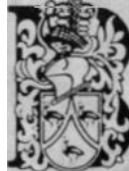


GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE  
WASHINGTON, D.C.  
ANNUAL LECTURE SERIES  
No. 4

**CHALLENGES  
OF AMBIGUITY**

**Doing Comparative History**

*With comments by  
Carl N. Degler and John A. Garraty*



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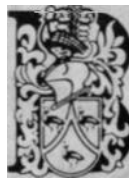
*Erich Angermann*

In Making Historical Comparisons  
Focus on Common National Issues

*Carl N. Degler*

Comparative History:  
Beyond Description to Analysis

*John A. Garraty*



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## Preface

In presenting the German Historical Institute's Fourth Annual Lecture I am most pleased to point out that we were able to assemble for this occasion three historians with impressive records in dealing with the both fascinating and difficult problem of comparative history. Our main speaker was Erich Angermann from Cologne.

Since the early 1960s, he has established at the University of Cologne a center for the study of English and American history which is unique in Germany. He is not only the author of *Robert von Mohl* and other works on modern German history, but also of *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika*, vol. 7 of *Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag—Weltgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, which is a bestseller in the field, and he has written and edited other texts which are widely used by German students of American history. In the 1970s and 1980s, Erich Angermann conceived the plans for and organized a series of conferences in which he brought together American and German historians in order to analyze and compare developments in the Old World and the New. Furthermore, Erich Angermann has to be given tribute for his energy, his perseverance, and his imagination in establishing the German Historical Institute in Washington. He was a member of the committee that laid the foundations for and defined the task of the Institute. Since its foundation in 1987, he has served as chair of the Institute's Academic Advisory Council (*Wissenschaftlicher Beirat*) and as a member of the Institute's Board of Trustees (*Stiftungsrat*). I should like to use this occasion to thank him for all the time that he has invested in the Institute's affairs and for all the help and good advice that he has given us.

Over the past three decades, Erich Angermann has shown a keen interest in comparative history. Having done research into

both European and American history, and having published widely in both fields, he is extremely well qualified to tackle and overcome the problems in this most complex and complicated field. Therefore, I was very grateful that he decided to share with us in our Fourth Annual Lecture what “Doing Comparative History” means and how the “Challenges of Ambiguity” may be mastered.

I am equally grateful to our two commentators, Carl Degler from Stanford, and John Garraty from Columbia, both of whom have experienced the ambiguity of the challenge of doing comparative history. Carl Degler has published important works in which he compared race relations in the United States and Brazil, as well as on the history of women and the family; John Garraty has come forth with highly interesting studies on the causes and consequences of the Great Depression comparing the United States and Germany in the 1930s.

As we can observe, much of the historical work done still concentrates on analyzing and describing national problems, regional developments, or local structures and events. Therefore, in order to provide standards for judgment and evaluation, comparative history is and remains an assignment of the highest priority. It is our hope that our Fourth Annual Lecture not only advises and cautions with regard to the problems that have to be mastered, but also encourages those interested in comparative history and stimulates their desire to be successfully engaged in this most challenging field.

HARTMUT LEHMANN  
*Washington, D.C., February 1991*

## Challenges of Ambiguity Doing Comparative History

*Erich Angermann*

One of my favorite tales is about one Elizabethan gentleman. From his travels in France, he reported that people there were so poor that even the well-to-do had to eat frogs and snails, that is *grenouilles* and *escargots*. Evidently, a less insular mode of observation might have opened up more discreet ways to discover and enjoy the peculiarities of French cuisine. In other words, he failed to take advantage of the challenges of ambiguity, to evoke his friends' imagination as to the hidden mysteries behind so strange an observation.

So it is with all comparative history, I believe, and in fact with all foreign history, which can scarcely avoid comparison with our own: The most important caveat is to refrain from applying preconceived theories, from jumping to rash conclusions, and from cherishing our own notions of "normalcy." To keep our minds open for the "otherness" of other people and their historical heritage—their *Sonderwege*, as it were—is a most exciting human experience, and it might be even more rewarding to detect regularities, devise sophisticated theories, or produce causal explanations. This I want to discuss in my talk, and I hope you will not be too disappointed by my lack of interest in theoretical history, cognitive patterns, social scientist generalizations, and God knows what. I am strongly interested, though, in historical professionalism, that is, in methodological sensitivity

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I do not wish to freight this paper with a full-scale bibliography, since I do not pretend to anything like a comprehensive treatment of so difficult a subject. There is already a surfeit of literature on it, but this is not the occasion to discuss it in detail, as much of it would deserve. So the following notes merely indicate some of the sources of information which I found particularly thought-provoking.

and circumspection, a truly historical perspective, an ability that might be called “sober imagination,” a gift for intersubjective communication of one’s ideas in a rhetoric both understandable and evocative, a sense of the tentative nature of all human knowledge, and similar virtues of a good historian.

At this point I must needs pay tribute to J.H. Hexter. When I chose the title of my talk from a list of possible formulations suggested by my good friend Daniel J. Leab (of course a professional historian!), I was barely aware how close my own ideas were to those Jack Hexter expounded in several witty books, notably *Doing History* and *The History Primer* (both 1971).<sup>1</sup> But rereading his essays greatly enhanced and confirmed my own thoughts, and I only wish I could emulate his wit and wisdom. So at least I borrowed and adapted his felicitous phrase as the subtitle of this lecture. I certainly share his predilection for doing and enjoying history over theorizing about it. I shall therefore not review other historians’ view on, or practice of, comparative historical studies, admirable as some of these works are.<sup>2</sup> I shall

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. H. Hexter, *Doing History* (Bloomington, Ind., and London, 1971); idem, *The History Primer* (New York, 1971; London, 1972); idem, *Reappraisals in History: New Views on History and Society in Early Modern Europe*, 2d ed. (Chicago and London, 1979). There are of course a lot of other studies on historical thought, such as Michael Kammen, *Selvages & Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987). But I must not indulge in extensive quoting.

<sup>2</sup> To mention but a few names, one would obviously think of the pertinent works of George M. Frederickson, Peter Kolchin, Carl N. Degler, John A. Garraty, Peter R. Shergold, and James T. Kloppenberg on the American side, or Jürgen Kocka for Germany. Good overviews are presented by George M. Frederickson, “Comparative History,” in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), 457–73; Peter Kolchin, “Comparing American History,” in “The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects,” *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982): 64–81; Raymond Grew, “The Case for Comparing Histories,” *American Historical Review* (1980): 763–78, and the subsequent debate; most recently A. A. van den Braembussche, “Historical Explanation and Comparative Method: Towards a Theory of the History of Society,” *History and Theory* 28 (1989): 1–24; see also C. Vann Woodward, ed., *The Comparative Approach to American History* (New York, 1968), especially his introductory and dosing chapters, 3–17, 370–90. On the German side, see for example, Theodor Schieder, “Möglichkeiten und Grenzen vergleichender Methoden in der Geschichtswissenschaft,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 200 (1965): 529–51.



rather expose to your criticism my own experience of trial and error in practicing comparative history.

