

# H-Net Reviews

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Jonathan M. Hansen. *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American Identity, 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xxii + 255 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-31583-6; \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-31584-3.

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## American Patriotism: Lost and Found?

In the introduction to *The Lost Promise of Patriotism*, Jonathan Hansen explains that he began his project shortly after the first Gulf War in 1991. The book went to press soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. With these events as bookends, it is small wonder that Hansen's work on the Progressive Era draws frequent parallels to our contemporary battles for control of patriotic language. For this reason and others, this book is a highly readable example of contemporary American intellectual history. It analyzes a cohort of critical voices in American politics from 1890-1920—a group that includes William James, Jane Addams, Eugene Debs, John Dewey, and Randolph Bourne. Hansen argues that a common ideological thread binds these disparate thinkers together, an oppositional civic affinity that he calls “cosmopolitan patriotism.” Before the political atmosphere of the First World War stifled overt dissent in the United States, this nuanced and expansive formulation of American citizenship offered an alternative to militarism and racism. This is the lost promise of patriotism referenced in the title.

Hansen's analysis is finest in his treatment of philosopher and psychologist William James's opposition to the 1898 Spanish-American War and the subsequent occupation of the islands of Cuba and the Philippines by the U.S. military. James's anti-imperialism evoked the ire of one of the era's intellectual titans: New York governor and “Rough Rider” Theodore Roosevelt. Hansen sets the stage for this battle with a skillful foray into the polit-

ical economy of the nineteenth-century United States, a tour that begins with ancient conceptions of republicanism and civic virtue as understood by Alexis de Tocqueville and includes a sophisticated reading of the era of corporate consolidation. Hansen returns to James's attempts to articulate an opposition to colonizing the Philippines based not on racist fears but upon sympathy for the people who resisted occupation by a foreign army. Lacking direct contact with the citizens of this Pacific archipelago, James nevertheless rejected the easy syllogism offered by Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson that equated the “uncivilized” Filipinos with the “savage” Indians of the Americas. Instead he asked Americans to nurture a fellow-feeling or solidarity with the human beings of the islands who sought self-determination and liberty—principles that were consonant with founding ideals of the United States.

The next two chapters attempt to link cosmopolitan patriotism to a trio of political activists, Eugene V. Debs, Jane Addams, and W. E. B. DuBois, by examining how formative experiences influenced their conception of who counted as an American. The quality of the second chapter falters because the observations that Hansen reaches about the three leaders do not rise far above a synthesis of arguments made by the major biographers of each subject. The book regains its footing in the third chapter, where Hansen argues that DuBois, Addams, Debs, and education theorist John Dewey expanded the ideal of American citizenship common to the early twen-

tieth century beyond materialism and “rampant individualism” through the skillful use of the rhetoric of republicanism and reciprocity.

The fourth chapter reintroduces William James and discusses a split among public intellectuals regarding how to meet the challenge of increasing diversity and economic inequality. The cosmopolitan patriots rejected both the crabbed defense of Anglo-Saxon superiority offered by conservatives as well as the liberal pluralism of Horace Kallen. But as a doctrine of American identity and political belief, cosmopolitanism remains difficult to fix. For example, Eugene Debs transcended the perspective of his middle-class childhood in Terra Haute, Indiana to become a powerful champion of American workers. On the subject of racial equality, the labor leader groped slowly towards opposing segregation and could not agree that there was a “‘Negro problem’ apart from the general labor problem” (p. 100). While Dubois applauded much of the Socialist platform, he chastised the Party on its failure to challenge racial inequality.[1] Furthermore, the gradations that Hansen draws between the cosmopolitanism of Jane Addams and the pluralism of Kallen, not to mention Randolph Bourne’s “Trans-National America” (1916), remain subtle. As Hansen rightly argues, these writers were describing a form of American patriotism that did not yet exist. The opacity also resulted from the rhetorical style employed by these authors, whose sketched metaphors questioned whether American diversity would yield a “hallelujah chorus” or a cacophony of dissonant and mutually unintelligible voices. And occasionally, there appeared internal contradiction within their beliefs. At one point, Hansen must rescue Addams from slipping outside of cosmopolitanism, by arguing that her public praise of Israel Zangweil’s *The Melting Pot* (1908) did not reflect her true ideas on immigrant assimilation.

In the final third of the book, Hansen shows how the cosmopolitan patriots briefly created an intellectual space to fundamentally reconsider American loyalty before it was crushed by the weight of political repression during World War I. Eugene Debs recast Americanism in the mold of justice for workers and a repudiation of

corporate consolidation. William James and Jane Addams famously explored how Americans might express civic love without recourse to warfare, either through development of a “moral equivalent” or by linking the national destiny to the forces of production and regeneration instead of destruction. The cosmopolitans also proposed that the United States reorder its relations with other states to emphasize cooperation. By 1919, such sentiments were either dismissed with scorn by pro-war voices or prosecuted as sedition. But the defeat of these principled stances against militarism did not come solely from outside. In the case of W. E. B. DuBois’s call for African Americans to “close ranks” in support of the war effort, Hansen argues that the civil rights leader compromised his anti-militarism to further political and personal ambitions.

Overall, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism* is a provocative and strong effort to unite a wide range of influential public intellectuals under the banner of an alternative mode of civic loyalty. Hansen provides a much-needed corrective to the view that early twentieth-century American patriotism was the exclusive province of nativists and jingoes, even if the book must occasionally contort the cosmopolitans’ views to fit the rubric. Indeed, what unites these thinkers is their almost idiosyncratic fashion of reconciling criticism of the United States with loyalty to the ideal of America. The book does not offer a “useable past” for dissident American patriots to emulate today as much as extend our insight into the difficulty in recasting patriotism amidst wartime. Readers from outside Hansen’s subfield may feel frustration that the book does not engage the tools of nationalist theory more directly, especially the idea of civic nationalism which Gary Gerstle used in *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (2001). This omission complicates the task of comparing this work with other studies of the era and across national boundaries. Nevertheless, students of nationalism will profit from consideration of Hansen’s arguments.

Note

[1]. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. DuBois: Biography of a Race*, vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 419-421.

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