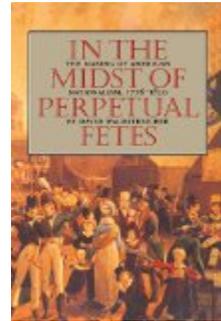


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Waldstreicher. *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism 1776-1820*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. ix + 364 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4691-9; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2384-2.

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Since the days of Cleisthenes, some 2,500 years ago, politics and nationalism have been intimate and convenient bed-fellows. The idea of “a people” or “a nation” has proved enduringly useful to political leaders and politicians of all ideological casts and has been used to underwrite programs as diverse as foreign invasions, German National Socialism, and the American New Deal. Nationalism has proved such a useful and ubiquitous political tool because it so effectively binds together disparate—sometimes even warring—factions in society. It is this idea of nationalism as a political tool that David Waldstreicher explores in *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*.

Unlike traditional approaches to nationalism, this is a book about the construction of nationalism in the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary worlds. Nationalism in Waldstreicher’s view, was not the creation of an a priori idea of ethnic, racial, or other sanguinary identity, but a collective identification that was forged from the public celebrations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Together with an increasingly far-reaching press, which extended symbolic political participation well beyond the bounds of the male voting public, celebrations created a new public sphere in the early days of the new nation. In this broad view, the history of nationalism is the story of the creation of rituals, public enactments that conveyed a sense of solidarity while they simultaneously contained and defused social and economic tensions.

*In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* begins with the mobilization of popular energies that underpinned the success of the American Revolution, but also represented its greatest challenge. In a new country with a population acutely divided along the lines of race, class,

gender, and region, one of the most pressing questions became how to contain social and economic contention while reconciling the competing visions of elites and common people. The answer proved to be a set of “national” celebrations—derived from English rituals and celebrations and hastily made-over to suit American purposes—that, spread through the medium of the revolutionary press, proffered a collective identity and a temporary sense of common purpose during the course of the Revolutionary War. By permitting Americans—especially white, adult males, but potentially women, African-Americans, even children—to participate actively or symbolically in the revolutionary movement, the new public sphere of nationalistic ritual became a venue for the construction of popular nationalism.

In one sense, the remainder of the book is a study of the extension and refinement of this fundamental process. The attempts of American elites to maintain their hold on power by extending national rituals into the 1780s met with surprising success. As Waldstreicher points out, much of this success came from the unsettled nature of the era. In the aftermath of revolution, wealth, personal identity, and even language seemed to float free from their previous meanings and everything—including the question of popular political participation—was called into question. Both the Constitution and the Grand Federal Processions that followed its ratification, provided a new, unified discourse that successfully, if temporarily, submerged the diversity of representations that had bubbled up during the Revolutionary years.

But only temporarily. The price of maintaining order through the deployment of nationalistic sentiments was the grudging involvement of ordinary people in the po-

litical process. As intra-elite rivalries and divisions came increasingly to occupy the 1790s and early decades of the nineteenth century, the need for popular support became ever more acute and Federalists and Democratic-Republicans alike competed to devise celebrations that would gather support for their nascent party organizations. The process was never easy, for leaders of both parties faced a formidable obstacle in what Timothy Breen has called the “persistent localism” of the early American public sphere. [1]

The problem for leaders seeking consciously or unconsciously to create political parties, was to link local and national politics, thereby overcoming the persistent popular desire to keep government and politics local affairs. It has long been clear that something fundamentally changed in American politics during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Before 1800, localism defined the outlook of non-elite Americans. But beginning with the rise of the Jeffersonians and culminating in Andrew Jackson’s campaigns of 1824 and 1828, true national politics emerged. That nationalism continued to have its basis in local politics, but by the 1820s ordinary Americans (at least voting males) defined themselves as “Americans” at least as much as they conceived of themselves as “New Yorkers” or “New Englanders.”

This much has been well-understood, but what has been missing in historical accounts of this transition is convincing explanation. It is here that *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* makes its greatest contribution. In his long and complex discussion of the uses to which Democratic-Republicans put the rituals of nationalism, Waldstreicher reveals how the rituals of nationhood allowed local participation in national affairs while permitting even those beyond the political nation—women, for example—to participate in direct, palpable ways. Here, in short, was the cultural mechanism that would make national politics the personal affairs of millions of Americans for more than a generation.

