# The End of American History? How "Exceptional" Was the United States?

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Once we all knew America was "exceptional" in the world. Our leaders told us so--from John Winthrop to John F. Kennedy. Foreigners agreed--from Alexis de Tocqueville to Werner Sombart. Over the past generation or so, that has all changed. To many commentators on current affairs the term "American exceptionalism" reeked of hubris. The America of segregation and lynching? The America of Vietnam? The America of Guantanamo? Exceptional indeed! More recently, historians have joined the chorus. One of our finest young historians of the United States, Eric Rauchway, disclaims a focus on American exceptionalism in his recent *Blessed Among Nations: How the World Made America* (2006), but, as his subtitle suggests, he shows us an America far more intertwined with the world than traditional narratives have supposed. Thomas Bender in his important *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (2006) is more blunt: "This book proposes to mark the end of American history as we have known it."

Bender's book, an important and impressive achievement by any reckoning, is a sustained argument against the idea that the history of the United States has been truly unique in comparison to that of other nations. Bender tells us that the American colonies existed in a larger Atlantic world, that the American revolution was one of a number of "Atlantic revolutions," that the American antislavery movement and the Civil War that it spawned was part of a much larger wave of nineteenth century liberalism, that American imperialism (beginning with continental expansion) was simply one manifestation of a larger surge of nineteenth century imperialism, that the social and political reaction to industrial capitalism was not that much different in the United States than in other major industrial nations.

Where others have seen differences in kind, Bender sees differences in degree. The sweep of his work is remarkable and the argumentation fluent. As Sven Beckert observes in a review of *A Nation Among Nations*, Bender confirms an already widespread reaction against the idea of American exceptionalism.

All of us probably would agree that a transnational perspective is commendable, but does it naturally lead into a denial of "exceptionalism"? It seems to me that something else is at work. In this, as in so many ways, the present dictates our view of the past. Liberal democracy, mass affluence, and technological progress are widespread these days. New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, may all have interesting distinctive variations, but they and the societies behind them seem to have a lot in common. It is equally true, however, that the past is another world. "Was it always thus?"

I

The idea of America as an exceptional place emerged almost concurrently with Columbus's voyages and remains alive today, partly as wishful fantasy, partly as European condescension, partly as empirical history. The wishful myth envisioned America as a new world, an Edenic place of virgin land, filled with riches and opportunity, a place in which the virtuous could make a fresh start and build a society free from all the failings of the Old World. America was, in the phrase of Thomas Paine, a place to "begin the world anew," a fount of virtue to provide an example to a decadent Europe.

European condescension depicted America (commonly understood after 1776 to be the United States) as a land of innocents out of touch with the realities of human nature. Americans were naïve and simple-minded. Europeans, understanding human nature and the world as it worked, possessed a wisdom that their cousins across the Atlantic ignored at their peril. At their worst, Americans were blundering *naifs* trying to remake the world and simply doing damage in the process. The American reaction was a folklore wary of anything European.

The myths and symbols of a new world, whether seen from the American or the European perspective, create an ideological fog that gets in the way of historical inquiry. They can neither be wholly discounted nor casually accepted. It may just be possible to gauge degrees of difference without reference to virtue or naiveté.

The American Revolution--the--culmination of a century and a half of separate development--did indeed occur in an "age of democratic revolutions," as Robert R. Palmer reminded us many years ago. But only the United States emerged from those upheavals as a functioning democracy. It was that palpable democratic uniqueness that attracted

Alexis de Tocqueville two generations later. Tocqueville KNEW that America was exceptional. His reference point was the French revolution, which had promised democracy, but had brought forth terror, dictatorship, Napoleon, national defeat, and reaction—and executed his grandfather. A liberal-minded aristocrat, he visited the United States to explore whether democracy was in the long run compatible with individual freedom.