We surely need not bother about the details of a long and often wearisome way. But a few general observations will be in order. I started out dabbling in comparative approaches to certain aspects that appeared to be germane to American as well as German history—pretty unsystematic and risky adventures into a terra incognita, which fascinated my imagination all the more (for better or worse!). The first of these essays, in 1964, tried to relate Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* to the medieval and early modern conceptual tradition of the mutuality of protection and allegiance, the contrasting images of the godly prince and the tyrant, and the right, nay the duty to throw off despotic government, albeit not without giving due notice. This conceptual framework I designated as *ständische Rechtstraditionen*—a not altogether felicitous notion intrinsically alien to the experience of any historian specializing in American history, and thus almost bound to be disregarded.<sup>3</sup>

Another attempt, in 1974, dealt with the impact of the American model upon early German constitutionalism and the unsuccessful revolution of 1848. That work focused on the interaction of democratic, federal, and republican principles as conveyed by Robert Mohl, Alexis de Tocqueville, Carl Welcker, Friedrich Murhard, and others, but largely misunderstood as a conceptional system with interchangeable parts. What I tried to understand was how, in contrast to the Founding Fathers and apart from the possibly fatal foreign adversities, the German revolution miscarried on the grounds of its own premises.<sup>4</sup> (As an

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Erich Angermann, "Ständische Rechtstraditionen in der amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitserklärung," *Historische Zeitschrift* 200 (1965): 61–91; a somewhat similar approach might be followed in a study in progress by Prof. Stephen E. Lucas of the University of Wisconsin at Madison who is, however, more especially interested in aspects of rhetoric, cf. his article "Justifying America: The Declaration of Independence as a Rhetorical Document," in Thomas W. Benson, ed., *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism* (Carbondale, Ill., 1989), 67–130. See also the inspiring chapter "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God" in Morton White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1978), 229–56.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Erich Angermann, "Der deutsche Frühkonstitutionalismus und das amerikanische Vorbild," *Historische Zeitschrift* 219 (1974): 1–32; idem, "Early German Constitutionalism and the American Model," XIV International Congress of Historical Sciences, San Francisco 1975, 16 pp.

aside, the highly praised peaceful revolution of 1989 in the GDR might well trace its conceptual pedigree to the events of 1848!)

Both essays, needless to say, were not comparative in any strict sense. By studying related events in the Old and New Worlds in their respective historical context, however, they could hardly avoid a comparative view. Literally comparative was my approach when in 1967 I tried, in a rather sketchy way, to understand how the United States and Germany, two highly industrialized nations with largely preindustrial value systems, were "Coming to Grips with Modern Society"<sup>5</sup> in the post-World War I period. Drawing more or less precarious parallels, such as between the (2nd) Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi order of the SS, the ideologies of *service* and *Dienst*, the fear of Old World corruption on the one side and of being "Americanized" on the other, I ventured onto pretty slippery ground. With all its undeniable shortcomings this attempt at comparative history, like the other ones, helped me a great deal to open my eyes to the deep-rooted differences between societies seemingly at a comparable stage of development. One might even risk the hypothesis that the more two societies seem to have in common, the more we must beware of the possible strong emotional and habitual differences hidden beneath a treacherous surface.

The problems paving the way to comparative history are so numerous, evident, and often discussed that I need not elaborate on them: To mention but a few, there is the necessity of marshaling potentially enormous quantities of data, both raw and processed, which may require the comparatist to rely, at least partly, on secondary sources, as a rule monographs or documentations, whose conceptual premises, selection of relevant material, rhetoric, etc., may be beyond the competence of the nonspecialist. Then there is the question of how to apply a conceptual framework, terminology, and rhetoric consistent in itself, adequate to all parts to be compared, and flexible enough to help the historian understand and communicate the respective historical context of the societies to be studied, that is, their states of information, material circumstances, climates of opinion,

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Erich Angermann, "Die Auseinandersetzung mit der Moderne in Deutschland and den USA in den 'Goldenen zwanziger Jahren'/Coming to Grips with Modern Society: Germany and the United States in the 'Golden Twenties,'" in *Deutschland and die USA / Germany and the USA, 1918–1933* = Schriftenreihe des Internationalen Schulbuchinstituts, vol. 13 (Braunschweig, 1968), 53–64/65–75.

prejudices, expectations, intentions, and achievements. Equally important for the comparative historian, it would seem, is to develop a set of fruitful questions without applying theoretical patterns likely to preclude the identification of unexpected problems, to impair his/her sensitivity to unfamiliar facts, and to mislead him/her into taking for granted that certain things must be more “normal” than others.

The list of apprehensions about the workability of comparative history could be continued indefinitely. One of the inferences of this predicament might be that the task is beyond the competence of an individual. This led me to the idea of organizing a number of collective efforts in the form of more or less international symposia. The first one, under the title *New Wine in Old Skins* (1976), was concerned with the American Revolution as an outstandingly important event in modern history with a comparative view of socio-political structures affecting that revolution; it is to be admitted that, with one exception, the comparative views were brought forward in the ensuing debates rather than in the several contributions.<sup>6</sup> The next conference, *Oceans Apart?* (1980), dealt with issues of mutual interest in nineteenth-century American and German history, in particular bound labor, early industrialism, civil service reform, and national styles of diplomacy. Papers on both sides were paired, but again the comparative aspects were born out in the discussion rather than in the individual contributions as published in the volume resulting from the symposium.<sup>7</sup>

Then, in order to sound out the views and interests of various groups of historians and similarly oriented political and social scientists of both countries in preparation for the opening of the German Historical Institute in Washington, there followed a series of binational conferences on such topics as urban history, the American role in European recovery after World War I and II, labor history, bureaucracy, and the tradition of mutual understanding and misunderstanding between Germans and Americans.

Each of these joint ventures turned out to be a remarkable experience both in mutual good will and cooperative spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Erich Angermann, Marie-Luise Frings, and Hermann Wellenreuther, *New Wine in Old Skins: A Comparative View of Socio-Political Structures and Values Affecting the American Revolution* (Stuttgart, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Erich Angermann and Marie-Luise Frings, eds., *Oceans Apart? Comparing Germany and the United States. Studies in Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Carl Schurz* (Stuttgart, 1981).

They all led to fruitful contracts, even friendships, and at times even to fresh insights, but virtually never to *tangible results* in terms of publications in the field of comparative history. There was general agreement that competent comparison on the basis of solid research and information about both sides required sustained efforts organized and supported by a suitable institution. This was one of the arguments behind the founding of the German Historical Institute in Washington, which gradually found the approval of both American and German historians. For only an institute or an institutionalized study group can carry out such long-range projects of collective research.

Carl Degler, in fact, had insisted from the very beginning of our deliberations that it is all but impossible to forge a truly comparative study out of a cluster of disparate points of view based on unrelated sources of information. Graciously, though, he did not withdraw from giving his advice in my dogged pursuit of those preparatory symposia; indeed, he was the one American colleague to participate in all of them. We never disagreed on the proposition that the initial process of integrating the comparative aspects of a study will apparently have to take place in a single mind, even granted that the end product will in all probability result from, or be improved by, a collective effort. In other words, an individual scholar (or perhaps a well coordinated team) will have to risk his/her head by authoring a comparative study, which, given the current state of professionalism, will by necessity lack in perfection and therefore be susceptible of being torn to pieces by all kinds of specialists. This may be a somewhat cumbersome procedure, but it is in keeping with the usual ways of scholarly progress—and it is fun!

