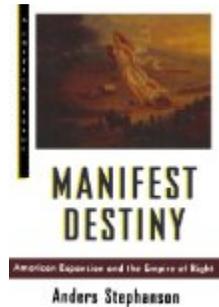


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anders Stephanson. *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1995. xiv + 144 pp. \$13.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-1584-9.

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Onward Christian Soldiers

Subscribers to H-DIPLO will recognize Mr. Stephanson from his provocative contributions to the list, the journal *Diplomatic History*, and meetings of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. His 1989 book on George Kennan, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*, was co-winner of the 1990 Stuart L. Bernath Book Prize. Born in Sweden, educated at Gothenburg, Oxford, and Columbia, and currently an outstanding teacher in the latter school's "Contemporary Civilization" segment of its core curriculum, he brings to the study of American diplomatic history an unusually broad intellect. Not surprisingly, with this book he makes an important contribution to the literature on the ideology of American foreign relations.[1]

The Jacksonian Democrat, John O'Sullivan, coined the term "manifest destiny" in the 1840s to describe what he saw as the American mission, decreed by Providence, to conquer the North American continent and create and populate, in Jefferson's words, an "empire for liberty." Stephanson uses the term "manifest destiny" in the broader, Wilsonian sense, as the widespread belief in a "providentially assigned role of the United States to lead the world to new and better things." This belief in a prophetic and universal mission, Stephanson argues, has animated American ideas about itself, the world, and relations between the two from the earliest colonization to the present. It has supported two contradictory American stances toward the outside world. On the one hand, Americans have sought to build an "exemplary state separate from the corrupt and fallen world, letting others emulate it the best they can." The other position has been

to redeem the world through intervention.[2]

This short book, containing nary a wasted word, can be summarized succinctly. The first chapter, covering the early seventeenth-century to early nineteenth-century period, is perhaps the most interesting one. Placing particular emphasis on the early Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, and Jefferson and Madison, he traces how secular and religious themes came to define "America" as "a unique mission and project in time and space, a continuous process," and how many Americans viewed their missionary expansion and the peoples—particularly the native Americans—who got in their way.[3] The basic outlines of the mission were in place by the time of the American Revolution and the early national period.

The final three chapters carry the story through to the present. The second chapter surveys the period from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 through the Civil War, with considerable focus on Jacksonian individualism, Texas, the Mexican war, and sectionalism. Especially worthwhile is Stephanson's analysis of John Quincy Adams, William Seward, William Ellery Channing, the *American Whig Review*, and John O'Sullivan and the *Democratic Review*. The third chapter covers the period up to 1914. Foreign policy from 1867 to 1898 was quiescent largely because "with no external threats and possessing vast internal territory to be exploited, the ruling classes had no reason to be eager about colonies and geopolitics." The rest of the chapters focus mainly on the debate over the Spanish-American War, where Stephanson offers particularly interesting observations

about race, religion, commerce, and American identity. The last chapter discusses President Wilson, and briefly surveys destiny thinking up through Reagan.

As a slim introduction to American ideology from the Puritans to the present, Stephanson's work is less comparable to the classic books on manifest destiny going back to Albert K. Weinberg than it is to essays on ideology and foreign policy, such as Dexter Perkins' exemplary *American Approach to Foreign Policy*.^[4] It is most similar to the book's main competition in undergraduate classrooms, Michael Hunt's *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, which has been for a decade the standard book on the subject. Drawing on Clifford Geertz, Hunt defined ideology as "an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality." He described the "ideology approach" as the examination of "sets of beliefs and values, sometimes only poorly and partially articulated, that make international relations intelligible and decision making possible." Hunt argued that American foreign relations ideology had been based on three related ideas: visions of national greatness, notions of racial hierarchy, and hostility to revolution. In three chapters, Hunt traced their development in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how by the beginning of the twentieth century they had coalesced into a "powerful, mutually reinforcing body of thought" that had gone far toward "dominating" the thinking of elites. He then examined twentieth century policy and the "contemporary dilemma" to demonstrate the continued influence of these ideas.^[5]

Stephanson makes similar claims for the importance of ideology. He assumes that the ideology of manifest destiny has shaped the way the United States has understood itself and its foreign relations, and that this understanding has "determinate effects" when combined with other forces. Manifest destiny had "ideological power" that "worked in practical ways and was always institutionally embedded." Not mere window-dressing, it "appeared in the guise of common sense."^[6] Neither historian attempts to *prove* that ideology *causes* policy. However, they do make plausible arguments as to why we should *assume* that ideology shapes our perceptions of the external world and our responses to it. They focus on the ideology of white, male, elites because that was the class that made the policy. They show familiarity with traditional works, but do not argue against them specifically.

