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AMERICANISM



Americanism: Instructions for Use

This timely collection of essays edited by Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin addresses the central term of the contemporary debate about Americanism. That Americanism is alive and kicking in the United States is indeed almost as certain as the fact that its Doppelgänger, anti-Americanism, controls the hearts and minds of many everywhere else. The question the editors want to address is whether American progressives can fruitfully embrace Americanism to advance liberal goals. The editors' reply is a resounding yes. In their opinion, the ideals of Americanism "deserve not just to endure but to be revived and practiced as the foundation of a new kind of progressive politics" (p. 16). The issue here is less one of morality than of pragmatism: a sort of Leftist call for realism and *Realpolitik* animates Kazin's and McCartin's provocative introductory essay. It would be nice if the world were united, they argue, but it is not, and in the absence of a planetary government we need to elect a sensible one in the most powerful nation state on the face of the earth. And to do that, we need a nationalist language that maintains "the ability to speak convincingly to [our] fellow citizens" (16).[1]

The value of the collection lies in the intellectual honesty of the editors who have included essays that argue both pro and contra Americanism, making the volume a very good starting point for a classroom discussion of this issue. Many contributors are forthright in suggesting how widespread was the reach of Americanism and how well it has worked for the left and may work again. Alan

Wolfe praises America as a model of religious freedom. In her essay on African American nationalism, Mia Bay suggests that African Americans embraced their American identity even before their rejection of the efforts of the American Colonization Society (f. 1816) to relocate free blacks to Africa. Jonathan Hansen uses the Progressive Era writings by Randolph Bourne, John Dewey, Louis Brandeis, W. E. B. Du Bois and Horace Kallen to suggest that one can be both a nationalist and in favor of cultural diversity and social justice. Even that alleged shibboleth of "bad boy" nationalism, Henry R. Luce's 1941 "The American Century" editorial is seen, by Stephen Whitfield, as not only right on the mark (and who could disagree after considering the second half of the twentieth century), but also not so nationalist, after all.

Other essays, however, like those by Mae M. Ngai, Alan McPherson and Melani McAlister raise serious issues about liberal nationalism's ability to serve as a rallying cry for progressive politics. For Ngai, the flaws of the Hart Celler immigration act of 1965 derive from its being an expression of liberal nationalism. The act did away with discriminatory ethnic quotas and replaced them with a nationality-blind ceiling. The Hart Celler act thus embodied liberal ideals, did not irk the interests and sensibility of increasingly vocal American white ethnics, and, by allowing fewer visas as a percentage of population than the Johnson Reed Act of 1924, pleased American trade unions for its economic nationalism. The act also replaced a racial and ethnic bias in the selection of

the immigrants with one favoring family ties and professional skills that turned a blind eye to the inequality of wealth and political liberties among nations. By seeing all nations and ethnicities as equal, it left many of the poor and of the persecuted outside the golden door. Ngai concludes that the act was deceptive and its “symbolic gesture of equality to [American] citizens obscured an unequal policy toward non-citizens” (p. 121).

In another suggestive essay, Alan McPherson notes that while American liberal patriots were able to criticize their own country for its failure to live up to its ideals in the Philippines or in Haiti, they were more preoccupied with the damage done by marines to American ideals than with the harm perpetrated by the U.S. military against Haitians and Filipinos. A variation of the same criticism can be leveled at the book. The volume begins with the oft-quoted Richard Hofstadter’s quip about America not having ideologies but being one. Preoccupied with the American nation, however, this book rarely addresses the work Americanism, as an ideology, does outside of the United States.[2] In a thoughtful essay on the American debate about clitoridectomy in Islamic and African countries, Melani McAlister notes how Americanism is often created for foreign, as well as domestic, consumption. Americanism is “more than just a national identity, or a belief in the superiority of American democracy. Rather it marks an assertive sense of that identity as an ideology, a way of life that is both peculiarly American and eminently exportable” (p. 244). Rob Kroes’s and Louis Menand’s rich, sophisticated, explorations of the reception of American culture in France depict the ways French intellectuals like Jean Paul Sartre or the films critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* used and fashioned American culture – be it crime novels or Hollywood films – according to their own intellectual agenda. But McAlister’s contribution along with Jun Furuya’s essay on the varying fortune of Americanism in Japan in the decades on both sides of World War Two are the only essays in the collection that strive to directly assess the reaction to the ideology of Americanism in foreign political and cultural spheres.