The mid-nineteenth century surge of liberalism in Europe had a significant impact in Britain, --the one major nation in which liberal ideas had a firm foothold--but much less on the continent. The revolutions of 1848 failed to deliver their promise. Louis Kossuth's triumphal tour was across the U.S., not through the streets of Budapest. France soon found itself ruled by Napoleon III, Germany not by liberal forty-eighters (many of whom fled to the U.S.) but by Bismarck.

The first major American historians, whether gifted literary amateurs or Ph.D.-holding professionals, largely assumed a continuity between American and "Anglo-Saxon" or "Teutonic" institutions and ideas. They were usually nationalist enough to celebrate American strength and to believe that the American way might amount to a higher development. They also were patrician enough to consider American culture crude and to worry that the United States might be, in contrast to Britain or Germany, too democratic. Many important younger historians of the early twentieth century--Charles A. Beard foremost among them--were more sanguine about democracy, but impacted directly or otherwise by Marxian thought. Positing an economic basis to politics, they tacitly assumed that all industrial societies were alike and moving in similar directions.

By the time Beard became prominent Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin had put forth a distinctive interpretation of American development. Born and raised in Portage, Wisconsin, the first major American historian whose origins were west of the Appalachians, Turner retained boyhood memories of local American Indians and rough river boat men who took control of the town on Saturday nights. His father, a local newspaper editor, had been named for Andrew Jackson, the first "common man" American president.

In July, 1893, at a meeting of the American Historical Association held in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair, Turner delivered a

paper that became the most famous article ever written by an American historian—"The Significance of the Frontier in American History." What made the piece vastly influential was its emergence at a pivotal moment in American history—the country was slipping rapidly into the first truly great depression of its industrial era; labor-management strife was intense and often violent; farmers demanded a wildly inflated currency as a way of dealing with their catastrophic debt burden. The nation was in crisis. Turner cited a report by the Superintendent of the Census that for the first time in the history of the nation's decennial population count, a clearly defined "frontier of settlement" no longer existed in the western United States. The meaning, Turner declared, was profound:

"This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Thus Turner shifted the entire focus of American history away from the Old World origins of American institutions to a westward movement that determined almost everything. Denying the centrality of the educated patrician preserving and passing along a European past, he substituted a distinctly American type, the restless democratic pioneer.

From the beginning, Turner's argument captured imaginations. Not only did it give the United States a new and distinctive past, it was filled with ideas that were all the more powerful for being only half-developed. Turner made no firm distinction between "the West" (an ill-defined geographical region) and "the frontier" (a line of settlement). He eloquently laid out several phases of what might be called a frontier process: "Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by."

In romantic prose that James Fenimore Cooper would have envied, he tells us how the frontier at first breaks down all the accoutrements of civilization:

"The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from

the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long, he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox fashion."

Eventually, of course, civilization sets back in, "but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs . . . . here is a new product that is American."

American in what way? The frontier promoted nationalism, Turner claimed, because its inhabitants looked to the national government for protection and identity, not to specific colonies or states. "Mobility of population is death to localism." The frontier was a melting pot that created an initial composite American nationality. It gave abundant opportunity to the venturesome and hard-working in the form of "free land," the availability of which fostered democracy and provided a "safety valve" for the unsuccessful in Eastern cities. It fed a national mood of optimism. It promoted individualism.

> The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom . . .

The most important effect of the frontier, Turner declared, had been the promotion of democracy. The primitive, leveling character of frontier society, he declared, had produced an acceptance of universal suffrage and resulted in a "democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds." The result was a flawed society whose weaknesses were the obverse of its strengths.

The critics came thick and fast from the beginning. Some, often men of patrician descent at Eastern universities, rejected Turner whole

cloth and reasserted the primacy of a Northern European heritage, usually conceived of as British or German. But, for the most part, the first two or three generations of Turner critics took him seriously. Some sought to refute important details, such as the "safety valve" idea. Others observed that frontiers elsewhere—nineteenth-century Siberia, for example—had not led to democracy. By the later twentieth-century, a group of "New Western historians" was in full revolt against not only the specifics of the Turner argument but also its atmospherics. Turner, they thought had created the illusion of a splendid, triumphal, national advance across the continent. What they saw was misery, oppression, despoliation of the environment, and genocidal extermination of Native Americans. The title of Richard White's history of the American West, *It's Your Misfortune, and None of My Own*, said it all.

