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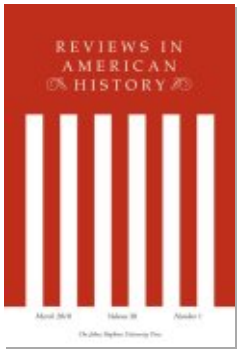

LIBERALISM, NATION, AND RACE

Francis G. Couvares

Gary Gerstle. *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. xv + 454 pp. Figures, notes, and index. $ 29.95.

Signaling the absorption of "whiteness studies" into the American historiographical mainstream, *American Crucible* is a major effort to reinterpret twentieth-century U.S. history in light of the power of race (and to a lesser extent of class and gender) to determine the national destiny.[1] Moreover, in its attention to the meaning of liberalism and the liberal state, it takes its places in a long line of interpretations—from Alexis de Tocqueville and Joseph Schumpeter, to Louis Hartz and Richard Hofstadter, to John Higham and Christopher Lasch and Alan Dawley and Linda Kerber, to mention only a few—that ask a set of overlapping questions: Why has the United States been so resistant to the politics of class and so weak in its embrace of the social democratic state, which, in most European countries, became the solution to the crises of industrial capitalist society? In what ways have U.S. society and state been shaped by the peculiar American pattern of white ethnic assimilation and racial inequality, as well as by the emergence of mass culture and the ethnic and gender relations it encodes?

Gerstle's contribution to this line of inquiry not only incorporates whiteness studies into his analysis, but takes seriously John Higham's reminder that nationalism is a subject of undying importance for historians not only of the U.S. but of the modern world.[2] Melding these perspectives into his narrative, Gerstle begins with the 1890s, when the lingering wounds of the Civil War and newer centrifugal forces associated with class and ethnic tensions led many Americans to seek national unity through empire. For many this implied what Gerstle calls "racial nationalism." But the bulk of his story is devoted to the challenge offered to racial nationalism by "civic nationalism." In contrast to the exclusive racial sort, this more inclusive, assimilative nationalism welcomed European immigrants of all kinds into the democratic political and social order in return only for the price of "Americanization." Civic nationalism emerged during Progressive years, triumphed in the New Deal–World War II era, strained during the Cold War, and

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collapsed in multiple crises beginning with the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and Watergate. These sapped the moral foundation of what Gerstle calls the "Rooseveltian nation" and led to the ambiguous Reagan-Clinton era. Finally, he suggests, what the future holds in store is either a regime of "thin loyalty," with self-absorbed individualism and "multicultural" group identity taking the place of civic nationalism, or the revival of a more fearsome exclusionary nationalism reminiscent of the past.

Gerstle's narrative is brisk, his prose accessible, and his argument persuasive. This is a book that will serve very well to organize courses in twentieth-century U.S. history. It will be especially valuable to those who want a broad narrative that gives continuous attention to race beyond the spheres of labor and popular culture, where whiteness studies has often been preoccupied. This is the way I will use it, though I will be teaching against it almost as often as with it. The remainder of this review will be devoted to explaining why I find *American Crucible* both very useful and in need of a degree of correction.

In some ways, Theodore Roosevelt is the figure that dominates this book. His ferocious energy seems to reach from the grave and grab hold of Gerstle's imagination, much as it did that of the Rough Rider's contemporaries. Moreover, Roosevelt makes Gerstle's argument: "If for Karl Marx history was the history of class conflict, for Roosevelt it was the history of race conflict" (p. 17). Plumbing TR's racial imagination, Gerstle's offers an effective intellectual history of racial thinking in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. He shows how Roosevelt's brand of racialist thought avoided reactionary Anglo-Saxonism and conservative defenses of the status quo. The Rough Rider instead combined Progressive hostility to effete aristocrats of his own class with civic nationalist acceptance of new immigrants as apprentices in the American democratic work-in-progress. But Roosevelt's more capacious melting-pot did bar non-European races. Like other historians of whiteness, Gerstle argues that racial exclusion in fact made possible a broader and more stable "white man's democracy." In expanding the assimilationist ideal to include the new immigrants and insisting that reform, not retrenchment, was the way to save both capitalism and democracy, the first Roosevelt created the intellectual tools and political models that would shape the rest of American history in the twentieth century.