The level of resistance Americanism encounters in today’s world may recommend caution about the feasibility of progressive nationalist politics that also want to engage the world outside the United States. The domestic scene, which most of the essays survey, does not offer a more encouraging picture. Even the contributors that embrace Americanism as a viable strategy for the domestic Left seem to have doubts, albeit unarticulated ones, about its viability. Mia Bay’s essay on African Ameri-

can Americanism leaves out the twentieth century and with it, the many concerns W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, or Martin Luther King Jr. expressed about Americanism. Other essays ultimately end up retelling a story of defeat. For example, Jonathan Hansen’s liberal nationalists, or to use his term “cosmopolitan patriots,” are extolled as bearers of ideals that “should provoke, if not inform, the contemporary left” (p. 86). But he is too good a historian to leave out of his essay the fact that the pluralistic ideals of Dewey, Bourne, and Kallen lasted the *espace d’un instant* and were clamorously defeated after the onset of WWI to re-surface only in the 1960s.

It is relevant to note that, as a strategy, liberal American nationalism has been tried before and, one should add, with no definite success. Hansen’s cosmopolitan patriots have more recent epigones. Gary Gerstle suggests that in the late 1980s many liberal filmmakers, like Steven Spielberg, made an attempt at “re-embracing nationalism and wresting control of it away from the right” (p. 129). Once again, however, liberal nationalism did not last and was easily co-opted by conservatives. Eventually, Gerstle notes, liberal nationalists wound up making “their nationalist narratives available to other groups on the political spectrum” (p. 131).

The essay by Gerstle is thought-provoking and his analysis of the limitations of the cultural output fashioned by those whom he calls “war-and-nation liberals” is penetrating. Yet the essay leaves the explanation of the failure of American liberal nationalism somewhat unclear. To be sure, Gerstle is aware that the name of the game is explaining how liberal nationalism’s efforts are routinely hijacked by the right. In the 1980s liberal nationalism failed, Gerstle argues, because its practitioners disregarded “the civic and soldiering questions that Vietnam raised” (p. 131), ignored the “historical connection between liberalism and war” (p. 129), and ended up producing war narratives – *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) being among the most prominent examples – that could also serve conservative warmongering goals.

Gerstle has important points to make. His contention that the creation of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973 marked a shift away from the citizen-soldier ideal and toward the creation of a professionalized military separated from society is worth considering. His second point, that before AVF, major wars “require[d] assent from a broad cross section of the population” (p. 140), is also interesting. They both may be ingredients of the recipe that gave us the second Iraqi War and the Haditha massacre. How central they may be, though, is open to question because

the Gulf of Tonkin resolution (1964) and the massacre of My Lai (1968) both occurred before the creation of AVF. The historical connection between liberalism and war also remains unclear. The fact that the presidencies of “liberal icons” Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy were marked by American involvement in wars that were supposed to defend, or spread, liberalism in the world, is hardly evidence of a specifically liberal penchant for war. Indeed, as anyone who experienced Japanese, Italian, or German oppression between September 1939 and December 1941 might tell, Roosevelt was a fairly cautious president when it came to starting wars, and Republican administrations had their hands in many of the foreign military interventions enacted through the centuries by what Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton provocatively define as a “Dominion of War.”[3]

As a matter of fact, the terms of the linkage may be changed. Liberal nationalism failed because it ignored the historical connection between nationalism, *not* liberalism, and war. American wars are, in fact, routinely justified via a reference to the interests of the American nation and/or to vaguely defined national values like “freedom” and “democracy.” It is not as a tale of liberalism successfully defended and exported, but as a nationalist retelling of an international conflict, that *Saving Private Ryan* becomes available to conservative appropriation. What is glaringly absent in the film is any reference to the Allies’ efforts—including to the many British and Canadian troops who fought in Normandy. The film overemphasizes American troops’ contribution to the defeat of Nazi-Fascism in France by making all other Allies disappear and reducing the history of WWII on the European Front to a nationalist tale of a conflict between the United States and Germany, with French civilians as bystanders. By doing so, *Saving Private Ryan* lends itself to encouraging a dangerous self-reliance in American foreign policy that may easily flow into an adventurist disregard for the opinion of the international community.