A former teacher of mine—a historian of England—never missed a chance to take a shot at Turner. "Turner was not a historian," he often declared. "Turner was a poet." The description is not without merit. The frontier essay possessed its obligatory quota of footnotes, but it was not an empirical investigation. It demonstrated instead that well-expressed speculative essays are the stuff of historical thought. The looseness of Turner's prose allowed for the assimilation of many of the criticisms of detail into an expanded synthesis. It was one thing to alter or amplify a large general idea, quite another to refute it altogether. In the latter task, the New Western historians met with frustration. Indeed, they simply called Turner's work to the attention of a new generation of educated readers, many of whom were seduced by his prose.

The allure of Turner's argument is one of intuitive credibility. The "frontier" after all began at Jamestown and Plymouth Rock, then progressed for nearly 300 years across a vast continent. During this time, a "West" always existed on the other side of that frontier line. This was a movement that involved the migrations and experiences of tens of millions of Americans; it captured the imaginations of more tens of millions who stayed behind. How could it have failed to have a defining impact on the American character? Historians who ask large questions about the American experience ignore Turner at their peril. But they need also to ask more carefully than he just what the "frontier process" impacted. Were Western settlers really "European"? Just what social and cultural baggage did they carry with them? And to what extent was it

transformed?

Turner not only explained the past, he predicted the future. “The frontier has gone,” he declared, “and with its going has closed the first period of American history.” The second period, he made clear in subsequent writings, would be one in which American society would be less mobile and dynamic, more stratified and more prone to class conflict. Having laid out the first historical explanation of American exceptionalism, Turner forecast its demise, implicitly predicting an America that would be more like Europe. This America probably would be a nation in which the two most conspicuous forces would be barons of big capitalism and a resentful working class turning toward revolutionary socialism. Turner’s prediction—in effect of the end of American exceptionalism—lent special force to his historical argument. It helped shift attention to another version of the concept.

II

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the rise of American industrial capitalism and a working class notwithstanding, most European intellectuals accepted as a truism the idea that the United States was an “exceptional” society. The most famous of these was the German social scientist Werner Sombart, who grappled with the different relationships between class identity and political mobilization by asking: *“Warum gibt es in den Vereignigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?”* At the time Sombart wrote his small volume in 1906, socialist parties in France and Germany were powerful; the Labour party was beginning to emerge in Britain. Marxists and those influenced by Marx envisioned an increasingly immiserated proletariat, rising class consciousness, and an eventual socialist revolution. The scenario seemed plausible for Europe, but the United States, already the world’s greatest industrial power and presumably the one that should be farthest along the road to that revolution, had the least significant socialist movement in the world.

Sombart’s most quoted conclusion was a materialist one: Socialism in America had foundered on “shoals of roast beef and apple pie.” The answer was plausible, although attempts by historians to investigate comparative working-class living standards from the early twentieth century are difficult and inconclusive. Some anecdotal evidence is telling. In 1917, Leon Trotsky briefly lived in New York City with his family. Their apartment, he recalled was in a “workers district” and was

"equipped with all sorts of conveniences that we Europeans were quite unused to: electric lights, gas cooking range, bath, telephone, automatic service elevator, and even a chute for the garbage." Of course, even a garbage chute could not deter Trotsky from revolution. The accommodations sound rather plush for most American workers in 1917, but it is a fair assumption that they lived and ate better than their European brothers. Would this in and of itself deter revolutionary sentiment?

