THE AUTONOMY OF AMERICAN HISTORY RECONSIDERED

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The increasing global awareness of our age enables us to view national differences with a new sophistication. We discern the arrival, for better or worse, of what Daniel Bell and others have called a post-industrial world.¹ On its non-socialist side, this world comprehends Western Europe, Australia, Canada, and Japan, as well as the United States. It is marked by essentially the same historical outcome, in terms of living standards, economic structures, political affinities, and, to a surprising degree, definitions of the good life.

Differences within this world of course remain. Superficially we seem to live in a climate of intense nationalism. Yet, on closer inspection, many of the internal contrasts within these post-industrial societies turn out to be nuances of the same impulses and aspirations rather than distinctions on the order of those encountered, for instance, by eighteenth-century Englishmen and Frenchmen seeking mutual contact. In an era when the presence or absence of oil appears to dictate national destiny, we can begin to appreciate the place that national cultures of a truly distinctive kind hold in our consciousness.

The powerful sense of a common outcome to modern history across a substantial part of the planet forces us to reexamine many long-held notions about the peculiar development of national cultural traditions. In particular, it is clear that earlier interpretations of American history and culture, aggressively put forth as recently as the 1950s and emphasizing “uniquely” American experiences and habits of mind, serves largely to mislead us. American history has been viewed far too often as if it were autonomous, a theme entirely unto itself, rather than in enormous meas-

ure a reflection of forces operating throughout the modern world. Whatever true suggestions of uniqueness one may find in the American experience will only be confirmed after a much more careful study of other industrial societies alongside America than has yet been undertaken. At the very least, we should admit how little we know about what is distinctively American, how inadequate the formulas of Tocqueville (tuned to a rising expectation of American greatness) now must often seem.

Against all earlier prophecies, we find that America has emerged not as a new Rome—center of the universe, focal point for mankind—but as no more than one nation among others, considerably larger and at present more powerful than France, Germany, England, or Japan, yet hardly vast in extent as compared with China, Russia, or Canada, hardly populous when measured with China or India. We are aware, as never before, of distinct limits on our material resources. "Abundance" no longer seems to be our special defining characteristic.\(^2\)

These perceptions become joined to our consciousness of a certain degree of convergence—if I may deliberately revive a somewhat unfashionable term—among the non-Communist industrial regions of the earth.\(^3\) Two of the most pivotal aspects of the traditional argument for American uniqueness—widespread "classless" affluence and the migration here of diverse peoples—are reduced to a less striking status in the context of the recent international scene, where the relative prosperity and internal social fluidity of all the developed capitalist nations offer a stark contrast to the Third World, and where the movement across national boundaries of ethnically varied job-seekers has become commonplace.

On a possibly more superficial level, the physical appearance of everyday surroundings inside the developed non-socialist countries has merged to the point that lingering evidences of unique tradition are reduced to tiny enclaves, whose preservation becomes more and more self-consciously artificial. The chance survivals that connote historicity—old houses and public

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\(^2\)The theme of exposure to abundance as the focal characteristic of the American national character, beautifully expressed in David M. Potter, People of Plenty (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1954) was appropriate to the nationalistic climate accompanied by an apparently limitless promise of increased living standards which marked the post-World War II period.

\(^3\)The "convergence" controversy of the 1960s, which focused largely on America and the Soviet Union rather than America and Western Europe, seemed on this basis to be settled by the failure of the Cold War to end. See Albert Lauterbach, "The 'Convergence' Controversy Revisited," Kyklos, 29 (1976), 733–54. In this connection, the sweepingly universalistic view of "industrial man" put forward by such writers as Alex Inkeles, "Industrial Man," American Journal of Sociology, 66 (1960), 1–31, and Clark Kerr et al., Industrialism and Industrial Man (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), especially pp. 1–129, 266–97, has since lost most of its credence. Yet the question of an emerging similarity of life patterns within the non-socialist developed countries has retained and increased its cogency.
buildings, entire neighborhoods in some lucky instances—are seized upon for renovation and display because everyone recognizes how far removed they have become from life. Europe has a great deal more such architecture, of course, yet the same signs of self-conscious preservationism occur everywhere, whether it is in Paris or in Albuquerque’s Old Town, in Deerfield, Massachusetts, or in the medieval village of Eze, where the craftsmen await the tourist buses high above the Riviera coast. Meanwhile, the view from the expressway is everywhere more or less the same.

We do not have to place undue weight on such visible external symptoms in these assessments. We can measure the growing convergence of per capita income, standards of medical care, and welfare support (in none of these respects is America now the best-off nation). More informally we can take note of the general emphasis on consumption-oriented and hedonistic values. In the economic sphere, there is evidence that the various developed nations, to a greater extent than ever before, are affected by the same trends and forces (such as inflation or unemployment) with little lag at a given frontier. To this picture we can add the concrete influence of the multinational corporation. At the same time, interestingly enough, war has become just about unthinkable within this particular group of developed nations. From every direction come strong hints of an internationalization of basic sociological, economic, political, and cultural patterns within the non-socialist developed world.