Small wonder, then, that when I was offered a tempting opportunity by the *Historische Kolleg* in Munich in 1982, I embarked upon a project that struck more sober-minded historians as a bit chimeric but had captivated my venturesome curiosity for years: a comparative study of the American Civil War in the context of midnineteenth-century European movements of national unification. A sabbatical year is a short time to draw up a workable conceptual framework for so unwieldy a project and do the indispensable research. Moreover, needless to say, academic and other chores kept me busy. So the book has not been written as yet; but I am surely looking forward to indulging within a little more than a year in the carefree life of the true leisure class, the *emeriti*.

The Civil War venture did lead, though, to a result which at least for me was indeed tangible. For I produced a lengthy programmatic paper, which in the summer of 1983 was discussed at another international conference of pretty high-grade experts, with Carl Degler and Jack Garraty once more joining the party. The tape transcript of these debates is still in my possession. I cannot say, of course, how rewarding the symposium was for the other participants, although I presume that at least some of them enjoyed the opportunity to meet colleagues from a totally different field of studies. As for my own reaction, it is clear that the adventure greatly enhanced my ideas both by prompting me to write that (no doubt unsatisfactory) methodological paper and by the sophisticated comments advanced in the debate—not to mention the hardly measurable but nonetheless very real gain from thought-provoking informal conversations almost inevitable in the course of such a meeting. In brief: The upshot of a conference like this may at first glance disappoint; in the long run it will lead to the insight that much more thought must be given to the project in question. For the more one goes into the details, the more one will be alerted to its conceptual shortcomings, the neglected soft spots of one's research, and the difficulties of communicating one's findings in a comprehensible rhetoric.

As the countless problems of factual research are obviously beyond the scope of a short talk like this, I shall concentrate upon some interrelated aspects of methodology and rhetoric. For, as may be inferred at this point, my aim is neither to contrive a theoretically incontestable scheme of investigation, nor to support theories of chaos, self-organization, deconstruction, or, for that matter, historical laws or the applicability of natural laws to history, a concept that is outdated anyway.<sup>8</sup> So what we need in the first instance, in order to cope with the potentially immeasurable mass of relevant materials, is a sufficiently reliable, pragmatic way to get rid of nonissues, side-issues, and evidently intractable questions of minor relevance.

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<sup>8</sup> To mention but a few titles, cf. John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, 1989); James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York, 1987); an earlier American case of such theorizing concerns of course Henry Adams, cf. especially the closing chapters of *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston, 1918), and Ernest Samuels, *Henry Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), passim; good German introductions are Karl-Georg Faber, *Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft*, 2d ed. (Munich,

This purpose, in my opinion, can be served by what might be dubbed a *skeleton topic*. What I mean is a historical question of genuine transnational interest apt to serve as a dominant theme wide enough to encompass a variety of related phenomena and flexible enough for them to be dealt with in detail without digression from the main question.

In my project, this function of a leitmotiv is assigned to the *quest for national unity*, to be observed around the middle of the nineteenth century in a number of what might be termed *unfinished nations*, such as Poland, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and the United States of America (for which Tocqueville coined the phrase "an incomplete national government").<sup>9</sup> For whether we like it or not, the unified nation was at that time the prevalent principle of political, constitutional, societal, and cultural organization, a principle with almost endless repercussions in the modern world (vide the recent developments in the Soviet Union and the Arab world). It seems to me that the quest for national unity is a suitable operational device to help us to limit our areas of investigation and to bring a semblance of conceptual order to bear on an otherwise amorphous mass of facts without introducing an idea alien to the contemporaries. Besides, it permits the exclusion of all countries that had previously achieved national unity, like France, Spain, and Britain—with several question marks to be added. It avoids dealing with empires not organized according to national principles, like the second British Empire, Russia, the Scandinavian empires, the

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1972), and Theodor Schieder and Kurt Gräufig, eds., *Theorieprobleme der Geschichtswissenschaft*, Wege der Forschung 378 (Darmstadt, 1977). The classic refutation of such aspirations is, needless to say, K. R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 2d ed. (London, 1960). I wish to thank Norbert Finzsch for his advice as to the more recent developments in this field.

<sup>9</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley, 2 vols. (New York, 1945), 1:164 (ch. viii); James T. Schliefer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980), 94–95, points to the strong impact of numbers 17, 39, and 46 of the *Federalist* on Tocqueville's text. The notion of Germany as an "*unvollendeter Nationalstaat*" appears to have been commonplace in midnineteenth-century usage, cf. Theodor Schieder, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich von 1871 als Nationalstaat*, Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, vol. 20 (Köln-Opladen, 1961), 39; Joseph Jörg, deputy in the Bavarian diet, also used it after 1870 (information provided by Dr. Franz Herre, 1 September 1990).

Habsburg monarchy, and the Ottoman empire, to mention but the most obvious examples. It is a little more complicated to categorize the movements for independence from such superstructures, like the Greek and other Balkan nationalities, Ireland, Belgium, and the former colonies in Latin America and Canada, whose claims to national identity would appear to be debatable, to put it mildly. Finally, the national movements in Poland, Italy, and Switzerland pose special problems because of their peculiar mix of ethnic, religious, and political motives.

Such considerations, I think, need not and should not prevent us from proceeding with a practicable project, for which I chose to place the American Civil War at center stage, comparing it with the fairly simultaneous events in Italy and Germany, partly because contemporaries and nearcontemporaries like Carl Schurz, Henry Cabot Lodge, or John W. Burgess and historians like David Potter and Carl Degler saw it that way, but also because of the evident thematic affinity of those movements.<sup>10</sup> In pursuing the latter, common sense will keep us from paying too much attention to frills like the special appreciation for Shakespeare shared by Lincoln, Cavour, and Bismarck, of which psycho-historians have made quite an issue.<sup>11</sup> Being aware of the incompleteness of our information, we shall be well advised also to abstain from quantitative methods—all the more so as most of it cannot be reduced to quantifiable data anyway. If the general hypothesis of a prevalent trend toward national unity in selected countries is accepted, however, a comparison of such national movements would apparently provoke a whole series of pertinent secondary questions.

In the first place, it quite evidently makes sense to ask whether the people we wish to study are fairly alike in terms of ethnocultural homogeneity, including racial prejudices, religion, language, moral values, etc., or whether there are differ-

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. H. Cabot Lodge, "The Democracy of Abraham Lincoln," in idem, *The Democracy of the Constitution ...* (New York, 1915), 122–59; Carl N. Degler, "One of Many," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 39 (1963): 289–306; David M. Potter, "Civil War," in *Comparative Approach to American History*, 135–45.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Abraham Lincoln and His Age* (New York, 1979), 244ff. Dwight G. Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln: The Quest for Immortality* (New York, 1982), 195ff.; Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (New York, 1982), 229ff.

ences possibly relevant to the dominant theme. Can we at all apprehend other people's patterns of thought and feeling without having shared their educational experiences, including nursery rhymes, fairy tales, tall tales, myths, superstitions, plays, entertainments, outdoor life, and God knows what? Does it make a difference, for instance, whether one grew up with *Alice in Wonderland* or *Struwwelpeter*, with anecdotes about the *Alte Fritz* or Parson Weems' *Life of Washington*, with *Rübezahl* or *Paul Bunyan*, and if so, what difference? (Apart from the fact that one may miss the meaning of allusions.) I will just mention the vexatious linguistic problems involved, but I do not wish to discuss them in any depth. For it must be all but obvious to any historian that the translation of key terms from one period of time to another, even in what is called our mother tongue is often no easier than between two different languages. However, I shall have to return to the question in the context of such changeable notions as *Libertät*, *liberté*, *liberty*, and *Freiheit*, or *nation*, etc.