Selig Perlman, an economist and historian of the labor movement at the University of Wisconsin in the early part of the twentieth century, added another dimension to the character of the American working class when he asserted that it (like Americans in general) was "property-conscious." Other scholars have shown that *immigrant* workers in America, often living in poverty or near-poverty, appear to have purchased homes at an even higher rate than native-born Americans. In Europe, the home-owning worker was uncommon. In America, he was fairly typical. The propertied worker was unlikely to be a revolutionary and more likely to think of himself as petite bourgeois.

A long history of access to suffrage reinforced that self-image. By and large, from the founding of the American republic in 1776 workers, small farmers, and other less than middle-class types were full citizens. There were excluded groups to be sure and struggles for suffrage here and there, but by comparison with European restraints they were modest and mostly disappeared in the first half of the nineteenth century. In general, the American lower orders did not have to fight for the right to vote. In theory at least, they usually could run for political office. Into the second half of the nineteenth century they differed in this respect from their counterparts in every significant European nation.

## III

Sombart, Perlman, and other pioneers in the "Why is there no socialism?" inquiry asked their questions at a time when the American working class was distinct from the middle class and when there was some rough resemblance between European and American social hierarchies. By the 1950s, that resemblance had disappeared. An impoverished Western Europe was still recovering from the devastation of the Second World War. There, socialism seemed a mighty political force.

Americans, working-class and otherwise, were prospering as never before, moving to split-level three-bedroom homes in suburbs, driving back and forth to work in monstrous automobiles. In 1949, per capita income in the United States was $1453; in the United Kingdom, $723; in the Netherlands, $502. It was by no means clear that the truly glaring differences between European want and American wealth were temporary.

By then, American history was at another critical turning point—the ten years after the end of World War II in which the United States completed its transition from inward-looking isolationist nation to hegemonic great power with worldwide interests. For the American intelligentsia, whether policy formulators, Cold War critics, or reasonably disinterested scholars attempting to make sense of a new world, it became imperative to relate the American experience to that of the rest of the world.

In 1954, David Potter's book *People of Plenty* would argue that material abundance long had set America apart from the rest of the world. Surely, there was much to be said for the argument. America long had possessed a special allure as a land of vast natural resources and huge tracts of fertile soil, which pioneers exploited recklessly. Their very existence had fueled the world's belief that the United States was a land of opportunity. Potter systematically related the fact of abundance to American social mobility, political democracy, and the nation's sense of a larger mission in the world. Moreover, he shrewdly argued that abundance was an underlying assumption of Turner's frontier thesis.

Potter drew earnestly on a large corpus of theory from the major social sciences. The discipline of history, he believed was theoretically impoverished. A brilliant and earnest scholar, he made no effort to conceal his sense that the task of defining national character was problematic. His scholarly caution, however, led to a hedging that leaves one longing for Turner's blithe certainties! *People of Plenty* was justly admired when it was published and still holds a place on graduate student reading lists a half-century later. But even in the world of the American Studies seminar, one wonders how much it actually is read.

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For three other important historians of the crucial decade, the struggle with the Soviet Union—a struggle that seemed driven by

ideological issues—provided an obvious starting point. Their work explored the relationship between ideas and politics, rejected revolutionary ideology, and discovered an American nation remarkably united in its core values.

Richard Hofstadter, surely the most important American historian of the last half of the twentieth century, delivered the first statement in his classic book, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948). American political leaders from the Founding Fathers through Franklin Roosevelt, he argued in his introductory essay, had in the main shared the values of individualistic capitalism and conducted their conflicts within that large consensus. To put it another way, the battles of American history, so large and divisive in the minds of most scholars of the national past, really needed to be understood as noisy spats between big capitalists and small capitalists. A once half-believing Marxist who still thought of himself as a radical, Hofstadter had written the introduction as an afterthought at the behest of his editor; it faithfully summarized the disenchantment with the limited possibilities for change in American life.

Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Genius of American Politics* was published in 1953, the same year in which he had appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities to renounce a transitory affiliation with the Communist party of the United States and proclaim his faith in "the unique virtues of American democracy." It, even more than Hofstadter's book, is best understood as the work of a recovering Marxist. Both were among a prominent group of American intellectuals who had grappled with Marxism in the 1930s, rejected it, and had come away with a generalized revulsion against all-encompassing ideologies. (Other highly visible members of the club—a diverse and contentious lot—were the sociologist Daniel Bell, who forcefully proclaimed "the end of ideology" at the end of the fifties and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who a generation later would still insist that America needed to be understood as Experiment rather than Destiny.)

The Boorstin of the early 1950s was at the extreme end of this group. It is rather jarring to read him fifty years later. Far more sharply than other exponents of American exceptionalism, he attacked "Europe" in scathing terms as the birthplace of nazism, fascism, and communism:

> For the first time in modern history, and to an extent

> not true even in the age of the French Revolution, Europe has become the noisy champion of man's power to make over his culture at will. . . . Europe has not yet realized that the remedy it seeks is itself a disease.

Having told Europe that America had nothing to learn from it, Boorstin then surprisingly declared that America has nothing to teach it:

> To understand the uniqueness of American history is to begin to understand why no adequate theory of our political life can be written. It will also help us to see why our institutions cannot be transplanted to other parts of the world. . . . we should not hope to convert peoples to an American theory of government or expect to save western Europe from communism by transplanting American institutions.

Assuming that an explicit American political theory was unnecessary because the nation had a satisfactory equivalent, he coined the term "givenness"—"the belief that values in America are in some way or other automatically defined: *given* by certain facts of geography or history peculiar to us." The widespread satisfaction of Americans with their lot, the need of diverse immigrant groups to redefine themselves along the lines of a common American ideal, the very majesty of the American landscape—all tended to validate an existing status quo. These in turn had provided a continuity of historical experience that stood in sharp contrast to that of a Europe that had endured more than two millennial of repeated violent upheaval.

Thus, the great glory of American political thought was that America was successful because it had *no* ideology.

The first task of dealing with *The Genius of American Politics* is to get past the concept of "givenness," which seems at once hopelessly mystical, empirically mushy, and crassly anti-intellectual. To grapple with it seriously, however, would require one to wander down various twisting alleys of epistemology and ontology, a process likely far more dangerous to my health and reputation than an after-midnight walk through New York's Central Park. The best course is to take a cue from Boorstin himself and simply dismiss it as an unnecessary intellectual diversion.

What made Boorstin's argument compelling and worth confronting was his assertion of a broad historical non-ideological consensus through the entire sweep of American history. He relentlessly applied his formula to the most unlikely of subjects—the Puritans, a group heretofore defined as obsessed with theological doctrine; the American Revolution, allegedly motivated by an explicit ideology of individual rights; and the American Civil War, long believed to have had something to do with issues of race, natural rights, and assumptions about the ideology of the Declaration of Independence.

It is Boorstin's treatment of the civil war—the Western world's bloodiest conflict in the century between 1815-1914—that leaves one especially rattled. Somehow, a common North-South agreement in principle on federalism and other constitutional tenets becomes more important than a generation-long argument about slavery that eventually consumed the lives of more than 600,000 Americans, North and South. One can only recall Richard Hofstadter's commentary. Imagining surviving Union and Confederate soldiers looking out over a battlefield populated with corpses and the terribly wounded as far as the eye could see, he has them saying to each other: "Thank God, we had no fundamental disagreements." Equally jarring is Boorstin's indifference to the problem of race in the nation's history.

The consensus approach to American history nonetheless possessed considerable merit. The question with which Boorstin had some problems involved the terms of the consensus. In later books, he argued that Americans were a uniquely practical and problem-solving people, natural pragmatists in the popular sense of the word. He also shied away from politics toward the social and cultural history of everyday life. No one of note has attempted to develop his thesis of the lack of ideas in American life. Rather the arguments have been about just what sort of ideas.