A new, far less self-sufficing conception of America has had a second distinct source, rising domestically upward from the interior of this society. Here one must raise the question—not is the twentieth-century nation-state too small a unit of study to be meaningful in social analysis, but is it also in other respects too large? Beginning nearly two decades ago, the demands of blacks and then of a whole range of ethnic subcultures that they be regarded as self-determining entities, fit subjects for factual rediscovery and inevitable legend-making on their own, strongly captured our attention. Suddenly the generalizations conventionally


5 For a good statement of the argument for the basic similarity of social structures in industrialized nations, see Joseph A. Kahl, *Comparative Perspectives on Stratification: Mexico, Great Britain, Japan* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), ix-xvii. Examples of recent broadscale efforts to study modern society cross-nationally in a sophisticated sociological frame of reference include Margaret Scalford Archer and Salvador Giner, eds., *Contemporary Europe: Class, Status, and Power* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1971), and Peter N. Stearns, *European Society in Upheaval: Social History Since 1800* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). A newly comprehended Europe—no longer seen in terms of its own nationalistic legends or the values transmitted by its literary and political elites—is of course as much a part of this total picture of historical revision as a differently comprehended America.
applied to all Americans seemed less certain. The ensuing woman's movement suggested that earlier generalizations about "national character" may likely have applied to less than half the white population at any particular point in time. For, to take one conspicuous example, the entire theme of success-seeking, in the energetic, competitive nineteenth-century sense linked to the name of Horatio Alger, had really been limited (at most) to the male, money-making, job-oriented sphere of life. Individualism, in its classic economic meaning, which seemed so crucial to any description of basic American values in the age of industrialization, was revealed to have been an ethic almost entirely for men, not for their wives, who were expected to adhere to a very different ideal of domestic contentment and non-competitive loyalty.  

About fifteen years ago the spirit of inquiry into the history of American society suddenly became much more specific and precise. A relativizing and pluralizing of definitions reopened the entire question of an American "mainstream" and of its relation to the demographic whole. In the process there is no doubt that articulate spokesmen for minority groups, both within and beyond the scholarly profession, greatly overstated their case. The argument for the dominance of an ultimately integrationist ideal, once the out-group has achieved the dignity of a symbolic distinctiveness and a large measure of equal treatment, remained strong indeed. But such an argument now has had to proceed in a climate of forceful challenge, rather than in a serene vacuum as before. This shift in the context of discussion opened up the notion of America from the inside—just as it was briefly but revealingly torn apart by the actual ethnic and countercultural crusades of the 1960s—so that it has become more of a covering label, an expression of convenience, rather than a resonating whole.

We must face the curious paradox that what led to a crisis in social morale for the lay person by the early 1970s could prove to be liberating for the serious student of the culture. The sobering demystification of America, the new awareness that we are but one fractional (and internally fractionated) unit in a polyglot world, and that social history is composed of a vast number of separate and distinct pieces, like a mosaic that seldom stops at international boundary lines, has enabled students of American social evolution to view their subject with fewer blinders than before. Just as the idea of a holistic and autonomous America has been eroded from two directions, from abroad and from within, so the social aggregates which come partially to replace the nation-state in historical analysis may

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be more general or they may be far more sharply pinpointed and specific. In either case, the result is a release from preconceptions inherited from the older political and diplomatic history and then given a second wind, with a more literary and anthropological vocabulary, during the renewed nationalistic zeal of the early Cold War.  

If these are recent trends in our thinking, stemming from a new sense of the somewhat modest outcome of American history, many may concede their relevance to scholars who deal with the mid- and late twentieth century but still ask why these perspectives should greatly affect our view of the longer past. Historians are especially disinclined to run after what is currently fashionable and inclined to insist, perhaps with some self-righteousness, that the past be looked at in its own terms, without any hint that one is aware of later developments.

There may be a virtue in the effort to attain such deliberately self-denying discipline, and it is certainly true that the losing forces of an age—the entire spectrum present in a society at a given point in time—deserve as careful a scrutiny as the rising ones (though the aim of examining them usually turns out to be a sharpened understanding of why they lost). This is the real point of the strictures against Whig or Progressive history. But it is doubtful, in fact, if much historical writing can ever deprive itself of the resonance which comes from admitting that one knows what happened later. Awareness of eventual American unity and "greatness" is bound to affect the tone of an account of the isolated, narrowly provincial colonial society of 1700, just as knowledge of American limitations in the 1970s must enter into any rendition of our atomic diplomacy between 1945 and 1949. Similarly, we must face the ultimate prospect, however jarring it is in moral terms, of a European history in which World War II is only a brief passing episode. This should not really surprise us, if we believe in the platitude that history is always being rewritten in new ways. Simply by living longer and knowing what has followed the events previously deemed to be culminating, we arrive at a new standpoint which compels us to regard our own retrospective vision as "truer" than earlier ones.

Our understanding of earlier American history must be reshaped by the less prideful, more realistic view of the American outcome attained in the

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2 E.g., Daniel Bell, "The End of American Exceptionalism," *The Public Interest*, No. 41 (Fall 1975), 193–224, quite fully accepts the foregoing argument about the recent trend, yet continues to believe in the exceptionalist interpretations of the earlier American past made by historians who were not yet able to see beyond the myths suitable to an age of expanding American "greatness."
1970s. A new, more cosmopolitan approach to the entire American past is marked by the use of broader reference points outside the nation-state, by the constant questioning of American uniqueness even as regards the most traditional and hitherto "sacred" topics, and by a self-conscious hesitation before applying the adjective "American" to anything. This approach emphasizes awareness of relevant occurrences in other societies, no matter what the concrete subject of inquiry, so as to avoid the elementary logical error of ascribing a particular phenomenon to a distinctly American chain of cause and effect when its appearance was not limited to America.

A few examples drawn from familiar topics within American history will help show what this difference in perspectives can mean. Some of these instances may lead us to question American uniqueness altogether; others may instead suggest a more genuine and refined sense of what the national differences were. However, the overall effect of such an exercise will be to diminish the degree to which American history appears to have operated in a vacuum.