Another set of questions follows from the logic of the situation: To what extent are the countries similar or divergent as to their political culture, ideological traditions, constitutional concepts, judicial systems, customary self-government, freedom of opinion, unfulfilled expectations, geopolitical pretensions, and so forth? What, for example, are the effects of political localism as it prevailed in the United States upon the concept of a "consolidated" national government? How does it reflect on the understanding of democracy, states' rights, and sectional or regional solidarity? How can all of this be related to traditions of more or less centralized and authoritarian political power in Europe, mitigated as they were by dynastic particularism, appeals to the *Gute alte Recht* (a concept not altogether alien to the Anglo-Saxon tradition) or constitutional rights and privileges? Was the regionalism of the East-Elbian, Western and Southern parts of Germany, or the Italian North and the Mezzogiorno fundamentally different from American sectionalism, and if so, wherein lay the distinctive features? How did they affect the respective versions of federalism and prevent it altogether in Cavour's Italy? Finally, what was the impact of foreign powers on the internal contests agitating those nations, and what kinds of war were fought under these circumstances?

These are by no means all the aspects we have to grapple with: What about the respective stages of economic and tech-



nological development of the societies and their constituent parts? How did the established social systems respond to the premises and consequences of economic and demographic growth, the infrastructural requirements, the use and preservation of natural resources, the needs of domestic and foreign trade? How did the monetary systems work with respect to the availability of commercial and investment capital, public and private credit, an adequate supply of currency, banking and stock exchange facilities, etc.? What were the respective problems of business and labor, bound, free, and organized, migration, urbanization, regional/sectional status symbols, and so forth? What were the predominant modes of resolving social tensions? In what ways did the legal systems favor the successful and discriminate against the underprivileged? To what extent was public violence (including the “right to keep and bear arms”!) accepted or replaced by an exclusive governmental authority to exert physical force (*staatliches Gewaltmonopol*), etc., etc.?

I should close my catalog of suggested questions (and I hope the reader will appreciate my doing so), for by now it ought to be clear that one may go on endlessly putting ever more somehow concomitant questions to the main theme. The next step, then, would seem to be an attempt to devise a set of what might be called *core questions*, that is, a configuration of interrelated questions which would add more specific aspects to the dominant theme and thus serve as a kind of backbone of a comparative study, perhaps a sort of *ideal type* in the sense of Max Weber’s terminology. For it would apparently help to reduce a host of often marginal problems to a manageable ensemble of often relevant and related viewpoints. When I did try to devise such a pattern, however, it turned out to be a mirage, if not an outright error.

Looking out for a handy title for my project that would indicate such an ensemble of interrelated ideas significant for all three national movements to be considered, I ran into the first line of our present national anthem. As you may have inferred, I am not speaking of “Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles,” but of “Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit,” as the condition of the pursuit of happiness. It was in fact a tempting idea to construe kind of a triangular system underlying the quest for national unity in all unfinished nations, namely a drive toward national union and independence, regional and local self-government,

and civil liberty under law as the major motives reinforcing each other mutually. Appeal as it did to my imagination at first glance, it unfortunately proved impracticable.

For when one digs a little deeper, it is inescapable that the “German Idea of Freedom,” to use Leonard Krieger’s title (1957), although to a certain extent inspired by American and Western European models, underwent a substantial change from the vivid expectations of the summer of 1848 to the stifled hopes of the 1870s accompanying the widespread enthusiasm over Bismarck’s empire.<sup>12</sup> It may not have been too dissimilar to the Italian experience, if we disregard the different mentalities of the various people concerned. That experience, however, was so strongly shaped by the desire to achieve independence from foreign powers that it can scarcely be likened to the development in Germany—not to speak of the regional differences, international aspects, diverse economic interests, and so forth.

Finally, how do these elements relate to the American tradition of *liberty*, of *freedom*? It may be a significant fact that both Webster’s and the *American Heritage Dictionary* treat them more or less as synonyms, starting with the statement “not imprisoned or enslaved”! Likewise, neither the *Dictionary of American History* nor Jack P. Green’s *Encyclopedia of American History* offer an entry under these headings, while they discuss all kinds of items from “Free Silver” to “Freemen” and “Liberty Bell” to “Liberty Poles,” “Freedmen’s Bureau” to “Freedom Rides” and the “Liberty League” to the “Liberty Party.” (The recent *Fischer Lexikon Geschichte*, 1990, incidentally, follows a similar policy.) On the other hand, Michael Kammen, borrowing Hexter’s felicitous phrase of several “languages of liberty,” made abundantly clear that the meaning of *liberty* has changed dramatically over time, even within the American tradition.<sup>13</sup> I surely need not belabor the subject.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition* (Chicago, 1957); a most welcome synthesis is James J. Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Michael Kammen, *Spheres of Liberty: Changing Perceptions of Liberty in American Culture*, 6th ed. (Madison, 1986), the reference to Hexter at 9; see also John Phillip Reid, *The Concept of Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chicago, 1988). A good survey is the article “Freiheit,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 7 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972–), II: 425–542.

To come back to the Civil War: How can we understand the ways in which this American tradition produced a new movement for national independence termed Secession and embracing the brand of “Liberty” for which the slave-holding South of the United States fought so doggedly to the utter ruin of her economic prosperity and social system? On the other hand, for the most part the North did not go to war for the slaves’ emancipation but, as Lincoln put it in his *Gettysburg Address*, “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.” Now was this merely a shabby disguise of the North’s economic interests or her lust for power in general? Or was it rather a sense of obligation toward all the people under the Constitution, which could not be fulfilled but by securing the integrity of “a nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”? One need not deny the many other motives behind both Secession and Reconstruction in order to acknowledge the greatness and persuasive power of this renewed national identity.<sup>14</sup>

I spare you a similar discussion of the German term *Recht*. It covers both right and law (including due process of law) with all their connotations of justice, civil rights, adequate administration, etc., so that the derivative concept of *Rechtsstaat* evokes a much broader spectrum of meanings than *government under law* (which is in fact the most adequate translation).<sup>15</sup> My purpose in this talk, after all, is not to present a clear-cut framework for dealing with my subject. Rather it is to call attention to the intricacies of devising such a precisely drawn-out conceptual pattern on the one hand; on the other it is to point to the challenges of a conceptually more open exploratory project. In other words, my somewhat disappointing experience taught me that, even though the ideas of liberty and law did indeed play their roles in all those national movements, a tripartite topical pattern may be too inflexible for an imaginative approach and that in the end the more modest focus on one central theme like nationalism might be more conducive to real understanding.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Erich Angermann, "Abraham Lincoln and die Erneuerung der nationalen Identität der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika," *Historische Zeitschrift* 239 (1984): 77–109.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. "Recht, Gerechtigkeit," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, V: 231–311; on the scholar who made the term "*Rechtsstaat*" a household word, see Erich Angermann, *Robert von Mohl, 1799–1875: Leben and Werk eines altliberalen Staatsgelehrten, Politica*, vol. 7 (Neuwied, 1962).

