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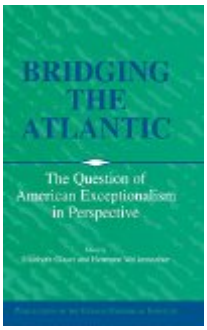

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American Exceptionalism Revisited: Recent Trends in Transatlantic Studies

The volume under review offers new approaches to the study of transatlantic cultures--of the relations, connections, and divergences between the United States and Europe, and more specifically, the United States and Germany. Grown out of a conference held at the German Historical Institute in 1995 in commemoration of the historian Erich Angermann (1927-92), the collection gathers together essays by many notables in the field investigating countless aspects of transatlanticism over time--from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Overall, the aim is to engage with and to contextualize what has come to be understood as American exceptionalism and to strive for a more integrated view of transatlantic history. This comparative perspective informs each of the five parts into which the book is organized.

In Part One, "Transatlantic Faith and Beliefs," Gerald Stourzh traces American constitutional history back to its English roots and points to a transformation process of the "inherited" English legal culture in America. Ari Hoogenboom somewhat idealistically and certainly controversially pleads for retaining a sense of American exceptionalism when looking at the American republican tradition and the impact of this republicanism on American history and society up to the present.

In Part Two, "Transatlantic Ideologies and the Perception of the Other," Hartmut Lehmann studies "The Role of Religion in Germany and America in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" and addresses the shifting social function of Christianity in both societies. He questions a simplifying secularization thesis that sees the decline of religion with the advent of urbanization and industrialization, and instead looks more closely at legal frameworks and cultural contexts pitting American localism against German centralism. Lehmann contends that in the United States aspects of voluntarism, revivalism, and pluralism "created a cultural climate that favored the growth of religion and in which religious activism could easily be related to matters of justice and social reform" (p. 75). In the German context, the

cooperation between state and church and the suppression of nonconformist Christian groups "produced a cultural climate in which religion was tainted with conservatism and with opposition to 'progress'" (p. 75).

Darwinism and its reception in the United States and in Europe is addressed by Carl N. Degler. Degler sees the reactions in the old and the new world as indicative of the intermingling of science and religion in the nineteenth-century debate over Darwinism. Evolution and natural selection, the two core concepts of Darwin's theory, were contested by American and European scientists and theologians alike, and, according to Degler, objections to and defenses of Darwinism followed largely similar patterns on both sides of the Atlantic. Still, Degler differentiates the responses in their national and religious contexts (Catholic, Protestant) and singles out individual voices which profoundly influenced the debate. By the end of the century he considers the controversy at a standstill--not because a conclusion had been reached, but because both, science and religion, were now developing independently of each other and moving in different directions. Taking the example of Germany and its nation-building enterprise and the United States and the rise of eugenics, Degler hints at aspects of nationalism, colonialism, and racism whose promoters--be they German or American--made use of Darwinian ideas according to their own tastes, a subject inviting further exploration.

Hans L. Trefousse compares the ways in which Abraham Lincoln, Carl Schurz, and Otto von Bismarck employ nationalism as civil religion. Lincoln's idealism of American nationalism linked to republican freedom is contrasted with Carl Schurz's "two nationalisms," one derived from a German ethnic nationalism, the other shaped by his new American loyalties. The fusion of both, Schurz-biographer Trefousse argues, made Schurz a powerful "role model" for Americans and German-Americans. Far removed from Lincoln's and Schurz's approach is Bismarck's pragmatic enlistment of nationalism in "his transformation from a Prussian patriot to a German nationalist" (p. 115). Trefousse argues that the case studies of the three statesmen reveal three distinct versions of nationalism as civil religion highlighting transatlantic differences.

Part Three, titled "People in the Transatlantic World: The Perception of Self," opens with Kathleen Neils Conzen's fascinating essay, which takes the example of Minnesota's German- and Catholic-settled Stearns County to discuss the loyalties of German immigrants in the United States between assimilation and "nationalization" on the one hand and an "intense localism" (p. 122) paired with the desire for local autonomy on the other. The Civil War and the way it is experienced in this community through national legislation (e.g. the draft) makes these ambivalences and contradictions visible and reveals "an abiding determination to construct walls of communal autonomy strong enough to withstand the pressures of an alien state, and an oppositional stance toward the state itself." (p. 122) Conzen's case study not only adds to our understanding of German-American ethnicity in nineteenth-century America, she also contests the myth of the German-American abolitionist and enthusiastic soldier of the Civil War, which was publicly created in the United States by the liberal Forty-Eighters and cherished by generations of historians.