It is agreed that evangelical Christianity, moral prudery, and more sharply defined sex roles were interrelated rising tendencies in early nineteenth-century America. But it happens that the same trends appeared strongly in England at the same time. Hence these subjects, of great import in defining central areas of American behavior as well as values or character in a more nebulous sense, turn out not to be exclusively American subjects at all, but Anglo-American. Explanations limited to trends in either particular nation, British or American, will by their nature be deeply suspect, once the total extent of these unfolding social patterns has been grasped. The bare mention of this case reminds us how closely intertwined American and British domestic social history remained (far transcending such an episode as the antislavery movement) in a period often thought of as the crucial heartland of the argument for a unique American character and destiny.

Or consider the subject of how Americans evoked nature—their own virgin land—in the same decades. The point often missed by students of such literature is that early nineteenth-century Americans from Cooper and Thoreau on down saw nature through the lens of romanticism, a novel mode of perception that was of course European in origin. Only an arriv-

10 Concerning the intensification of sex roles for middle-class women, the British and American trend seems so chronologically similar as to cloud the interpretation that it stemmed directly from the industrial revolution, for the latter occurred so much later in America. See Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, and the argument (uninformed by an American comparison) in Harold Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 157–60.
ing romantic sensibility enabled the "howling wilderness" of the Puritans and the utilitarian forests of Benjamin Franklin (whose first thought on seeing them was to measure how long it took to cut down a tree)\textsuperscript{11} to be replaced by the passionately heroic imagery of the Leatherstocking tales or by the organicist contemplations, seasoned by classical allusions, at Walden pond. Americans viewed their own landscape in ways borrowed from an international literary movement, and the true pioneering was done by Rousseau, Goethe, and other members of a European intellectual elite. To be sure, the American environment held peculiarities (such as its natives) that could be seized upon by the imagination, and these are a genuine element in the emerging story. Yet at the most basic level the heroic individualism offered in variant versions by Daniel Boone legends, by images of pioneer farmers, and by Transcendentalists must all be traced to new ideas that had floated westward across the Atlantic. Without those ideas, the nineteenth-century American landscape would have seemed unrecognizably different.

Again, what are called recurrent populistic tendencies have been looked at from many angles in America, as if they expressed a characteristically native theme. Here the international frame of reference is less clear-cut. Yet, through the investigations of Laurence Wylie and others, we are aware of a deep-seated strain of skeptical suspicion of official authority at the grassroots level in much of France, occasionally erupting to the surface.\textsuperscript{12} Again, it is interesting to explore parallels between the American notion of "the people" versus "the interests" and the British working-class concept of "us" and "them."\textsuperscript{13} These and other social environments abroad need to be carefully considered before we can ascertain what is specifically American in an attitude of active (or cynical) resentment against elites.

Americans have also been credited with an unusual degree of aloofness or outright hostility toward institutions of all kinds. On the other hand, we know that church attendance has been far higher in America than in most European nations for a very long time, and that individuals will far more


\textsuperscript{13} E.g., see Richard Hoggart, \textit{The Uses of Literacy} (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 62–63, 71–72, 87. Hoggart (p.99) also develops a case for the pragmatism of the British working class. The American idea of "the interests" no doubt carried more of a tone of geographical remoteness than the British idea of "them."
readily join neighborhood associations in American suburbia than in similar British surroundings. Does the usual Tocquevillian interpretation of this evidence, distinguishing between voluntary and legally established institutions, form a meaningful explanation of these differences? Then why have Americans been relatively punctilious about their tax returns as compared with Frenchmen? Why was anarchism a smaller movement here than in much of Europe? There are arguments and counterarguments, of course, but they will never be settled without a much more extended look at the attitudes of great numbers of people toward institutions of all kinds in a multinational setting, both for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The same searchlight might be turned on the question of political democracy itself. Here lies the very core of the popular account of American uniqueness, yet from a larger vantage point the movement toward giving every adult human being the vote was the central political tendency throughout the Western world in the period since 1800. When Richard Hofstadter once was asked just what he considered to be unique about American political institutions, with wise caution he replied that mass suffrage arrived here in the 1820s and 1830s as compared with 1867 in England and that popularly based political parties were also first developed in the United States. Yet Hofstadter’s statement unthinkingly neglected the denial of the suffrage to a majority of the adult population in England until 1918 and in America until two years later. As for parties, Hofstadter failed to mention the emergence of certain surprisingly modern precursors in the England of the 1780s, not only the following of John Wilkes but also the Yorkshire Association. Quarrels can go on endlessly over these details, but one wonders whether a few decades’ precedence in similar tendencies is enough contrast on which to hang a theory of distinctive national development, when it is set against the record of forces leading everywhere in the same direction.

What about the failure of radicalism in America? Revolutionary Marxism failed in England, France, and the smaller states of Western Europe as well. This basic similarity of outcome has been lost from view in concern for a somewhat higher percentage of Communist voting, in

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France for example, over the years. But one cannot ignore the question of the nature of French Communism, as it arguably developed into something surprisingly non-revolutionary and establishmentarian. Crucially, in the critical year of 1919, when revolutionary hopes were at their peak throughout the Western world, a decisive majority of Frenchmen as well as Americans reacted with counterrevolutionary alarm, chaining themselves to unimaginatively orthodox political leaders rather than risk their existing property-oriented way of life.\textsuperscript{17} We forget that France has not had a successful revolution in over a century, and indeed not since 1848 except in the special context of a military defeat. The difference between a lingering heritage of what Louis Hartz called "feudalism” and its absence in America has been no more than the survival in France of a minority faction, itself composed of persons deeply attached to the bourgeois style of living.

The blunt fact is that socialist agitation everywhere failed to achieve its original goals, while various relatively similar versions of the welfare state were achieved throughout Western Europe, the British Commonwealth, and Japan, as well as in the United States. National variations seem distinctly minor in comparison with that single overall result. Not just Americans, but Englishmen, Australians, and Western Europeans proved decisively loyal to a modified version of the existing social system as the twentieth century advanced, and so-called American exceptionalism has not been as exceptional as all that.\textsuperscript{18} Truly militant leftism comprises a tiny minority everywhere within the post-industrial group of nations, though it can become briefly conspicuous, as in 1968, almost anywhere—in France or America alike. Only by emphasizing the milder parliamentary leftism of certain European and Japanese parties can the weakness of the American left be made to stand out as unique.