That task was left to Louis Hartz, a political scientist with a primary interest in political thought and culture. His *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) was the last and ultimately most influential statement of American exceptionalism during the crucial decade. Hartz subordinated men to ideas, arguing that the history of the United States needed to be understood as occurring almost entirely within the tradition of modern liberalism, broadly understood as an emphasis on the individual as the

basic unit of history and a belief in fundamental liberties. Liberalism thus defined, Hartz declared, was most prominently represented by the English philosopher John Locke, whose name became Hartz's semi-mystical shorthand for the determining force in American history. His view of the conflicts in American history as being mainly between Whigs and democrats was congruent with Hofstadter's sense that it was all a fuss among capitalists. He agreed with Boorstin that America's experience and political values were not readily exportable to the rest of the world.

Hartz's main reference point was, of course, Europe, seen in the grand tradition of American exceptionalism as a continent with a long and dark history of truly fundamental conflict. When Hartz wrote, Eastern Europe was under Soviet control; Franco ruled in Spain, Tito in Yugoslavia; Greece, less than a decade removed from its civil war, was bitterly divided between monarchist and left-wing socialist factions; France and Italy had large, noisy Communist parties, equally large socialist parties, and notoriously unstable governments. Clearly, the range of ideologies was much larger than in the United States and the sentiments behind them more explosive.

Why had Americans been spared all this? Why was "Locke" dominant in the United States, but not in Europe? Hartz cited the preeminent foreign interpreter of American civilization, Alexis de Tocqueville, who observed that Americans had been "born free" by virtue of having settled a wilderness in which it was possible to begin a new society without the impediments of an old one. American history had begun without an entrenched feudal system in place, no decaying ancien regime to overthrow in a bloody, bitter social upheaval, no reactionary remnants to struggle for a restoration, no centuries of rigid and immobile class distinctions.

Moving relentlessly through American history, Hartz found "Locke," and one variety or another of liberalism. From time to time, he also threw in someone named "Alger"—a reference to the writer Horatio Alger and the protagonists he created—ambitious, hard-working young men who seized chances offered to them and moved up in the world. Much less developed than Locke, "Alger" was a clear reference to the Calvinist presence in American thought. Perhaps because he preferred a more secular figure, Hartz said little about Calvinism. Yet from the

earliest days of the Pilgrim and Puritan settlers, Calvinist ideas had occupied a primary role in American culture.

The Calvinist tendency to connect virtue and salvation with worldly success surely encouraged the development of capitalism. Its skepticism about human nature led naturally to liberalism's imperative of checks on unlimited power. Its emphasis upon a contractual relationship between man and God led naturally to an assumption of contractual relationships in all aspects of human life, including the relationship between rulers and ruled. (Locke himself had an ambivalent relationship with seventeenth-century Calvinism. He seems to have been attracted to its liberal elements while repelled by its frequently authoritarian practices. Their point of convergence, however, was powerful and apparent—the centrality of the social contract.) Calvinism was clearly the dominant strain of American religious thought during the three centuries after the earliest settlements. John Patrick Diggins persuasively argued that the American liberal tradition has two icons—Calvin and Locke. (He never, however, got around to the comic strip.)

The major problem with the Hartz-Diggins liberal paradigm is its implicit assumption that the American experience can be abstracted as political philosophy. It has great allegorical value but insufficient tangible connection to the wide range of experiences that go into the formation of a national character. It is here perhaps that Turner's "frontier" assumes powerful resonance with its reference to consecutive waves of settlement that reenact the social contract time and again through much of American history while creating opportunities for those ready to take risks and strive for opportunity in a new setting. Potter's theme of abundance is likewise congruent with the Hartz-Diggins perspective; it refers not simply to the presence of vast natural resources, but also, to a zeal to exploit them—"the ventures and struggles of the pioneer, the exertions of the workman, the ingenuity of the inventor, the drive of the enterpriser, and the economic efficiency of all kinds of Americans, who shared a notorious addiction to hard work." "Liberalism" as defined by Hartz and Diggins meshes nicely with Boorstin's revulsion from Marxism and the emphasis in much of his work on American practicality and enterprise.