For the very term *nationalism*, upon closer inspection, poses a host of intricate questions. This becomes quite clear, when looking at the voluminous literature discussing its “true” meaning.<sup>16</sup> The two prototypes are of course the “voluntarist” and the “cultural” versions. The former was succinctly defined by Ernst Renan’s formula of “un plebiscite de tous les jours” (1982) or by Friedrich Meinecke’s term *Staatsnation* (1907) and represented by the United States of America, perhaps also by the Gheuniierde Nederlanden, Belgium, and the Confédération Helvétique. The latter, Meinecke’s *Kulturnation*, reached back to Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Volkgeist* (1772)—whatever that means—and to the romantic tradition; it stressed such elements as a common language, a collection of cultural and political experience, if not racial and religious homogeneity, a peculiar tradition of law, and so forth. These nations informed of course not only the German and Italian movements. They were a significant force behind the Spanish and Russian resistance against Napoleon. They had for a long time worked in Scotland, Ireland, the Scandinavian countries, and in due course spread to all the Eastern European nations. Finally, did they not also underlie the centralizing trends in France and Britain, overlapping, as it were, with dynastic and patriotic forces? So who can really tell at what stage of its development a particular national movement changed, or was transformed, from a predominantly cultural identity into a chiefly voluntary political entity? And at what point might a voluntary political society acquire a cultural identity?

In this predicament, I think David Potter’s advice may be helpful:

It is questionable whether either basis can support a superstructure of nationality without the other. If the historian will recognize this dualism, he will not only possess an effective working concept, but will also free himself from his present compulsion to prove a growth of cultural unity every time he observes an intensification of nationalism and to prove the emergence of a new culture every time a new dissident group proclaims its solidarity in nationalistic terms.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A useful survey is Peter Alter, *Nationalismus* (Frankfurt/M. 1985); in particular Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat, Werke*, 2d ed., I (Munich, 1969), and Franz Schnabel, *Deutsche Geschichte im neunzehnten Jahrhundert*, 4 vols. (Freiburg, 1927–36), esp. vols. I and II.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. “The Historian’s Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa,” (1962),

Such merging of only superficially divergent concepts will no doubt lead to a less rigid approach.

For when we turn to American nationalism, it is easy to detect that it simply will not fit into any of those patterns. Even if we admit, as I do, that by the end of the colonial period the British possessions on the North American continent had achieved a certain cultural, societal, and economic *American identity*, the argument needs no elaboration that this was a far cry from a *national identity*. Edmund S. Morgan in a famous essay from 1973 held that “The Americans did achieve nationality during the Revolutionary period, and nationalism has proved to be the most powerful, if the least understood, social force of modern times.” But he does not choose to elucidate this understanding of nationalism; he merely hints at an early “continental vision” and its “expansive quality,” otherwise maintaining that “Nationalism was in itself the strongest force binding Americans of the Revolutionary generation together.”<sup>18</sup> I wonder, however, why the Federal Convention of 1787 replaced the term “national government,” as used in the Virginia Plan, by “United States”;<sup>19</sup> and Philip Freneau’s *National Gazette* surely will not qualify as a nationalist paper—not to mention the Kentucky and Virginia or, for that matter, the Hartford resolution. On the other hand, there seems to be a pretty convincing consensus that a trend toward national coherence can be discerned from Hamiltonian policies to Albert Gallatin, the War of 1812, the “Era of Good Feelings”—including *McCulloch v. Maryland* and the Monroe Doctrine—through John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay’s American System, and Andrew Jackson’s stand in the Nullification Controversy. But what about the widespread misgivings as to internal improvements, the Second Bank of the United States, and the growing sectionalization of American politics?

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repr. in Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *History and American Society: Essays of David M. Potter* (New York, 1973), 60–108, the quotation at 84.

<sup>18</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, “Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution,” in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973), 189–309, the quotations at 302–3.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 2d ed., 4 vols., (New Haven, Conn., 1937), I: 24, 35, 395, III: 473–75, 517, 529, and Jürgen Heideking, *Die Verfassung vor dem Richterstuhl: Vorgeschichte und Ratifizierung der amerikanischen Verfassung, 1787–1791* (Berlin and New York, 1988), 129, 409.

When all is said and done, I am afraid it must be admitted that up to the Age of Jackson, Young America (loosely connected with Young Europe), Manifest Destiny, and the Mexican War, American nationalism was less an emotional than a practical effort to reinforce economic and political unity and independence. Moreover, it was ensnared in a perennial dialectic with sectional, state, and local counterforces.<sup>20</sup> It is true that George Washington himself and some of the leaders of the Revolutionary generation were concerned about the lack of common national past to serve as an ideological underpinning of political unity. This interest inspired as well the early historiography of the struggle for independence and the forthright propaganda of such authors as Jedediah Morse, Noah Webster, and Parson Weems, not to speak of countless Fourth of July orators.<sup>21</sup> Many of them were convinced that the national past, if necessary, must be created like the new nation itself. Think also of Thomas Paine's dictum: "The bravest achievements were always accomplished in the nonage of a nation." Nonetheless, if I am not mistaken, it took considerable time until American nationalism—apart from all the spread-eagle talk and the Jeffersonian myth of the expanding empire of freedom—became more similar to European developments. Perhaps it is not mere accident that such a change of structure was closely connected with the most fundamental crisis of the federal union since the Revolution and its immediate aftermath.

Interestingly enough, the theme of American nationalism, although well researched by justly renowned historians like Carleton Hayes, Hans Kohn, Boyd Shafer, Louis Snyder, and others, is not too well taken care of in more general works. For example, it is conspicuously absent from the topical essays in A

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. George Dangerfeld, *The Awakening of American Nationalism, 1815–1828* (New York, 1965); Marie-Louise Frings, *Henry Clays American System und die sektionale Kontroverse in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, 1815–1829*, Europäische Hochschulschriften, III/117 (Frankfurt, 1979); also Hans Korn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretative Essay* (New York, 1957), and Boyd C. Shafer, *Nationalism: Myth and Reality* (New York, 1955).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Paul C. Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798–1898* (New York, 1971); Bert James Loewenberg, *American History in American Thought: Christopher Columbus to Henry Adams* (New York, 1972); Arthur H. Shaffer, *The Politics of History: Writing the History of the American Revolution, 1783–1815* (Chicago, 1975); Lawrence J. Friedman, *Inventors of the Promised Land* (New York, 1975).

*Comparative Approach to American History* (1968), although Vann Woodward himself expressly points to its significance for American historical thought.<sup>22</sup> A notable exception is a “conversation” with Henry Steele Commager in John A. Garraty’s stimulating collection, *Interpreting American History* (1970).<sup>23</sup> After summing up the “ingredients” of nationalism and the absence of some of them in the development of the young nation, he arrives at the decisive turning point when he discusses the emergent Southern nationalism. He admits, of course, that it turned out to be “a failed nationalism,” because “the South organized a nation on the irretrievably antinational basis of particularism—the basis of states rights.” But he insists, arguing his case rather persuasively, that the South with her peculiar social system, retrospective romanticism, genteel and military traditions came much closer than the North to achieving a national identity of her own. However, “Southern nationalism is to be understood, as the whole South is to be understood, not so much in American terms, as in European terms.” Commager’s notion of the “European terms” of nationalism is surely a little simplistic, and personally I do share Kenneth Stampp’s conviction that Southern aspirations to a national identity failed not merely because of particularism, but because too many Southerners lost their faith in the validity of their cause.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, whatever kind of nationalism prevailed in the North, it did not look to sectional identity but, under Lincoln’s able leadership, if perhaps not “under God,” was concerned with the national integrity of the Union as the premise of “a new birth of freedom.” Despite the sectional origins of the Republican Party, the moral deficiencies of warfare and Reconstruction, and the greedy materialism permeating, after all, the