The problem with the liberal nationalist position and, ultimately, with the introduction and many of the essays in this thoughtful volume is that they refuse to contemplate the possibility that liberalism in the United States was at its most successful when it was less nationalist, that is, when it was more active in looking for international engagements at a political and intellectual level. The 1930s, which many refer to as the decade of liberalism triumphant, was not only the decade of the “exiles’ returns” to America, Irving Berlin’s *God Bless America* (1938), or Earl Robinson’s and John LaTouche *Bal-lad for Americans* (1939). As Daniel Rodgers has per-

suasively argued, the New Deal was also the moment when American liberalism reaped the fruits of decades of intense intellectual Atlantic cross-fertilization.[4] Gerstle usefully compares *Saving Private Ryan* with Vietnam War movies, but other helpful terms of comparison include the films inspired, during WWII, by the predominantly liberal staff of the Office of War Information and made by many American and foreign-born progressives in Hollywood who had matured politically and intellectually in the 1930s.[5] Aside from the subject matter, *Saving Private Ryan* shares with these films an ability to “speak to” ordinary Americans, a “people” centered narrative that finds in the platoon its natural filmic embodiment and a pretense of “realism”.[6] Yet this previous generation of liberal, “war,” filmmakers were hardly nationalist, having intensely collaborated in the 1930s with the anti-Fascist refugee community in Hollywood and, in some cases, belonging to a heavily internationalized progressive movement. As opposed to *Saving Private Ryan*’s “solo” attitude, the “realism” of the early forties war films often coexisted with the necessity to show a war fought together with many allies, against racist dictatorships. Who can forget the “beautiful friendship” between the American expat Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Captain Renault (Claude Rains) in *Casablanca* (1943)? Gerstle rightly notes that *Saving Private Ryan* makes African Americans disappear from WWII.[7] Turning the war into a nationalist tale, the film also keeps all Allies out of the picture. WWII becomes an “American only” adventure—albeit one infused with liberal, and “just war,” tones and musings. Other nations need not apply for on-screen representation—regardless of the blood they shed in France. And I cannot help wondering whether, Spielberg’s intention notwithstanding, the children of James Ryan are now fighting in Iraq surrounded by a “coalition of the willing” that resembles, in fact, the non-existing Allies in this film.

Notes

[1]. See also by Michael Kazin, “A Patriotic Left,” *Dis-sent* (Fall 2002), pp. 41-44. A critique of this position is offered by Andrew Ross in his essay “The Domestic Front,” in *Anti-Americanism*, ed. Andrew Ross and Kristin Ross (New York: New York University Press, 2004), pp. 281-300.

[2]. And thus the book eludes the call, recently and forcefully argued by Thomas Bender, to analyze “the way American presumptions and policies were understood by those affected by them.” Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill

and Wang, 2006), p. 189.

[3]. Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America* (New York: Viking, 2005).

[4]. See Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1998), p. 416.

[5]. See Gregory D. Black and Clayton R. Koppes, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War Two Movies* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), p. 68. On the 1930s generation of Hollywood writers and their relation to the Hollywood anti-Nazi refugees, see Saverio Giovacchini, *Hollywood Modernism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

[6]. Like *Saving Private Ryan*, 1940s war films were marketed as “realistic” via a selective interpretation of the term that identified filmic war realism with the “uncut” representation of violence on the battle field (as opposed to, say, the representation of bodily functions). Not unlike *Saving Private Ryan*, for example, *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943), from the real-life diary of marine Richard

Tregaskis, won much critical consensus among progressive reviewers for its realism. The audience at the Roxy, wrote Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times*, “was visibly stirred and ... [and] no doubt had the impression that it was witnessing the battle of Guadalcanal.” *New York Times* (November 18, 1943), p. 29. In *New Masses*, Daniel Prentiss called the film “a memorable exposition of the character of American fighting men,” *New Masses* (December 7, 1943), p. 27. On the realism of WWII film see *Hollywood Modernism*, pp. 138-163.

[7]. It is interesting to note that during WWII and contrary to the actual segregation of the U.S. Army, American platoons that were segregated in reality were some times shown on the screen as multi-ethnic, multi-racial formations. For example, the platoon of *Bataan* (written by Robert Andrews and directed by Tay Garnett in 1943 and strongly praised by the OWI staff) had Anglos and white ethnics fighting side by side with a Filipino Corporal (Roque Espiritu), and Latino and African American privates (Desi Arnaz and Kenneth Spencer). See Black and Koppes, *Hollywood Goes to War*, pp. 258-259.

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