Does this body of work vindicate the idea of American exceptionalism? It certainly makes for a strong case. The range of ideological politics in America has historically been considerably narrower

than in most European countries; the authority of the state, ruling elites, and bureaucracies has been more constrained; the breadth of opportunities greater; the median standard of living richer.

But other issues give one pause. Writing on the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States, Britain, and Germany, I did not find "American exceptionalism" to be a very useful concept. The large, general differences between the US and Europe may have been there, but they seemed to me overshadowed by vital *national* differences that did not coincide with continental distinctions. There was one especially inescapable problem: The core differences between British and German political cultures were enormous. One was a liberal democracy that sought consensus in hard times, the other a bitterly divided authoritarian culture that embraced Nazi totalitarianism. In contrast, Britain and the United States had much in common; their bedrock commitments to liberal ideals made distinctions in institutions and styles of leadership seem trivial by comparison. Stanley Baldwin, Neville Chamberlain, and Franklin Roosevelt, despite large differences in experience and background, had far more in common with each other than Baldwin and Chamberlain had with Hitler. The electorates that went to the polls in 1935 to return Baldwin and Chamberlain and in 1936 to return Roosevelt shared values far different than those of the Germans who voted with near unanimity for Hitler's latest plebiscite.

This brings us to the other side of the coin—the difficulty of generalizing about "Europe." Long ago, scholars trying to make use of the Hartzian formula realized that there was a clear distinction in degrees of liberalism among the nations of Europe, and that the distinction ran roughly from the North and West, where it was greatest, to the South and East, where, for the most part, it diminished. Have European nations simply been characterized by differences in degree. Have there been no differences in kind? Have there been exceptional nations in Europe?

A few years ago, shortly before leaving the United States to spend a semester as the Sackler Professor of American history and culture at the University of Leiden, I spent some time leafing through one of the great works of nineteenth-century American historical writing, John Lothrop Motley's *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*. Motley's grand narrative concludes with the relief of the Spanish siege of Leiden, the triumphal founding of its university with its motto *Praesidium Libertatis*

(Bastion of Liberty) in 1575, and the establishment of the United Netherlands. It takes a moment for an Anglocentric historian to realize that these events predated the English defeat of the Spanish armada by more than a dozen years and the founding of the Jamestown colony in America by a generation. The Dutch achievement, Motley asserts, was the seminal event in a long historical process that led to parliamentary government in England, to the American revolution, and to other triumphs of liberty in the Western world. If Motley were writing today, he doubtless would call the rise of the Dutch republic the first victory of modern Western liberalism.

Motley's argument strikes me as having much merit. The early Dutch nation stands in sharp contrast to the rest of continental Europe as an incubator of liberalism in the early modern era. It extended a large degree of tolerance to the Catholicism it had defeated. It harbored the heretical Jewish pantheist Baruch Spinoza, who must have been even more repugnant to the Calvinist establishment. Holland provided refuge not only to John Robinson and his Pilgrims, but also to John Locke for five critical years. And when England had its liberal revolution, Holland provided it with a new king and queen. Locke returned to his native land with them. I will leave the issue of Dutch exceptionalism to colleagues who know far more than I, but it does appear to me that at one point in its history the Dutch nation was indeed exceptional and critically so.

Issues of national exceptionalism should remain of interest to historians, but they lack contemporary immediacy. The nations of the Western world are now more alike than they ever have been in their unprecedented widespread affluence, social mobility, and embrace of liberal democracy. It is easy to believe that national differences are marginal, that all peoples have the same emotions and aspirations; the hard facts of history, whether ancient or recent, tell a different story. True national exceptionalism may be rare; it may be, as is likely the case with the Dutch, simply a phase in the long history of a country or a people. National differences persist. Many are small and manageable. Some involve huge and enduring gaps of perception and values. When these collide, they can create a lot of history, much of it unlovely. The denial of exceptionalism usually is accompanied by a denial of fundamental differences among nations and peoples.

Unfortunately, the end of history is not yet with us.

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