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<sup>22</sup> See note 2.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. John A. Garraty, *Interpreting American History: Conversations with Historians*, 2 Parts (New York, 1970), I: 93–115, the quotations at 109–10; see also Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848–1861*, History of the South, vol. 6 (Baton Rouge, La., 1963); Clement Eaton, *A History of the Old South: The Emergence of a Reluctant Nation*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1975); John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830–1860* (New York, 1979).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), esp. chap. 8, “The Southern Road to Appomattox,” 246–269; Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation, 1861–1865* (New York, 1979).

whole nation, I think it can hardly be said that the North fought merely to promote her sectional interests. She did fight, though, for a “more perfect Union,” even if the countervailing forces of states’ rights and sectional self-consciousness prevented a truly centralizing development. David Donald, who reminds us of the limitations of that trend toward a “consolidated government,” adds a significant observation, however: Not only did common usage during the Civil War more and more replace the term *Union* by *Nation*; there was also a grammatical shift from the plural to a singular construction of United States.<sup>25</sup>

I am at the end—surely not of my journey of trial and error through the vicissitudes of doing comparative history, but probably at the end of the reader’s patience and therefore at the end of my essay. My aim was not to present a theoretical framework for comparative studies. For I am convinced that in the final analysis learning by doing is more conducive to the uses and rewards—and joys!—of comparative as of all historical studies than the most elaborate theoretical blueprints. I have tried to illustrate this process by dealing with the comparative aspects of nationalism more fully than I could do with other examples. In fact I believe that an untiring curiosity for human affairs, a certain gift for empathy, and a discerning mind open to the unexpected are the most indispensable driving forces behind such efforts to understand other ages and/or foreign nations. However to quote Immanuel Kant (as translated by Sir Karl Popper): “To yield to every whim of curiosity, and to allow our passion for inquiry to be restrained by nothing but the limits of our ability, this shows an eagerness of mind not unbecoming to *scholarship*. But it is wisdom that has the merit of selecting, from among the innumerable problems which present themselves, those whose solution is important to mankind.”<sup>26</sup>

In other words, it will not do simply to reject theoretical approaches. We do need a mode of selection if we wish to contain our vagrant curiosity within the limits of national and expedient research. As most historians will agree, this selection of relevant and soluble problems will partly be directed by common sense and experiential knowledge.<sup>27</sup> This can certainly

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<sup>25</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Liberty and Union* (Boston, 1978), 215.

<sup>26</sup> Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*, 56, quoting from Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, ed. by W. Weischedel (Darmstadt, 1960), I:984, “Träume eines Geistersehers” (1766).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hexter, *History Primer*, 386.



be enhanced by refined historical craftsmanship—what is sometimes overestimated as *historisch-kritische Methode*, the rules of doing history in a professional way. However, what my much admired academic mentor Franz Schnabel referred to as *Geschichtsschreibung großen Stils* (historiography in a grand style) is more than that: It is a work of art conveying a kind of insight *not otherwise obtainable*.<sup>28</sup>

As Morton White put it, "History is a literary art as well as a discipline aimed at discovering and ordering truth."<sup>29</sup> To wit: "Discipline" in this context ought to be understood as both an intellectual activity and a behavioral attitude. As to history as a "*literary art*," we must be aware that this is not merely a question of adequately presenting historical materials. It is to a large extent a question of choosing a well-ordered and understandable sequence of historical facts and interpretations and of presenting that story to a receptive and reasonably educated audience with an appropriate rhetoric (in the sense in which Hexter uses that term). To put it another way, the noetic function of interpreting, that is, translating historical insights into notions related to our own experience is part and parcel of a cognitive process and not merely an aesthetic accessory.<sup>30</sup> Since I cannot solve all the problems involved anyway, let me close with another quotation from Jack Hexter's *Doing History* which opens a rather bright outlook for the historiography of our time:

[M]ore and more historians today display a bold, open-minded curiosity about a wide range of human communities, their ideologies and social structures, their interactions of conflict, accommodation, and symbiosis, the internal and external pressures on them, both for change and stability, and the various similarities and divergences among them. This new curiosity transforms each historian's small realm of specialization into a universe of discourse more spacious, more exciting, and more rewarding for him to inhabit and for others to explore.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Erich Angermann, "'Sapientia et Eloquentia.' Überlegungen zur Geschichtsdarstellung Franz Schnabels," in Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, ed., *Franz Schnabel: Zu Leben und Werk, (1887–1966)* (Munich 1988), 41–92, esp. 62ff.

<sup>29</sup> 29. Morton G. White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York, 1965), 200–221, as quoted by Hexter, *Doing History*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Hexter, *Doing History*, 74ff., and Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York, 1974), esp. conclusion, 185ff.

<sup>31</sup> Hexter, *Doing History*, 146.

Let us hope that the challenges of ambiguity will in fact lure many historians into such adventures! Had Columbus foreseen too clearly what expected him in the New World, maybe he would have changed his mind about sailing West.

## **In Making Historical Comparisons Focus on Common National Issues**

*Carl N. Degler*

Like Erich Angermann, I have long been interested in placing the history of the United States in comparative perspective. For, in common with him, I am convinced that comparison highlights aspects of a nation's past that are obscured or overlooked until thrown against a backdrop of another country's history. Fortunately, comparative history, unlike some other departures from traditional approaches—such as psycho-history or quantitative history—enjoys a strongly positive response from the average historian. Having said that, however, one must immediately regret that very little comparative history is written. The reasons for that sad situation Erich Angermann explained well when he set forth the difficulties, obstacles, and ambiguities that confront anyone who tries to compare historical events or processes. Yet, simply because comparison is truly valuable, we must not be cowards and shirk our obligations. Erich Angermann may be a little disenchanted by the difficulties, but he is not forsaking the endeavor. Therefore I want to applaud his resolve, and, especially, to thank him for the stimulation that his persistent emphasis upon placing the Civil War in comparative perspective over the years has provided me personally. For that reason I shall direct the remainder of my remarks to his thoughts on the nature of American nationalism.

Professor Angermann is quite right that a fundamental requisite for successful comparison is that the issue or subject to be discussed should be equally present in each of the national experiences to be compared. Thus I agree that his original idea of including *law* and *freedom* as concepts to be compared, in addition to *unity*, was taking on too much. Unity, nationalism, or Union are sufficiently broad to encompass the nineteenth-century experiences of the three nations he seeks to compare

and yet precise enough to be analyzed comparatively.

Professor Angermann was right on target, too, in accepting David Potter's observation that for a people or country to exhibit nationalism does not require that it first exhibit or feel a sense of cultural nationalism. Professor Angermann uses this observation to suggest that in the years between the inauguration of the Republic in 1789 and the Civil War a broad national sentiment had not been established, that the Union was, as he phrased it, more "a practical effort to reinforce economic and political unity and independence," than a deep-seated emotion. Here, I think Professor Angermann is too circumspect, too cautious. In my judgment, the weakness of American nationhood in those years is of central importance in comparing the Civil War with other examples of nation building.