That conservatives failed to see that TR was one of them, while so many progressives thought he was, is one of the ironies of American history. It is also what, in this interpretation, links the first Roosevelt to the second. But before Gerstle forges the crucial link between the two, he wisely spends time explaining why Rooseveltian civic nationalism failed to resist the reactionary tides that swelled during World War I and the Red Scare that followed it. The tribalism underlying racial nationalism has never simply blown away in the face of the civic nationalist advance, despite its "bully" embodiment in the

first Roosevelt. The triumph of the Rooseveltian nation was always partial, as racial consciousness continued to be nurtured in the segregationist South, the anti-Asian West, and the exclusive precincts of the northeastern elite, among other places. Racial nationalism would revive after World War I (and again after World War II), when civic nationalism could not satisfy the need for solidarity and reassurance among some segments of the American population. Both Jim Crow and immigration restriction most clearly mark the limits of the assimilationist ideal in the first half of the twentieth century.

Gerstle's treatment of the campaign against restriction displays all the subtleties of his approach. Like other practitioners of whiteness studies, he reveals the sometimes racist tactics of those who sought to defend southern and eastern European immigrants by sharply distinguishing them from "inferior" blacks, Mexicans, and Asians. But he also reminds us that many proponents of ethnic equality readily embraced racial equality, refusing to make invidious comparisons between descendants of Italian peasants or Jewish ghetto-dwellers and those of slaves or peons. Like most Americans, the champions of open immigration were a mixed lot. "Out of their ranks would come a vigorous movement to oppose racial distinctions and to compel America to live up to ideals enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Out of their ranks, too, would come a desire to prove their whiteness and to claim its privileges. They would carry forward both the civic and racialized notions of American nationalism" (p. 122).

The second Roosevelt completes "the liberal nation-building project" begun by the first (p. 129). Gerstle makes plain the differences between the two, especially noting FDR's greater openness to a range of ethnic and racial types and the sheer geniality of his temperament, which contrasted sharply with the almost manic intensity of his cousin. Ironically, moreover, FDR was also the inheritor of the ethnic assimilation that was the end product of immigration restriction and several decades of Americanization campaigns. As Lizabeth Cohen and others, including Gerstle himself, have shown, among the very people who had once been targets of patriotic Anglo-conformists, a working-class patriotism emerged out of the rhythms of everyday life, in factories and neighborhoods, in local political and union struggles.[3] FDR's New Deal, along with the CIO, inherited more than sparked this evolution. Moreover, the Catholic Church, which represented most of the working-class descendants of the new immigrants, spoke both for the progressive political interests of its faithful and the conservative interests of the hierarchy. In so doing, it helped simultaneously to expand and contain the political options available to formerly marginalized Americans. All in all, despite the catastrophe of the Great Depression, FDR's civic nationalist coalition was broader and his political opportunities greater than those of his predecessor.

As careful as he is not to conflate two very different eras and social and political contexts, Gerstle's insistence on civic nationalist continuities begins to raise doubts about the very notion of a Rooseveltian nation. Moreover, his assertion that the predominant (if not the sole) limit on the promise of the New Deal was the ineradicable power of racial nationalism requires him to underplay a large body of historical scholarship that details many other serious obstacles to radical reform. As historians as different as the liberal William Leuchtenberg and the radical Alan Dawley argue, the New Deal came up against almost every conservative force in American society, even white supremacy, although here, as Gerstle quite rightly avers, it put up the weakest fight. Shaped by so many different energies within a society in crisis, the New Deal responded most vigorously to the best-organized interests. The power of special interests—notably among them bankers and big businessmen; the farm bloc; bureaucratic elites in labor, in private health and charitable establishments; and local and state political machines, not to mention the churches—played a crucial part in moderating or thwarting the New Deal's more radical impulses. In trying to explain its successes and failures, the power of civic and racial nationalism makes an important but only partial contribution.