The closely related subjects of immigration and social mobility deserve attention, as they directly pertain to the legendary "American dream." Scholarly work on mobility has advanced along quantitative lines. The recent studies of Stephan Thernstrom and Thomas Kessner reveal im-
pressively high rates of mobility in major American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though European mobility rates do not seem as low as they were once pictured, and some questions remain regarding limitations in the data. The argument for American uniqueness as a "land of opportunity" is on still firmer ground if it centers upon the bedrock fact of consistently higher real wages, especially in occupations toward the bottom of the social scale that were filled by white people. In this respect there was indeed a continual contrast in America's favor from colonial times forward, as the result of a real or perceived labor shortage.

Not so clear, when set against this, are the possible later effects of the grandiose mythology of "from rags to riches," operating as an irrational lure in the migrant's mind. Increasingly we question the actual prevalence of such highflew expectations, and possibly the intensity of the work ethic itself. Perhaps the romanticized verbal expressions of the American dream of success only represented the ideology of some sectors of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century male middle-class. There is a growing case for seeing an overwhelming share of the initial movement to America and later movement within city neighborhoods as based upon logical calculations including knowledge of wage rates, employment opportunities, transportation and housing costs, and the availability of kin on the scene to cushion the change. At the bottom layer of the society, these considerations shade off into the more desperate form of movement that randomly seeks bare survival.

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Such calculations are set in motion by the basic belief in the possibility of improving one's life-chances through a change in location. And this has been the most general trend throughout the industrializing world. A belief of this kind, which is a component even in moves described as sheer necessity, appears to have impelled Englishmen to move into the new factory towns during the industrial revolution.22 Alien immigrants, moreover, became a standard part of the English scene in those early days of factory production. In Manchester by the early 1840s, some 24 percent of the entire city population was Irish, and the Irish there were subject to the same intensity of scornful dislike as in the Eastern seaboard cities of the United States.23 Though the volume and diversity of this migration into England does not compare with the American at so early a time, clearly the contrast is less absolute than it has often been pictured.

Again, the sheer degree of physical or geographical mobility within the United States has been one of the most astonishing discoveries of recent social historians. Yet European nations have not had such locally fixed populations as was long believed.24 Behind the architectural facade of a "traditional" and picturesque Southern French village, for example, lies the reality of a high degree of in- and out-migration of people, starting in the late nineteenth century.25 The degree of American peculiarity in this respect must be defined with greater care.

One does not want to simplify the explanatory account of migration unduly, whether it is within or between countries, and objective economic appraisals hardly explain all decisions to move or to stay put. For certain groups, especially the Jews, the factors of religious persecution, and of America as a nation peculiarly mild in its expression of it, was very real. But the lure of the city, whether in Europe or America, and of a change of neighborhoods within cities later on, seems for most people to have been the lure of one concretely envisioned step upward.26 The reading of a novel such as Émile Zola's L'Assommoir in conjunction with such American novels as William Dean Howells' A Modern Instance or Frank Norris' McTeague can raise anew the question of certain basic similarities in

the lives led by newly arrived rural folk in large city neighborhoods, whether in Paris, Boston, or San Francisco at the end of the nineteenth century.

At the level of the mythology itself, though we have had several penetrating studies of American "success" literature considered in isolation, more attention could be paid to the impact of such a writer as Samuel Smiles in conjunction with the rise of a similar thrift ethic among British workers in the 1850s and 1860s. In all this increasingly careful examination of life patterns, beliefs, and motives, room remains for an appreciation of American differences, especially centering on higher real wages and somewhat higher social mobility, but the added context clarifies their nature and reduces them to proper scale.

As a final thematic example of the use of international reference points in the reconstruction of American history, one might consider the topic of nationalism and imperialism. Here also the similarities between American and European state histories have gained increasing attention. Is the imperial dream so very different when it is pursued in contiguous territory rather than overseas? From the natives' point of view, the American policy of equal citizenship in the states formed by expansion or conquest merely fashioned alien rule upon them all the more vigorously—nor were Indians soon given full citizenship rights. Was the pseudo-idealism that attended our territorial outreach of a genuinely different caliber than French dreams of spreading their "civilization," as it was called, in Africa and Asia? To what extent were we directly imitating European models of imperialism in the 1890s? In this area there are again counterarguments, but the internationalization of the discussion creates the very dialogue that allows possible genuine American peculiarities to come into focus. A cross-national exploration of such attitudes may lead us to the insight that a national sense of mission and destiny paradoxically forms one of the great common qualities of the major nations in the modern world—indeed, that intense popular nationalism, stressing claims to superior collective virtue of some kind, is one key attribute of any modern society, frequently finding an echo in its historians' interpretations.