Almost from the beginning, I would argue, the endurance of the United States as a union, much less as a nation, was problematic. Before the Union was ten years old, one of its revolutionary leaders, Thomas Jefferson, was already contending that it was possible for a state to nullify an act of Congress; a few years after that disunion was being recommended as a legitimate response to the allegedly unwarranted acquisition of Louisiana. Less than a decade later, New England itself came close to getting out of the Union in order to escape what it considered the oppressions set in motion by the prosecution of the war against Great Britain. Indeed, as Kenneth Stampp showed a few years ago, the Union was defended as perpetual for the first time during the Nullification Crisis of the early 1830s, over a half century after its founding.<sup>1</sup> From that time on the Union's endurance was increasingly called into question by the growing antagonism between North and South. In short, I think a quite convincing case can be made that whatever may have been the state of American identity or nationalism at the time of the Revolution and the Constitution, by the 1850s that sense of unity was largely eroded or, alternatively, thanks to the growing sectional antagonism, had failed to grow into a sense of nationhood.

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<sup>1</sup> See his first chapter "The Concept of a Perpetual Union," in Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (New York, 1980). A similar point is made in Paul C. Nagel, *One Nation Indivisible: The Union in American Thought* (New York, 1964), Chapter I, where he notes that in the first quarter century the Union was frequently described as an "experiment."

I think Professor Angermann may be unduly defensive about the sectionalist forces underlying Northern nationalism. For as David Potter incisively pointed out, one may admit that the North had sectionalist interests, such as keeping slaves out of the territories, or building a Pacific railroad from Chicago rather than from New Orleans, or pushing for a protective tariff, but none of those goals was so vital an interest as to cause the North to disrupt the Union in order to achieve them.<sup>2</sup> The North easily acquiesced, for example, in the reduction of the tariff in 1857. At the same time, waging a war to preserve the Union was quite consistent with Northern long-term and national interests. A successful war for the Union could only enhance the power, the economy, and the expansion of the North, as in fact it surely did.

None of that, of course, was true for the South. By the 1850s Southerners may have shared a common history with Northerners, but that did not mean that they felt they shared a common country. Too much had changed since they first joined the Union. At the origin all the states of the Union, not only the Southern states, sanctioned slavery, virtually all people, North and South, depended on the land for their livelihood, and all Americans looked back to a common experience of having achieved their independence from Britain.<sup>3</sup> By the 1850s, however, that unity of experience had been shattered by the transformation of the North's economy and social order, which had spawned an outright hostility to the South's dependence upon slavery in the shape of the antislavery Republican party. Clearly the South's sectional interests, especially that of preserving slavery, were not realizable in a Union that also contained a transformed and unsympathetic, not to say hostile north. In short, the case is strong that in the 1850s the United States was indeed, to use Professor Angermann's term, as much an "unfinished nation" as Germany or Italy.

The Civil War showed that Southerners were wrong to have believed that secession could preserve slavery. But suppose for a moment that the Confederacy had survived the war—as I

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<sup>2</sup> David M. Potter, "The Historian's Use of Nationalism," in *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge, La., 1968), 58.

<sup>3</sup> James M. McPherson expertly developed this argument in his "Antebellum Southern Exceptionalism: A New Look at an Old Question," *Civil War History* 29 (1983): 230–44.

think it might well have if Lincoln had not been relentlessly dedicated to the defense of the Union at all costs or if he had failed to be reelected in 1864. Professor Angermann comes close to addressing a form of this supposition when he quite properly raises the subject of Southern nationalism. Unfortunately, in my judgment, he was too quick to accept Henry Steele Commager's contention that states' rights precluded a sound basis for a national state. After all, states' rights had been the foundation of the American Union that lasted for almost a century. And who knows what victory in the war by the Richmond government might have done to reduce the importance and value of states' rights in a Confederacy no longer bedeviled by a devastating "foreign" invasion. More to the point than this counterfactual proposition is the possibility that Southern nationalism had more of a future than I think Professor Angermann allows. The question of the origins of a sense of nationalism and how it enters into history has been reopened of late; and the upshot of this recent scholarship is the contention that nations are made as much as they are born. Rather than seeing a nation emerging from a people who already have a sense of cultural cohesion, European scholars like Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Ernest Gellner have called our attention to the deliberate efforts of persons and groups to create a sense of nationhood. Benedict Anderson has strikingly defined a nation as "an imagined political community," the implication being that it was created, not simply found or emergent. Or as Anderson quotes anthropologist Ernest Gellner, "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist."<sup>4</sup> Among American historians, no one has applied this approach more thoughtfully or convincingly than Drew Faust in her recent Fleming Lectures entitled *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*. Her argument is that the cultural, social, and economic differences between Northerners and Southerners that slavery did so much to create also provided the raw material from which publicists, politicians, and preachers

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983), 15. See also E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, and Reality* (Cambridge, 1990); and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983).

fashioned a Confederate nationalism.<sup>5</sup>

Don Fehrenbacher has given credence to the reality of Southern nationalism from a different angle. “It seems to me,” he wrote in 1989, “that the quality of southern nationalism at the beginning of the Civil War compares not unfavorably with the quality of American nationalism in the early days of the Revolution.” In both instances, he notes, though the desire for independence was hardly universal in either instance, a common hostility to the alleged oppressor united the people: “the sense of national identity drew added strength—for a time, at least—from the ordeal of conflict.” Southerners, it is true, he adds, were more conflicted by “their deep affection for the old federal Union and their hatred of northern abolitionism.” But perhaps the critical difference, he concludes, “is the effect of hindsight on historical judgment.... Thus victory in 1783 made the Declaration of Independence a reality; defeat in 1865 turned the idea of southern nationhood, as it flourished in 1861, into an empty dream.”<sup>6</sup>

These acknowledgments of Southern nationalism are easier for me to accept than I think they are for Professor Angermann. Unlike him, I do not find so convincing Kenneth Stampp’s explanation for the defeat of the South as a consequence of Southerners’ loss of “faith in the validity of their cause.” A people who sacrificed a proportion of their young men to an extent matched only by the Germans and the Russians during the Second World War can hardly be seen, in my judgment, as lacking faith in their cause.

Although Professor Angermann properly abandoned *freedom* as one of the concepts he once intended to study comparatively, it seems to have crept back into his thinking when he came to discuss Northern nationalism. Quoting from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, he concluded that an element in Northern nationalism was the integration of “a new birth of freedom” into the restored Union. But in discussing the nation-building aspect of the American Civil War, which is the only way it is comparable with other countries’ experiences, it is essential, I submit, to keep the issue of slavery and emancipation out of the discussion. The war began, truly enough, because of slavery, the

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<sup>5</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge, La., 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Don Fehrenbacher, *Constitutions and Constitutionalism in the Slaveholding South*, Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures, No. 31 (Athens, Ga., 1989), 59–60.

South feeling that its interest in slavery was threatened by the triumph in the North of a frankly antislavery political party. At the same time most historians agree that the North went to war not to free the slaves, but in order to keep the South in the Union. Only later was the second war aim—emancipation—introduced.

It is that second issue that confuses discussion of the Civil War as an example of nation building. For as David Potter has perceptively pointed out, to ascribe genuine nationalist sentiment to the South is to suggest that perhaps the region had a legitimate cause—self-determination—a cause that many Europeans saw in it at the time and which had long stood and remains today among the most cherished of American political values. Yet, given the second war aim—emancipation—it is difficult for us to accord much credence to a true or genuine Southern nationalism. It smacks of justifying slavery or at least of denying the importance of emancipation. In short, if we seek to appreciate the true tenuousness or incompleteness of American nationalism in 1860 and the strength of Southern nationalism, we need to set aside the recognition that one nationalism brought emancipation in its train while the other would have perpetuated slavery.

