government uninterested in regulation resulted in an ineffectual response to the stock market crash and a growing crisis in national confidence.

According to Gerstle, Franklin Roosevelt did more than restore the shaken confidence of the nation when he took office in 1933. His New Deal was an "experiment in state building without precedent" in U.S. history and the completion of Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalist vision, which TR articulated in 1910 (128–29). The regulatory apparatus of a large state helped to secure the individual's "social rights" that TR had deemed necessary in an advanced industrial society, and the establishment of a large military to provide for national security promised to protect democratic institutions in a time of crisis. FDR initially made few appeals to racial nationalist sentiment, opting instead for an inclusive stance toward southern and eastern Europeans and their descendants—Jewish and Christian alike. They repaid him with loyalty and votes. "If the immigration restriction legislation of the 1920s had disciplined this 'unruly' and 'dangerous' population," writes Gerstle, referring to the Jews who voted overwhelmingly for FDR by 1940, "the reform legislation of the 1930s and 1940s had opened up opportunities for it—and for Italians, Poles, and others—that had not

existed before” (129). The astonishing rise and clout of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the mid-1930s, organized on behalf of social democratic reform, pushed FDR’s civic nationalism leftward toward a more pro-worker position. Although a conservative backlash, led by the likes of Martin Dies, set in by the late 1930s, the patriotism and fervent loyalty of formerly marginalized Europeans inspired by the New Deal and FDR fired a new nationalist fervor during World War II.

The war against the Axis Powers elicited a complicated interweaving of racial and civic nationalist strands of thought. America’s entry came with the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by a race of people considered by many—especially denizens of the western states—to be inferior yet crafty and untrustworthy, so the race war in the Pacific pitted Japan against the United States in a contest for racial, cultural, social, and political supremacy. In Europe, Hitler’s “Final Solution” made for a different kind of race war—one in which the American civic nationalist tradition promised to serve as an ideological antidote to totalitarian brutality. The reasons for going to war were clearly articulated; Americans fought to avenge the dastardly attack on its people and territory and to protect the Four Freedoms that anchored the “American Way of Life.” The logic that drove each of these nationalist agendas set in motion curiously tangled thinking about race and nation. A civic nationalist war against Nazi racism did not prevent the denial of basic civil rights to Japanese Americans, who on the basis of race could not be trusted as loyal citizens. Moreover, some African Americans admitted a certain pleasure in seeing white America being outfoxed by a purportedly inferior race, but leaders in the black community found hope in the civic nationalist rhetoric that might yield a “double victory” against racism at home and abroad. Multi-ethnic combat units testified to the egalitarian spirit alive in the United States, although the reach of this new tolerance stopped short of an embrace of all people and all races.

In a particularly fascinating section of *American Crucible*, Gerstle trains his eye on the popular culture representations of the war. Memoirs and wartime films confirmed the expanded definition of American citizen that now included formerly marginalized ethnic groups—Irish, Eastern Europeans, urban Catholics, and Jews. Although old-stock Anglo-Saxons served as commanding officers, the camaraderie between unlike men and their loyalty to one another bespoke a kind of inclusiveness that would persist after the war. That

inclusiveness reflects the whitening of ethnic groups whose membership in the white race had frequently been called into question in the past. Hollywood producers and screenwriters—under the watchful eye of the Office of War Information—could not, however, imagine an American soldier of color—although some with Popular Front convictions experimented with black characters only to be sent back to rewrite the script or to the cutting room. Of the films Gerstle discusses, only *Sahara* included a black character—a Sudanese corporal who joins other stragglers in North Africa as they flee the Germans. Gerstle’s analysis underscores the pervasiveness and strict enforcement of racial nationalism.

Gerstle sees the Cold War years as the last ones in which the dynamic tension between civic and racial ideals could be sustained in the service of national cohesion. Communism abroad and radical subversives at home made ideal targets for nationalists seeking to protect American civic ideals—even when their fervor led to denial of civil rights at home. New immigration legislation in the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 seemingly turned away from the racial nationalism embodied in the 1924 quota system by permitting one hundred immigrants per year to enter the U.S. from each Asian nation, but such a small quota reflected older ideas about which kinds of people would make the best citizens. Pressure from overseas regarding the U.S.’s abysmal record on race relations led to grudging support for expanded civil rights, and the two decades following the end of World War II saw the flowering of civil rights activism. But racial nationalism had not yet expired as investigations into organized crime revived stereotypes of Italians as naturally prone to lawlessness and corruption and as the disproportionate number of Jews on the Hollywood black list, the execution of the Jewish Rosenbergs, and the government’s hectoring of Paul Robeson suggest.

Gerstle devotes the final third of this book to the unraveling of “Rooseveltian nationalism.” The shift in the civil rights movement from civic nationalism to black nationalism and the immense appeal of racial and ethnic pride, he argues, splintered the cohesion built by World War II and anticommunism in the 1940s and 1950s. Groups that once had struggled to achieve status as white and distanced themselves from blacks now echoed “Black is Beautiful” with their own movements to preserve and celebrate old world ethnic traditions and in some cases to push for group interests/rights in politics. These trends,

coupled with a disastrous war in Vietnam, shook national unity. The crisis that ensued took place “primarily in the realm of ideology, culture, and institutions. Many people who resided in America no longer imagined that they belonged to the same national community or that they shared a common set of ideals. The bonds of nationhood had weakened, and the Rooseveltian program of nation building that had created those bonds in the first place had been repudiated. A nationalist era that had begun in the early decades of the twentieth century had come to a stunning end” (345).

The claim made here by Gerstle is taken up in a brief epilogue on the final quarter of the twentieth century, years that witnessed the rise of multiculturalism, culture wars, multinational corporations, and attacks on feminism and affirmative action—indeed, the very years that spawned the historiographical upheavals to which this book is a response. Still, throughout the epilogue, Gerstle points to elements of both racial nationalism and civic nationalism in arguments against affirmative action and in favor of particular groups’ rights, respectively. He also identifies a variety of transnationalist commitments that reflect the global realities of the latter days.

In the final pages of this exemplary analysis, Gerstle raises questions about the possibilities for a revival of nationalism that would build on social solidarity “without restoring old exclusions or creating new ones” (373). He is not optimistic that such a nation is about to take shape. I doubt that events since September 11, 2001, have done much to alter his pessimism, even though older cherished symbols and songs have succeeded in arousing nationalist fervor in public life. His final words, however, contain a prediction few will gainsay: “[W]e will continue to be what we have been—a nation among nations, struggling, like many other peoples, with the complexities, contradictions, and burdens of our nationhood” (374). Thanks to *American Crucible*, the nature of these complexities, contradictions, and burdens are made clear.

NOTES

1. Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73 (June 1986): 120–36.

2. Steven Watts, "The Idiocy of American Studies: Poststructuralism, Language, and Politics in the Age of Self-Fulfillment," *American Quarterly* 43 (Dec. 1991): 656.

3. Michael Frisch, "American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in Empirical Iconography," *Journal of American History* 75 (Mar. 1989): 1130–55.

4. Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993); Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1995); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), and *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London: Verso, 1994); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple Univ. Press, 1998); and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993). Obviously, this handful of titles barely scratches the surface, but they serve as instructive examples of efforts to rethink the contours and sources of American cultural values.

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 8–9.