Here, then, are some major instances of topics that might profitably be explored in a less traditional light. Beyond them, however, lies the deeper concern over how one should now conceptualize the entire course of American history as it unfolds chronologically, in relation to the trend of

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28 See in particular Ernest R. May, American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay (New
the other industrializing nations. For the early colonial period, the central issue is whether, as it has been phrased, we were "born modern." That is, did American society begin on a basis already very much unlike that of Western Europe? This is the kind of question that Frederick Jackson Turner appeared to have confidently answered long ago, and it is also a broader version of the question of consequences stemming from the absence of "feudalism" in America, posed in the 1950s by Louis Hartz. Certainly the conventional view of American distinctiveness required us to have been unique almost from the very beginning. But then was American uniqueness heightened or dampened during the course of the eighteenth century—both as regards the trend of the society in the decades just before the Revolution, and as a result of the Revolution and Constitution? How was the picture affected by the supposedly greater isolation of America from Europe in the nineteenth century? Did this isolation actually intensify after 1815 in any sense beyond that of mere political caution? Did the United States drift further apart from Europe as a result of its own internal westward movement? With the coming of the industrial revolution a whole new range of questions appears. Industrialization is now often regarded as the single most fateful event of recent human history. America was the second major nation to industrialize—after England and ahead of Germany. Is there anything in this time table, or in the way in which industrialization proceeded here, which would add to a sense of American distinctiveness? Finally, according to what processes did America come more closely to resemble other nations as we move into the twentieth century, with its global wars and rapid communications?

In brief space it is possible only to sketch some major aspects of an argument that would address itself to this theme, and to take note from time to time of a few of the complexities of interpretation.

Insights into the earliest divergences between European and American society have appeared in recent writings of social historians. An initial abundance of land in America had numerous effects, only some of which Turner recognized. Because people spread out on the land, they lived further apart from each other than in Europe, and this meant a gain in life expectancy, as they were somewhat insulated from epidemics. Available land made for an initial social structure far more egalitarian (among white males). Sheer distance from England meant that all sorts of burdensome

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institutions were not transported over here, or, if they were, like the Anglican church in Virginia, they took on untraditional meanings.21 Ironically, these structural differences were at their greatest in the very same period, immediately after the foundings of colonies, when the settlers had had the least time to evolve distinctive ways of thinking.22

From a point of view that emphasizes demography and social stratification, the very fact of denser development within a limited Eastern seaboard terrain over the course of the eighteenth century meant that colonial American society grew in some respects once again to be more like the European. Land was parcelled out, until by midcentury a flow of younger sons toward the frontier was underway, leaving older communities stranded in a state of incipient decline. Greater population density in them had already moved disease rates up toward European levels, thereby curtailing the biggest single advantage of living in America—a longer span of life.23 Meanwhile, American society was becoming more unequal. Every quantitative study of wealth distribution shows a growing inequality as one moves forward in time and especially as one moves from the rural areas to the more dynamic towns.24 The well-to-do colonial elite dramatized this tendency by directly imitating the styles and customs of the English gentry, thereby emphasizing a gulf between rich and poor. By the time of the American Revolution, Richard D. Brown argues, America was fast losing its earlier distinctiveness.

Was America then growing toward England, rather than away from it? A seemingly rival interpretation points to the emergence of an American cultural consciousness in this same period, culminating quite naturally (if only after some prodding by events) in political independence. Yet, from a cosmopolitan perspective, this may not after all be so inconsistent. For the sense of an American identity meant paradoxically that in still another


22 So far as the rise of individualistic attitudes is concerned, a recent brilliant essay by Michael Zuckerman, "The Fabrication of Identity in Early America," William and Mary Quarterly, 34 (1977), 183–214, places the crucial turning point back in English history before colonization. Much argument remains, however, about the pace of its further intensification, both in England and America.


respect America could be like Great Britain. That is, it could attain the
dignity that went with national status.\footnote{In India, members of the
native elite were similarly to imitate British upper-class styles,
forging an Indian nationalistic identity modelled in many central respects on
European lines.}

The arrival of nationalism on a popular level is usually associated with
Napoleonic Europe. Erratic British policies may have brought about its
birth in America at a slightly earlier time—prematurely, so to speak. For a
long time after the 1770s it flickered somewhat fitfully, only barely surviv-
ing during the Articles of Confederation. Not until the 1820s did it take all
but universal root in the truly modern fashion. By then it was a rising
force in Europe as well. The fateful propensity of the ordinary man to
identify himself with the nation-state occurred at nearly the same histori-
cal moment on both sides of the Atlantic. What was important about the
beginnings of American nationalism was not so much that it was Ameri-
can as that it was nationalistic. Americans, like Europeans, had adopted
the primary religion of the soon-to-be industrial world.\footnote{To be sure,
American nationalism was non-monarchical, but so by this time was at least
one version of the French.}

In other respects, as we move forward into the early nineteenth century
and westward across the Appalachians, it may become necessary to con-
cede more to traditional arguments about American distinctiveness. The
extremely rapid push into the wilderness brought a temporary return to
some of the same conditions that had initially marked the Atlantic
seaboard—above all, a staggering abundance of land (needing only to be
cleared of troublesome natives). A thin spreading out once again created
more equalitarian daily circumstances even if land titles this time fell in
large share to advantaged speculators. A national ethos of republicanism
(born in the improvisational heat of the Revolution, while looking back to
the memory of the far earlier English Commonwealth) now gave ideologi-
cal sanction to impulses that were somewhat levelling.\footnote{It is import-
ant, however, to understand the limits of American “democratic”
tendencies in the early nineteenth century, and their only partial relation to
what may be unique American characteristics. Much of their import centered upon acquisitiveness to-
ward property. As an idea, laissez-faire philosophy gained ground rapidly in England as well as
in the United States during the same period. Generically unique to America, in all likeli-
hood, was the expectation of the ordinary farmer that he could hope to obtain
expansive rewards in such a landscape. To this must be added the pervasive evidence of a style of
child-rearing that rewarded assertiveness in young boys. But it is notable through all this that
no one short of Thomas Skidmore advocated confiscatory inheritance laws (such as would
have assured more genuine equality of opportunity for white males). And, at the very top of
the social structure in this period, Edward Pessen has documented the existence of a con-
tinuous elite of established wealth, surprisingly “European” in character and socially iso-
lated from everyone else. See Edward Pessen, \textit{Riches, Class and Power Before the Civil
War} (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1973).}
enormous tracts of land will no doubt possess important characteristics that set it sharply apart from all long-settled societies, whether agrarian or industrial, even if (as earlier seen) it borrowed its vision of itself from European romanticism. In this sense Turner was right. And there remains in some major respects an argument for the exceptional character of American life in those times and places where such factors have been present—mainly in the seventeenth and again in the early nineteenth centuries. But, of the total number of Americans who have ever lived, very few of them breathed under such pure frontier conditions. No less startling than the rapidity of the westward push was the quick trend toward urbanization, even in the western regions themselves. And again, as in the eighteenth century, greater population density—now accompanied by technological improvements sweeping Europe and America, and by the beginnings of industrialization—turned the society in directions that would make its differences with other dynamic societies increasingly ephemeral. This time there would be no turning back.