If we are able to escape from that moral dichotomy, I think we will appreciate better the strength of Southern nationalism in the antebellum years and therefore the incomplete character of American nationhood in 1861. From the standpoint of comparative history, separating nation building from emancipation in looking at the Civil War would make comparison with other countries' nation building much more accurate. It might even make an analogy between the nation building of Otto von Bismarck and that of Abraham Lincoln more acceptable inasmuch as both might be said to have created new nations through a common policy of *Blut und Eisen*.



## **Comparative History: Beyond Description to Analysis**

*John A. Garraty*

Erich Angermann's essay on the challenges of ambiguity might well be titled, "The Trials and Tribulations of a Comparative Historian." The comparative method is indeed full of ambiguity, and employing it certainly calls for the qualities Professor Angermann mentions—"untiring curiosity," a "gift for empathy," and "a mind open to the unexpected." As I am sure I need not add, these are qualities he himself possesses in full measure. However, I want to call to your attention two other qualities required of historians interested in the comparative method, ones that he did not mention, but which his account displays: persistence and the capacity to learn from experience.

Consider the development of his work as he has just described it: First the Declaration of Independence and the medieval concept of mutual protection proved to be incomparable, a false start. Then searching in the American Constitution for roots of German constitutionalism turned out to be a study of where various European thinkers got their ideas, but not really a matter of comparing German and American ideas per se. Next he turned his attention to how America and Germany came to grips with "modern society" in the 1920s, and then to how the American Civil War resembled certain mid-nineteenth-century European unification movements, a project that called attention to similarities and differences in *what* happened in different nations, but threw little light on *why* these things occurred.

His most recent effort, aimed at trying to understand what he calls the American, Italian, and German "search for unity" by breaking down these societies into their elements—education, political ideology, technology, natural resources, the status of labor, among others—seems more likely to produce practical comparative results when completed. But in my opinion the

project still leaves the work of getting beyond description to analysis untackled. This, I gather, he is leaving for his forthcoming retirement.

I agree with Professor Angermann that symposia and other collective efforts to reduce the volume of work in comparative projects to manageable proportions, while stimulating and no doubt enlightening to the participants, are more often than not short on concrete results. But in other respects I found his discussion of the problems inherent in doing comparative history to somewhat overstate these difficulties. Writing about two or more countries or cultures or whatever obviously requires more knowledge than dealing with only one, but such tasks do not demand superhuman intelligence, energy, or, for that matter, time.

Nor do the difficulties of dealing with a foreign or chronologically remote subject appear to be as daunting as he suggests. Is this not something that historians studying any one society other than their own or any past era have to face? Countless scholars have done so effectively. If anything, a comparative aspect makes this problem easier because it focuses the historian's attention on differences that have to be accounted for.

Other problems that Professor Angermann mentioned are peculiar to comparative studies, and some of them are vexing indeed. Words can mean different things in different languages and not merely in the dictionary sense or because of the fact that terms like *democracy* and *sectionalism* defy exact definition in any tongue. The great French medievalist Marc Bloch made the point in his essay "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," published back in 1928, when he complained about "the lack of correspondence between the meanings of historical terms" in German and French.

In nineteenth-century America, to offer a more specific example, nationalism and sectionalism, or states' rights, were not mutually exclusive terms. Andrew Jackson was certainly what might be called a flamboyant nationalist, but he was a firm believer in states' rights too. He was being a nationalist when his common sense told him that the United States could not survive if (as John C. Calhoun claimed) a state could unilaterally nullify a law of Congress. But Jackson took a relatively narrow view of the powers of Congress even by the standards of his age. He vetoed the Maysville Bill funding a federal road-building program and the far more important measure extend-

ing the life of the Second Bank of the United States on the ground that the Constitution did not give Congress the power to pass such legislation.

My own attempt to deal with the Great Depression of the 1930s from a comparative perspective turned up many examples of the different meanings even apparently precise terms can have in various languages. One would think the term unemployed would have a cut-and-dried meaning, however it was spelled and pronounced. But in France in the 1930s it was not enough to be idle, capable of working, and eager to find a job to be classified as unemployed. Unless one had had a job and lost it, one was not unemployed in the eyes of the French Ministry of Labor. This meant that the Ministry did not count young people entering the labor market for the first time as unemployed. In addition, foreign workers who lost their jobs were deprived of work permits and sent back to the countries they came from. Thereafter they might be unemployed in Portugal or Poland or whatever their native land. But not in France. As a result, French unemployment statistics for the period are simply not comparable to those of the United States, Great Britain, Germany or any other industrial nation.

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Part of the problem in understanding what comparative history is and how best it can be practiced is that every kind of historical writing has comparative elements. To begin with, since history always involves change, the difference between “before” and “after” involves a comparison. Words like “heavy,” “rich,” “slow,” and, of course, the comparative and superlative degrees of any adjective or adverb involve making comparisons with something, by implication if not overtly.

A somewhat more advanced kind of comparison occurs when an historian tries to increase the reader’s understanding by showing how different eyewitnesses viewed the same event or (more commonly) by offering the opinions of several people about the character or motives of a person they knew. The popular historian Frederick Lewis Allen called this technique *triangulation*, a term drawn from the vocabulary of surveyors and geometers. The portrait the historian seeks to create, Allen held, “will leap into bolder relief,” when presented in this way. The device is certainly useful, but it usually adds more to

interest than to insight. Contrasting views are as likely to produce confusion as understanding.

Then there is the kind of comparison that seeks to increase understanding by seeing how an institution or policy that existed in two or more countries was affected or not affected by differing environments. Professor Angermann's interest in examining the impact of nationalism on the nations of Europe and the United States falls into this category, but as he has explained, the problem is much complicated by the different views that existed in the different countries of what nationalism was. Carl Degler's *Neither Black Nor White* (1971), a comparison of slavery in Brazil with the peculiar institution as it existed in the United States, and George Frederickson's comparative study of how whites treated black people in the United States and South Africa do not entirely avoid this complication, but slavery and racism are more precise terms than nationalism.

The differences and similarities that projects of these types almost force upon the attention of historians and their readers are of great interest. But they are far more likely to add to what we know about *how* the institutions in question were alike and different than to tell us *why* they were the way they were. Totting up similarities and differences, in other words, answers *what* questions rather than *why* questions. In other words, it helps with description far more than with analysis.

This is true because it is close to impossible to distinguish between, say, the institution *slavery* and the environment in which the institution existed. The problem is somewhat like the chicken-and-egg riddle. What slavery was like in both Brazil and in the American South can be better described by pointing to the similarities and differences, but the very similarities and differences make explaining causation more rather than less difficult.

To make comparisons that get at causes and effects, one needs an independent variable—something that is common to all the things being compared. In the sciences, independent variables are not hard to find, but historians deal with human beings and complex ideas, and these are rarely the same from place to place and time to time. That is of course the problem with comparisons of slavery in ancient Greece and the United States, or of feudalism in Western Europe and China, or even of nationalism in various countries. To be more specific, black people are not the same in South Africa and the United States, which explains

why George Frederickson's book does not tell us much about the roots of racism.

Similarly, it is unhelpful to use unemployment *statistics* in making comparisons about conditions during the Great Depression, but if one can define *unemployment* in a way that was common to jobless people in all the industrial nations, then how people reacted to being unemployed can properly be compared, and we may learn something generally true about unemployment.