Although some of these doubts about the conceptual adequacy of Gerstle's notions of civic and racial nationalism arise again when the narrative reaches the post–World War II era, once again the author's treatment of topics from war movies to McCarthyism to the civil rights movement is insightful and nuanced. For example, in accounting for the rise of the civil rights movement, Gerstle points to several important causes. The anti-fascist crusade of World War II boosted an inclusive civic nationalism, while black veterans, returning to the Jim Crow South and the ghettoized North, demanded more opportunity and, sometimes with the help of the GI Bill, got it. More important, the mass migration of blacks from the South, which intensified in the 1940s but had been going on for many decades, had made African Americans a growing force in labor unions and urban political machines and boosted the power of civil rights organizations, especially the NAACP.

Having noted these causes, Gerstle goes on to say this: "But one factor outweighed every other in triggering the civil rights movement, and that was the collapse of the European empires in Africa and Asia as a result of the Second World War" (p. 271). It cannot be doubted that the emergence of new African states heartened African Americans in their struggles for justice. But it is very hard to believe that this moral encouragement outweighed or even matched the causal power of the vast socio-economic transformation effected by the great migration of blacks from the country to the city, from the South to the North. Despite this overstatement, however, Gerstle's treatment of the civil rights movement is comprehensive, complex, and briskly narrated.[4]

Gerstle's book is stronger for its appreciation of what James Kloppenberg has called "the virtues of liberalism," for its refusal to embrace what has become an almost reflexive anti-liberalism in some historical criticism of American society. He avoids what David Hollinger has dubbed the "competitive disillusionment" that allows some critics to lay all the failures of American society—especially its racial injustice—at the door of liberalism.[5] If the United States has failed to live up to the "American Creed" it is not, in this disillusioned view, because the forces arrayed against liberalism have been too strong or because liberals have been hypocritical or confused. It is because liberalism is, at its very core, essentially corrupt: its masculinist individualism is inseparable from competitive market thinking; its relativist moral vision is inadequate to the task of fighting for a just community; its procedural politics is designed to manage conflict and buttress the status quo. Gerstle avoids this dismissal of liberalism, but embraces at least part of the critique.

As can be seen in his debate with Hollinger in the *Journal of American History,* Gerstle is a thoughtful and persuasive proponent of his point of view.[6] He believes that the virtues of liberalism—even the "cosmopolitan" version that Hollinger discerns in the record of American progressive thought and politics—have been exaggerated and that coercion has played a far larger part in shaping popular nationalism and the institutional state. He thinks that liberalism has been the handmaiden of that coercion more often than its adversary. Those who wish to emphasize liberalism's more progressive side—its inextricable entwinement with myriad struggles for justice and equality in American history—can easily supplement Gerstle's text without having to fight against it. They can, for example, attend to the works in women's history recently reviewed by Rosemarie Zagarri in the *American Quarterly*. These works, according to the reviewer, demonstrate that liberalism, in its "elasticity, its ability to tolerate dissent and entertain opposing viewpoints," and in its contractarian ideal, which provides an expandable logic of equal and reciprocal rights and obligations, has "proven itself to be an indispensable avenue to freedom" for women battling over church governance, divorce, birth control, suffrage, affirmative action, and many other issues (as well as for other "dispossessed groups" struggling for "fundamental change").[7]

Although Gerstle argues that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the Rooseveltian nation has "collapsed," his volume ends with evidence of both the exhaustion and vitality of liberalism. He notes, for example, that for all the political opposition it has generated, affirmative action has accomplished remarkable things and, when combined with a decade of sustained economic growth, has actually expanded opportunity and reduced poverty. Some liberals have failed to fight for expanded rights with adequate vigor, and many have been overwhelmed by stronger adversaries. Indeed, the Reagan

years may have convinced many Americans—historians among them—that something other than liberalism is at work in American history, most importantly conservatism. In recent years historians have been demonstrating that, in addition to Gerstle's racial nationalism, a variety of conservatisms—"New Right" social conservatism, sunbelt libertarianism, and old-line business conservatism, among others—are as much as liberalism a vital part of American political culture.[8]