The most characteristic experience of modern people is to live inside dense, large-scale communities, whether these are towns, cities, or their suburbs. The cultural historian who is bent on squeezing atmospheric symptoms of uniqueness out of particular national environments in this primarily urban world must at least recognize that the total context in which such subtle embellishments can be made has been set everywhere in these fundamentally given terms, and that these terms furnish an enormous contrast with the experience of most peoples (including Americans) in all earlier centuries. Diversities abound, of course, within cities. But the most important sources of variation—between rich and poor, white and black, men and women—do not usually lend themselves to analysis along neatly national lines. We go on studying such topics as the

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* The use of Siberia and Spanish America as counterexamples to discredit this insight about the nature of frontiers disregards the differences between zones of light versus extremely heavy inflow of population. But it would be wrong to downplay the memory of the earlier colonial experience and the sanction of the republican ideology, both of them leading to the farmer’s belief that it was his “right” to own increasingly large tracts of land, producing the cultural style of the West. French peasants were also tenacious landowners, but without the scale of appetite whetted by the frontier.


* I am not persuaded that evidence concerning a mad social scramble, or the boorishness and naïve pretension of the newly rich in American cities of the early nineteenth century, e.g., in Francis Grund, Aristocracy in America (London: Richard Bentley, 1839) or in the etiquette books of the period, indicates distinctively American traits. In traditional interpretations, such evidence has usually been linked to a view of total fluidity in the upper reaches of the society, such as Pessen has now refuted. A similar sector marked by an intense striving for position, along with a rapid learning of manners, may well have existed in many countries in this and other periods, occupying a niche just below the quieter established wealth.
working class within particular countries because the customary forms of
graduate education channel us in nationally defined directions, but it is the
intrinsic state of being poor, female, or socially excluded (in the context of
an urban cash economy) that primarily serves to excite our attention. The
backdrop of similarity concerning life circumstances and aspirations
among ordinary people within a great number of modern nations must not
be lost from sight in the continued pursuit of finer distinctions.

"How very American it is that . . ." (as an opening to a conversation
about furniture, morals, or Mark Twain) might profitably be banished
from our forms of scholarly discourse while a truly studied reappraisal of
relevant specific topics is under way. At the end of such a sustained
exercise, we might go back and reread Tocqueville or Daniel J. Boorstin
with a much developed critical discrimination.

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If the older concept of distinct, autonomous national cultures surviving
in the modern period deserves critical scrutiny, the attempt to define a
suitable alternative conceptual framework immediately lands us in a
snake's nest of contending partisanships. It is far easier to urge that traditio-
nal programs in American history or American Studies are obsolete
than to specify what should replace them. I have put forth the view that
the natural unit of study comprehends the industrialized, non-socialist
nations. But such an avoidance of provincialism is only a beginning.
What, in the way of substantive guiding conceptualizations, should infuse
such study?

In fact several well-marked traditions of inquiry beckon us, seeking to
make us converts. Marxism, internally divided as never before, tries at
bottom to promote our sympathy for oppressed groups within these
societies and our estrangement from the thought processes of their
decision-makers. Most of all at present, in the writings for instance of
Immanuel Wallerstein, it attempts to imbue the entire Western intel-
ligentsia with a sense of guilt over the dealings, past and present, of
industrial nations with the rest of the globe. National differences are
assessed primarily in terms of commercial patterns, and those nations
which are "core" rather than "peripheral," in Wallerstein's vocabulary,
are those which eventually comprise very much the same group as I have
envisioned forming a natural collective unity for analysis in the modern
period.

An alternative perspective that likewise focuses upon economic de-
velopment is the now familiar theory of modernization, developed by

Walt W. Rostow and others in an explicitly anti-Marxist spirit. Unfortunately, the polemics of advocacy—that is, a defense of capitalist industrial development—infused the notion of modernization from the very first. It thus became difficult to argue both that the concept of modernization might have value as a major tool for historical analysis and that one might not entirely like the fruits of capitalist industrialism. The concept has also been plagued by troubles of another sort, purely on the analytical level. It seems notoriously hard to define just what it means. And historians have not always been able to pinpoint economic “take-offs” with precision. For these reasons the concept has come under an increasing cloud of late. Yet to abandon it would be a grave mistake if it meant lapsing back toward the routine nationalism of earlier scholarship in such fields as American history. Modernization theory has been important, at least historically, in helping to pry us loose from the crushing provincialism of the early Cold War period—an effect that Rostow may not have intended.

Marxism and modernization theory are the main rivals in providing an international perspective within the social sciences. The humanities, in particular intellectual and literary history, offer an international outlook of a different and venerable kind, centering upon the way that ideas travel across borders, mainly within the milieu of cultivated elites. Social historians increasingly write off these phenomena as a sideshow, irrelevant to the forces shaping the lives of most people. Yet the earlier example of the impact of romanticism upon widely held images of the American landscape in the nineteenth century should make us think twice before closing the door to insights generated in this conventional fashion. Moreover, the study of elites must be defended as entirely legitimate in its own right, in view of the power they wield and the intrinsic interest that attaches to the flow of ideas within them.