Kenneth L. Kusmer investigates a "comparative history of racism and xenophobia in the United States and Germany, 1865-1933." In the United States, he looks at the treatment of African Americans, Mexicans, Chinese, and the so-called new European immigrants and sees African Americans and Chinese immigrants as the prime targets of racism. While European immigrants of Scandinavian and German descent were gradually assimilated into the ranks of white America, southern and eastern European immigrants "were sometimes characterized as nonwhite, or at least as

sharing traits with nonwhites" (p. 151). In his assessment, Kusmer can make out no underlying economic patterns as the motivating force behind racial violence. In Germany, Kusmer singles out Polish immigrants as a minority group and discusses the discrimination faced by them. He also stresses the central role of the Jewish population "whose place in the social and political order was, for most Germans, the subject of continual, often intense discussion and debate throughout the entire industrialization period" (p. 162). In spite of differences between the two countries, the overall patterns resemble each other: in both national contexts, modernity and industrialization are accompanied by conflict, cultural backlash, and profound anxieties about a multi-ethnic and multiracial society.

"Movie Stereotypes, 1890-1918: Some German and American National Perceptions" is the title of Daniel J. Leab's contribution, which establishes fundamental differences in the way Germans and Americans depicted each other in films. Americans tended to portray Germans negatively in the early years of the film industry. Contrary to the positive image Germans enjoyed as an immigrant group in the United States, their cinematic presence is dominated by a negative militaristic image often connected to the figure of the Kaiser. This image intensified with the onset of World War I. By contrast, the portrayal of the United States in early German films stands out as much more positive regardless of the war and its propaganda. Leab sees a prominence of the Western, which even the Kaiser enjoyed, and the presence of Anglo-American detective films. In both genres, he makes out contradictory, yet generally positive images of Americans, limited, however, to the male species.

Part Four, "Transatlantic Politics and Economics," begins with Gerhard L. Weinberg's comparison of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler, "A Contemporary Comparison Revisited". Following the career of both figures, the author points to out that they, in fact, had little in common apart from their contemporaneity. The two never met in person, although Roosevelt had invited Hitler to Washington in 1933--one step in the transatlantic relations and the diplomatic history of the 1920s, 30s and 40s, which the author briefly chronicles.

Elisabeth Glaser in "The Role of the Banker in Transatlantic History: J. P. Morgan and Co. and Aid for the Allies, 1914-1916" analyzes the banker J. P. Morgan's involvement in supplying the Allies with financial resources, which ultimately sped up their victory. Here Glaser sees the beginning of a process that casts the U.S. business and commerce sector as "transatlantic communicators" and that has in the long run contributed to the shaping of the United States into a world power.

Part Five, "Transatlantic History and American Exceptionalism," explicitly engages with the topic of American exceptionalism. In "Transantlantic History as National History: Thoughts on German Post-World War II Historiography," Peter Krüger documents a history (and philosophy) of the sciences characterized by a number of belated developments in theories, subjects and methods compensated by the personal involvement and initiative of individual scholars. He makes out a focus on the national, paired with the aim to reintegrate Germany into the larger political context of Europe but lacking for the most part a transatlantic perspective. The author calls for an integrated political history that would facilitate more interdisciplinary cooperation.

Hans R. Guggisberg argues in favor of exceptionalism and proposes that in every instance of national history there is an inherent sense of exceptionalism--hence the latter is not limited to American history and culture. He traces the American paradigm from Alexis de Tocqueville's observations to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and on to the "negative exceptionalism" of the New Left.

The final contribution, "The Historical World of Erich Angermann" by one of the editors, Her-

mann Wellenreuther, presents a detailed biographical sketch of Angermann, his life and his intellectual achievements, and pays tribute to a historian who dedicated his work to transatlantic comparative history.

The collection is truly comprehensive and diverse. In their contributions, the authors often sketch projects that move beyond the scope of one paper and map itineraries for further studies (Lehmann, Krüger). Many essays raise stimulating questions and present genuinely new research (Conzen, Kusmer, Glaser). At other times, the point of comparison seems more arbitrary (Trefousse, Weinberg): transatlantic differences and similarities are established, but to what end or larger purpose this is done remains vague. In some instances, a discussion of American exceptionalism could have profited from a more discursive approach--after all, apart from it being "true" or "false," American exceptionalism presents a powerful rhetorical topos and cultural construct, whose power we still witness today.

In their focus on integration, most essays employ a binary old world-new world structure. Of course, there is yet more to consider when moving toward a new disciplinary and geographical openness and beyond American exceptionalism in the transatlantic realm (which not all of the papers, as I have indicated, actually do): where, in this newly integrated vision of Europe and the United States, is Africa, for instance? Scholars of the so-called Black Atlantic have in the last decade changed the face of transatlanticism. The present volume, in which I have found issues of race and gender underrepresented, is for the most part the joined work of a generation of German and American historians who have for decades transcended narrow national boundaries and have thus intervened in established discourses and disciplines. Having done so, however, their immensely valuable work now prompts a calling for yet more integrated visions--visions that move away from a still white, largely male, and Eurocentric paradigm of the transatlantic world.

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