One virtue of Gerstle's *American Crucible* is precisely its insistence that American political culture is "complex"—a word the author uses over and again. Within this very large cultural archive coexist a variety of liberalisms and conservatisms, of quasi-republican, communal values, of myriad religious beliefs and practices, of local and regional perspectives, of class, ethnic and age subcultures, of aesthetic preferences. These interact unpredictably with one another and with a raucously creative, if frequently dismaying, yet increasingly internationalized popular culture. Not all items in this big cultural grab bag are created equal. Some items are fugitive and disconnected, others organized into enduring repertoires or traditions, sustained by powerful religious institutions or refashioned by commercial interests. The archive receives new additions from the margins: some like hip hop or "fundamentalism" seem (mistakenly) to come from nowhere, only to claim a wide swath of cultural space and to generate powerful political implications; others like transcendental meditation win a following, then recede into a niche, or like militia movements tap ominous undercurrents without ever winning a wide following. Moreover, the American cultural archive is part of a far wider trans-Atlantic and international one, within which a very wide range of ideas and practices are filtered through existing repertoires, sometimes merely passing through, at other times finding lodgement.[9]

If racial nationalism and civic nationalism are to be understood as traditions—and it is Gerstle's achievement to convince us that they should—they are repertoires that change shape and that wax and wane over time. Although Rooseveltian civic nationalism may have declined, it is highly unlikely that either it or racial nationalism will disappear for two reasons. The first is that the social reality which has nurtured these traditions—shaped by capitalism, ethnic plurality, and political democracy—endures. And, second, because the larger traditions of political liberalism and conservatism also endure, even if unstable and recomposing before our eyes. A more cosmopolitan nationalism may be emerging from large elements of the old civic nationalism and newer additions from what is called multiculturalism, as well as other sources.

As we contemplate the now-completed twentieth century and look ahead to the twenty-first, Gerstle's *American Crucible* will help us trace the path from the past to the future by reminding us that the political, cultural, and social landscape of modern American history is very broad. That landscape encom-

passes the enduring power of class, race and gender to structure the opportunities of citizens; the continuing dynamism of capitalism and of the culture that it helps to shape but never fully controls; the profoundly generative possibilities of our flawed but deeply grounded popular democracy; and the liberal, conservative, and other traditions that play a large part in shaping our engagement with that democracy.

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1. The literature on whiteness is now voluminous. The seminal work is David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991). See also his *Toward an Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Work, Politics, and Working Class History* (1994), and the essays and bibliography in Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (1997).

2. John Higham, "The Future of American History," *Journal of American History* 80 (March 1994): 1289–1309.

3.Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City* (1989); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (1990).

4. On Cold War pressure to show postcolonial nations that America's civil rights record was improving, see most recently Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (2000).

5. James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (1998); David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (1995), 169.

6. See "People in Motion, Nation in Question: The Case of Twentieth-Century America," *Journal of American History* 84 (September 1997): 524–597, with contributions from Gerstle, Hollinger, and Donna R. Gabaccia.

7. Rosemarie Zagarri, "Gender and the New Liberal Synthesis," *American Quarterly*, 53 (March 2001): 123–129.

8. See, for example, Leo P. Ribuffo, *Right, Center, Left: Essays in American History* (1992); and the AHR Forum featuring an article by Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," followed by responses from Susan M. Yohn and Ribuffo, with Brinkley's reply, in *American Historical Review* 99 (April 1994): 409–452. Particularly insightful case studies are Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (1991); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1997).

9. Daniel T. Rodgers's *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (1998) is invaluable on this point. See also Klaus J. Hansen, "The Liberal Tradition in America: A German View," *Journal of American History* 87 (March 2001): 1397–1408.