Clearly none of these perspectives will prevail in any unqualified sense. In scholarship a hundred flowers will go on blooming. Topics will continue to be highly specialized. The internationalization of our ultimate outlook will affect our research to its benefit if we remain aware, in a flexible fashion, of how one or more of these wider perspectives may illuminate whatever local and thematically segmented inquiry attracts us.

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43 Brown, ibid., applying the concept to early American history, succeeds in giving us fresh insight on many concrete topics, e.g., the speed of mail communication, while never satisfactorily (to my mind) defining the overall rubric under which he is writing his reinterpretation, i.e., the delimitation of his subject matter.
Especially I am impressed by the major points of agreement between modernization theorists and many Marxists, despite their intense mutual hostility. They agree—aside, oddly enough, from Wallerstein—in seeing the arrival of industrialism as the key turning-point in the history of mankind, the creator of the kinds of cities, landscapes, and patterns of human interaction which we experience today. From both traditions we obtain our sense of the fundamental break in human history that occurred during the nineteenth century. And as for the substantive definition of what distinguishes the modern period, when taken together the factory, the impersonal meritocratic bureaucracy, and technology that permits rapid travel over distances would seem to be the essential components. For cities had always existed, although their size and character greatly changed with the coming of the electric streetcar and the automobile.

Modernization theory rather than Marxism directs our attention to the recent arrival of a post-industrial stage, marked by widespread affluence, a shortening of the work week, and an emphasis in most people’s lives upon consumerism and leisure. In America this stage may have begun as early as the 1920s; in Europe it arrived in the 1950s. The shift from industrialism to post-industrialism is surely less profound than the break that occurred at the outset of industrialism, yet it is real enough to have altered the grounds on which such societies are both attacked and defended. In the early industrial period, the attack focused upon the flagrancy of human misery and the defense upon laissez-faire individualism. Now the attack is made upon the psychological consequences of monotony in work and of media-fed leisure, and upon discrimination against minorities rather than the earlier majority, while the defense points to what might be called the flagrancy of affluence and the survival of considerable liberty, especially in comparison with other sections of the world. But the proper term to describe this latest, inescapably real social stage has not yet been coined. Post-industrial is ungainly. Along with deeper analysis of its nature, as a topic in recent history rather than in futurology, should come a better label for it.

The post-industrial world, though it has a clear identity, is by no means entirely a monolith. My argument is that until lately, we have too greatly ignored its transnational similarities and that meaningful differences often involve units other than nation-states considered as wholes—not that every topic we pursue ought directly to feed into this single undifferentiated notion of the portion of the world we live in. Our empiricist instincts will continue to insure our apprehension of differences. The danger is rather that unless those instincts are counterbalanced by the kind of larger awareness I have been advocating, we shall keep on losing sight of the forest for the trees.
In terms of our research, three approaches lie open to us. The first, an attempt directly to comprehend the broad post-industrial world, will of necessity occur rarely. The second, an extension of local topics to include comparisons with other relevant social aggregates, has become widespread and may offer the most frequently available practical form for expanding one’s horizons. The third way of doing things, merely to fasten upon some local theme as if it were self-contained, carries with it the ever-present hazard of unexamined particularism, the stance of the ostrich.

We should further remind ourselves that comparisons—leading usually to the elucidation of differences within agreed similarities—may be between any two entities, not necessarily national units. Yet, from the standpoint of the earlier argument about the place of the nation-state in the modern world, there is a special value in comparisons of entities—cities, ethnic groups, or whatever—that are located within different countries. For in that way we get hints of just what weight a nation carries amid smaller and larger pieces in the mosaic. Comparisons, one is finally tempted to say, always involve some mixture, formal or informal, of intuition and quantification. Stephan Thernstrom is an intuitive historian when he maintains that a given percentage of social mobility is “high.”

Awareness of larger similarities may impress us with the relative unimportance of certain kinds of local differences, or it may refine our sense of exactly what differences do remain important. In this connection, one may posit the hypothesis—as a starting-point for explorations into local data—that in the modern period the most compelling differences have to do not with entire communities (a relatively fictive concept) but between groups of people defined by ethnicity, wealth, sex, age, and political or cognitive predisposition.

To be sure, even inside the industrial arena, differences of architecture, of region, of precise political constitution and degree of military strength, continue to exist, and some of these may have important effects. But the hypothesis would caution us against unduly magnifying their significance.

On their political side, for instance, these kinds of differences are often within elite groups, not between them on a truly national basis. Each country seems to have its more complacent and its more reform-oriented, its

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44 Too often historians proceed as if the mere discovery and elucidation of differences, the pursuit of uniqueness, were its own end. Logically this leads toward antiquarianism—the act of calling attention to anything simply because it has existed, making no effort to group individual phenomena into larger classes. Lingering effects of this bias within the discipline may still lead comparative historians such as Carl Degler (letter, American Historical Review, 79 [1974], 1304–05) to contend that the ultimate aim of international comparisons is always to explicate differences, rather than ever to weigh their meaning in light of apprehended similarities.
more dovish and more hawkish types of political leaders. The contours of partisanship are discernibly internationalized, and a standard international game is being played (by America as by everyone else) along neo-Bismarckian lines, suitably enshrouded in appropriate ideological rhetoric. When each major nation-state pursues what is called "the national interest," the similarities among nations—in this respect including most Communist nations—are further intensified.