If the early decades of the nineteenth century marked the nativity of an inclusive national politics, were there effective limits to its use and deployment in early national society? Could well-orchestrated festivals and the mass press really encompass all Americans? In his concluding section, Waldstreicher turns to the looming and increasingly urgent importance of racism in American culture and society. Like political party organizers before them, white colonizationists and free black community leaders battled mightily for the mantle of nationalism, in the process pushing the capacity of nationalist

rituals to its limits. Like so much else in early nineteenth-century society, racism defined the boundaries of actual and symbolic inclusiveness in America. White society would not allow even the symbolic participation of African-Americans in their rituals of nationalism.

The value of a good book can be measured in two ways: in the things it tells us and in the things it doesn’t, but encourages us to ask. In the *Midst of Perpetual Fetes* is no exception. On the one hand, it provides us with a detailed and convincing analysis of the construction of nationalism in early national America. On the other hand, it leaves a large and important question unanswered.

Nationalism emerges from this study as a particularly powerful cultural formation, a formation uniquely able to neutralize the myriad conflicts of the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary eras. We are left, however, with the question of how to account for this unique power. Does the power of nationalism reside in its essentially ambiguous or multivocal nature, a nature that allows for multiple interpretations of its meaning? In this sense, by absorbing the social distinctions and divisions among groups contending for its definition, nationalism can be seen as a distraction from broader social and economic issues—a form of Lukacsian false consciousness. [2] Or was it that social divisions and identities were themselves so essentially weak and protean that people had not yet divided the world into rigid, conflicting categories such as classes? This would have made the task of nationalism an easy one. Yet the same era that witnessed the creation of nationalism also witnessed the construction of the concept of class, a concept that was not easily assimilated into a mediating nationalism in the early nineteenth century. [3] In fact, faced with proliferating ideas of class, nationalism proved surprisingly fragile and ineffectual. In the long run, the most productive answer to the question of the power of nationalism might well come from the construction of a Foucaultian genealogy or, alternatively, a Derridean turn to an innate concept of human justice. [4] But however it is addressed, the question of the power of nationalism is central to a complete understanding of nationalism as a cultural phenomenon.

Waldstreicher chooses to elide these larger issues, claiming that “to uncover the metaphysics of national identity... [is to] become prisoners of it (p. 141).” This is a good postmodernist argument, but metaphysics is not really the issue. We needn’t hypothesize some essentialist notion of national character applicable across historical time and space as the only means of analyzing nationalism. We do, however, need to understand

nationalism's power as more than a sum of cultural techniques. This is especially true if we are to understand the enduring power of nationalism to mobilize ordinary men and women. Nationalism is easiest to understand among America's elite: throughout history, an amalgam of nationalism and religion has always been the ideology of choice of powerful minorities seeking to maintain social order and their hold on the reins of government. By deploying these cultural constructions through the pulpit or press, elites have sought to construct a fantasy of equivalence among unequal and potentially rebellious members of society.

In this sense, elite recourse to nationalistic rituals is perfectly understandable: no elite can long remain in power by emphasizing the asymmetries of power in which they alone benefit. Simple interest thus goes a long way toward explaining conservative thought. But understanding popular compliance requires more. It is not clear that ordinary men and women have an economic or political interest in nationalism, yet the power of nationalism stems from its successful mass appeal. The laments of countless socialist and communist thinkers and organizers attest to the power of nationalism to derail the prospect of popular power from the nineteenth century to the present. Waldstreicher gives us ample evidence of its equivalent power in post-Revolutionary America. But his postmodernist stance notwithstanding, it is not enough to reveal only the mechanisms of nationalism's creation and enduring power. The evidence and arguments of *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* make it clear that

nationalism had significant resonance among America's popular classes. We need to take the next step and attempt to understand why nationalism resonated so powerfully in the minds and lives of ordinary Americans in the years following the Revolution. Only then will we be in position to understand the mental world of Americans in the birth years of the early republic and the modern world.

#### Notes

[1]. Timothy H. Breen, "Persistent Localism: English Social Change and the Shaping of New England Institutions," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 32 (1975).

[2]. Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971).

[3]. Ronald Schultz and Jacquelyn Miller, eds., *Deference, Democracy, and Domesticity: Essays on Class Formation in British America* (forthcoming); Ronald Schultz, *A Class Society?: The Nature of Inequality in Early America*.

[4]. For examples of these approaches, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 3 vols. (N.Y., 1978-); Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, N.C., 1995); Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (N.Y. 1997).

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