Stephanson surpasses Hunt in two critical areas,

however. First, he avoids Hunt's overemphasis on American hostility to social revolutions. The fact of the matter is that American elites tend to favor foreign revolutions when they seem to promote ideologies similar to American ones. Americans tend to be either modern liberals or classical liberals who call themselves "conservatives"; both descend from Paine rather than Burke, and their main area of disagreement is simply over the proper role of government in promoting progress and individual freedom (in the standard liberal meaning of those words). Thus viewing themselves as the vanguard of history, they assume that revolutions will bring other countries "up to speed." When a revolution fails to meet expectations, they then turn against *that* revolution, not revolution in general. Stephanson seems to recognize this better than Hunt.

Hunt's main shortcoming was his inattention to religion. Stephanson's emphasis on religion, in contrast, is his most important contribution to the literature on ideology and American foreign policy. In Christianity we find a source of America's Janus-faced attitudes toward the outside world. Christian beliefs simultaneously promoted holy war fervor that encouraged aggression—and pacifist attitudes that restrained it. It simultaneously encouraged notions of Americans as a chosen people—and universalistic, transnational notions of human rights. Stephanson sees a connection between Christian millennialism and the language of isolation and expansion. Pre-millennialists held that Christ would return *before* the millennial age to usher in the thousand years of peace. Skeptical and inward-looking, they assumed that the world is corrupt and unsuited to improvement without the direct intervention of Christ. Post-millennialism asserted that Christ will return *after* Christians had spread the Gospel and transformed the world. Although Stephanson does not use the "pre-and post-" terminology common to historians of religion, his book may encourage diplomatic historians to explore the links between pre-millennialism and isolationism and post-millennialism and expansionism, and the class and regional differences that often underlie these formulations. That alone makes it essential reading.

Essential, yes; but of course not perfect. Such a small book on such a large subject is bound to have oversights. I would liked to have seen a serious discussion of seventeenth-century ideology south of New England, where interest in the pursuit of Mammon clearly exceeded interest in the pursuit of God, and of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment ideas about the role of vigorous international trade in the spread of

liberal ideas abroad and the preservation of liberty at home. The Civil War deserved more than the one paragraph allotted to it. Here an examination of the ways in which both sides reworked American ideology for their own ends would illuminate the malleability of ideology. The North secularized the traditional Protestant versus Catholic “Free World versus Slave World” theme that had informed American ideology from the beginning. In the last chapter, most of the Woodrow Wilson discussion is old hat, and Reagan deserves more discussion than he gets. Furthermore, World War Two certainly merits more than one paragraph. That war globalized the Free World/Slave World theme and expressed it in new ways, as with Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series of films. It shaped the doctrines, perceptions, and public relations of American foreign relations from the beginning of the Cold War through the Gulf War. Such books inevitably have some oversights, but it is hard to understand why a book on American ideology and foreign policy contains no mention of Hitler, Churchill, Mussolini, or the Holocaust.

Shortcomings occur even in Stephanson’s otherwise outstanding treatment of religion, as in his undue emphasis on the militant face of Christianity over the peaceful. More important, however, is his inattention to Israel. Although purely economic and geo-political considerations might dictate American support for Israel’s regional enemies, the United States has tended to be neutral or tilt towards Israel. Surely ideology has contributed to this tendency. Americans have perceived Jewish Israelis as being more “white,” Western, and masculine than Arabs, and as pioneers in an uncivilized part of the world. Perversely, even many American anti-Semites favor Israel because they prefer to have the objects of their hate “over there” than in the States. Many Christian fundamentalists have supported Israel because its existence is necessary for their interpretation of Biblical prophecies to come true and usher in the Millennium (where they believe Jews will have to convert or be annihilated). Discussion of this certainly would have bolstered his case for the importance of ideology and his emphasis on the dark side of the United States.[7]

Many readers will be put off by the cynical tone of this book. Stephanson claims that he has tried to “avoid moralizing,” yet he portrays the American past as being fundamentally evil; its story is nothing so much as a tale of racism, slaughter, hypocrisy, and genocide. His views

of the present and future are discouraging. Law, ethics, discussion, democracy, and international commerce, and inferentially the ideas of human rights and liberalism in general, are nothing more than a sham, “Americanism writ large in the name of humanity, as always hiding who really is involved and what really is at stake.” (We are left wondering what these enigmatic realities may be.) As for the future, he predicts resignation to a “postmodern world” where “all that matters in the end is the perpetual present, a virtual reality empty of value.” Is our past nothing but evil; is our future really so bleak? Compared to what? Given the book’s tone, teachers assigning this book in tandem with excerpts from works with a more balanced tone –such as Frederick Merk’s *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*–are certain to provoke lively and worthwhile classroom discussion.[8]

Notes:

[1]. Anders Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge MA, 1989).

[2]. Idem., *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York, 1995), xii.

[3]. Ibid., 6.

[4]. Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore, 1935); Dexter Perkins, *The American Approach to Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, 1951).

[5]. Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, 1987), xi, 12-14;

[6]. Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, xiv.

[7]. Michelle Mart, “Tough Guys and American Cold War Policy: Images of Israel,” *Diplomatic History* 20:3 (Summer 1996), 357-380. On Israel and American views of the “End Times,” see Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge MA, 1992), esp. chap. 6.

[8]. Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 129; Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York, 1963).

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