Meanwhile, amid the continued exploration of differences, it should not be lost from sight that the texture of life as it affects most industrialized peoples becomes increasingly uniform. The division of daily and weekly existence into separate spheres of work and leisure, each now almost equally important, the bureaucratized and rationalized content of the former, the travel- and gadget-oriented content of the latter, seem strikingly similar in the various developed nations. Large-scale organizations play the major role in economic life, whether nominally they are termed public or private. Yet in the non-work realm, the individual gains certain private choices through somewhat wider moral tolerance as well as such practices as birth control. Attitudes—at least as revealed in the quantitative cross-national studies we have—do not become utterly identical. But neither are they as dissimilar as stereotypes would often propose.\(^{45}\)

On the cultural side, to ignore these trends and to continue dwelling instead upon contrasts between England and America, or between Los Angeles and San Francisco, as ritualistically conjured wholes increasingly comes to seem like a merely pleasant diversion, a conversational resource among the advantaged. It is not only to fly in the face of all the evidence concerning basic life-patterns and the spread everywhere of hedonistic values, but to obscure (by inattention) the glaring differences, for instance

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\(^{45}\) Quantitative cross-national studies of attitudes and of revealing items in personal behavior emerged in large numbers in the early 1960s, culminating in such volumes as Richard L. Merritt and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Comparing Nations: The Use of Quantitative Data in Cross-National Research* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1966) and Alexander Szalai, ed., *The Use of Time: Daily Activities of Urban and Suburban Populations in Twelve Countries* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), where sex-role differences emerged as more important than national differences. While many cross-national comparisons made during the 1960s have a somewhat dated quality in terms of the "convergence" controversy and their eager rhetorical identification with modernization, the need for careful cross-national study remains—from the point of view of this essay, especially focusing upon America in relation to Western Europe and Japan. Recent periodical indexes show about 50 cross-cultural studies per year being published in the social sciences (though nearly half of them centered in the Third World or tribal societies). From this literature, which I do not claim fully to have absorbed, I gain the impression of more revelations of national distinctions in attitude and values than in socio-economic structures, and I am impressed by the great areas of similarity as well as of difference among Danish and American youth and parents in an unusually elaborate study of childrearing patterns in both countries, Denise B. Kandel and Gerald S. Lesser, *Youth in Two Worlds* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1972).
of income, which indeed remain. The very fact that climate now becomes
an important consideration to many people in evaluating differences
among cities, leading to the growth of the so-called sun belt in America
(and to British workers' annual vacations in Spain) reveals a post-
industrial level of expectation from life which has its roots in these spreading
uniformities of attitude. (Nineteenth-century British novels do not
complain about the amount of rain.) Yet economic disparities still prevent
large numbers of Americans or Europeans from enjoying the newly prized
rewards of escape from grayness.

In taking the path that has brought us where we are, the United States
sometimes led the way. It often set the pace and other nations, originally
less affluent on a mass level, followed a bit later on. But if the forms of
change, and the hungers they seem to satisfy, turn out to be so similar,
then why should it matter all that much which particular segment of the
industrially developed world happened to display them first? Moreover,
the United States was by no means always first in important phases of
these developments. We were not the first country to industrialize; we did
not go as far as Germany in the direction of corporate monopolies; we
were not the first country to achieve a comprehensive welfare state (indeed
we have not done this even now); we were not the first major
country to give women the vote; we were not the first to build subway
lines under cities.

We were the first to build skyscrapers, the first possibly to have rec-
ognizably modern political parties, and so on. And yet this record is very
mixed, and one wonders, anyhow, just what could seem alluring about
basing an historical account on "firstness" of this sort. The kind of a race
we have all been in, not the relative standing of the competitors, should
matter to us most, as historians or as students of contemporary society.
Especially is this so when the lag between first and last nation (within this
group) seems to amount usually to no more than half a century, while the
common course of development—the race itself—poses grave dangers
for the ecological survival of the planet.

We are now witnesses to the late twentieth-century outcome of the
industrial process, and it is our most important task to try to understand
this outcome and the ways in which it came about. American uniqueness
in certain respects during relatively brief periods of the increasingly re-
move past no longer matters much except as a curiosity. It has long since
largely been swallowed up in the common processes of industrialization,
large-scale urbanization and suburbanization, and the frequent move-
ments of peoples across national borders (as job-seekers or as tourists)
which produce the characteristic patterns of life in the twentieth-century
world.
The real trend of American history—no less so for usually being unacknowledged—is toward a loss of whatever distinctiveness the society once possessed. It is a trend that gives scant comfort either to mainstream nationalists or to leftists (who commonly have their own strongly held alternative ideal "America," replete with its sense of an influential mission to perform in the world). But 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.

David Potter, after years of reflection on the subject, warned that "the close relation between nationalism and the political state warps the historian's view" in certain ways, among them that the evaluative use of the concept of nationalism "impels him to explain the origins of nationalism in terms of deep-seated, long-enduring cultural affinities among a people, or in other words to rely too heavily upon cultural factors in his explanation, even where they are tenuous." One might go a step further and ask whether the study of any particular society—and its diverse internal components—can advance any longer except in the context of studying other closely related societies. Here may be a case where customary forms of academic organization collide ever more insistently with our awareness of the social and intellectual realities. To make sense of America may require the act of reaching at least some distance beyond it. *

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46 E.g., see William Appleman Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (Cleveland: World, 1959), 212.
* An earlier version of this essay was written while the author held a Senior Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities and was concurrently a fellow of the Charles Warren Center at Harvard University. The author greatly benefited from the advice (often strongly critical) given various versions by James M. Banner, Jr., Carl Degler, David Hackett Fischer, Jack P. Greene, David D. Hall, Hugh Hawkins, John Higham, David Hollinger, H. Stuart Hughes, William R. Hutchison, Carl Kaestle, Paul Koistinen, Henry F. May, David Riesman, and Robert Wells.