LIBERALISM AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN THE UNITED STATES, 1900-1930: A COMMENT
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Focusing on the period when the United States emerged as a global power, Professor von Saldern offers us a series of challenges that reveal significant complications in our usual way of thinking about several key American intellectuals as liberal cultural nationalists. The history of the Progressive Era, coincident with the rise of American power, has generally been seen as liberal in the modern sense. We now recognize that in that era the idea of national inclusion was troubled, especially with respect to racial practices and nativism. But that is not the topic discussed here. Von Saldern’s focus is on educated, mostly Northeast-based magazines and their contributors.

While Professor von Saldern is aware of these limitations, she chooses to focus mainly on culture and politics in roughly the first third of the twentieth century. Hers is a welcome intervention — and a telling one. She makes her points well, and the range of her research and her command of a vast amount of material suggests that this is a condensed version of a much larger, doubtless more elaborate project.

She begins with the magazines that stimulated many of the debates to come. As she rightly points out, these magazines connected intellectuals and introduced their work to wider circles. It was a great era of magazine journalism, and magazines were flourishing. Some were short-lived, but others, like the principal ones she names — The Atlantic, The Nation, Harpers, and The New Republic — have managed to last for a long time.

Early in the lecture, with subsequent reminders, she points out that there were two weaknesses in American literary culture: it was quite thin sometimes, and it worried too much about its relation to European culture, particularly when copying it, thus weakening home-grown thinking. George Santayana made much the same point in 1911 in a famous Berkeley lecture, delivered on his way out of the United States never to return — “The Genteel Tradition in American
Thought.”¹ But he missed much that historiography in our time energetically addresses and appreciates: minority cultures, not only Afro-American arts and culture, but the emergent ethnic writers of the time, which Henry James, somewhat surprisingly, had positively described as part of a day on New York’s Lower East Side.²

Professor von Saldern points out that there were a number of women contributing to the magazines she examined, and this is an important point. There was indeed a dramatic increase in women journalists who were writing about issues of public interest in those years. Some were famous, as von Saldern indicates, for “muckraking” and “peacemaking.” I assume she is referring to Ida Tarbell and Jane Addams, although they are not named, and I wish she had named more women writers in her presentation.

Von Saldern carefully read and analyzed an impressively broad set of sources in the interest of getting a sense of the dimensions of American national culture. It is fair to say that the results are critical and compelling: her findings reveal a core representative of her primary source base indicating the virtues and limits of a national democratic culture. She also speaks particularly to the influence of British culture; clearly she would prefer that Americans liberated themselves more from their British origins.

In fact, I think that Anglophilia in American public culture not only applies to literature. The long tradition of emulating and articulating British cultural standards may have been partly a strategy at the time to deny or hide an emerging multicultural America. In the English language and cultural norms, the nation’s anxious intellectual elite found a means to maintain a distance to the new immigrants, the marginalized Native Americans, and African Americans. To that end they sustained the legacy of English cultural forms that had been reinforced by the post-colonial Anglo-American informal geopolitical and economic alliance from 1812 to World War I.

This legacy had deep diplomatic and conceptual roots in the peace treaty of 1783, which ended the Revolutionary War on quite generous terms. This was intended by Lord Shelburne, who fell from grace at least partly because the English political class misread his geopolitical strategy as undue generosity. Shelburne was a close student of Adam Smith, and that inclined him to link the two nations in commerce, including investment as much as trade. Events unfolding in the nineteenth century showed him to have been prescient.


Anglo-American trade on a global scale was protected by the British navy, while American cotton fed the British factories and British capital flowed into the U.S. until 1919. Then came the big shift: In the nineteenth century the United States was the world’s largest debtor nation, with British banks holding a great part of it, but after the First World War the United States had become the world’s largest creditor nation. The United States then recognized itself as a world power, and that would have cultural implications.

A generalization of the national culture of the United States is difficult to grasp from a European perspective. The institutional aspects of national culture such as one might see in Europe were missing in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was a pluralist and localist society with no national school system, no national curriculum, and no national body of “immortals” such as the Académie Francaise, for example. There never was a national program for “making Americans” such as Eugen Weber describes for France in his compelling book, Peasants into Frenchmen (1976). With no center, there is a huge burden on those who make and critique American culture. American national culture is a product of commerce rather than the state.

New York City represents one of the American culture zones I can be more specific about, as I have repeatedly focused on the city in my research. (Chicago would also support my point, and, to a lesser extent, the San Francisco region as well. Boston would not.) From that perspective, the story Professor von Saldern tells needs to be understood as having two distinct phases, each relating differently to British and European culture. There was a gradual shift that included Germany and France as well as Britain. But the big shift, increasingly apparent after World War I, is the embrace of America as the embodiment of modernity, something recognized more quickly by foreigners — most notably Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp during the war and afterwards. For Picabia New York was “the futurist city … it expresses in its architecture, its life, its spirit, the modern thought.”

After the war, Americans were more open to continental developments, and cultural ties to Britain weakened. More importantly, there was a new appraisal of America — the home of skyscrapers and mass production and a distinctly American art. Alfred Stieglitz reveals this shift. His prewar gallery brought European modernism...
to the United States; after the war, he turned to the American scene. Likewise, Martha Graham, the pioneer of modern dance, increasingly turns to the land, to American space, notably with *Primitive Mysteries* (1931), inspired by the southwest and Hispanic-Indian religious rituals there, and later with *Appalachian Spring* (1944). During the same period Stieglitz turned to the study of American skyscrapers and American space/nature, including his famous cloud photos. Georgia O’Keefe, who never looked to Europe, also explored the skyscraper aesthetic, but increasingly and then wholly turned to American space after moving to New Mexico. And in the interwar years Mark Twain, whose American stories were linguistically and topically far from British literature, became recognized in academe.

By emphasizing this turn by artists and intellectuals from the Atlantic to the continent, with a new appreciation of American history and culture, I am not suggesting American exceptionalism. Von Saldern suggests that it is in this period that American exceptionalism emerged. Nationalism was surely heightened, but not exceptionalism. They are two quite different categories: nationalism is replicated and integrated into the world of nations with formal equality, while exceptionalism literally means against the rule or norm. Daniel Rodgers has made quite a strong argument for the post-World War II emergence of exceptionalism. In fact, he traces the phrase to Joseph Stalin, in 1929, when American Communist Party leaders made excuses that revolution was more difficult in the United States. He accused them of the sin of “exceptionalism,” anathema to him, since his theory of global revolution depended upon a universalist theory of history.

Professor von Saldern discusses the Jewish philosopher Horace Kallen, and I would like to conclude by building on her discussion. He leaned toward a cosmopolitan America, using the image of the fingers on the hand, unified but distinct. Most critiques of him find the separation implied by separate fingers problematic. But with a little imagination the palm could imply a diverse and democratic public sphere. Moreover, he was, admittedly, thinking of immigrants, specifically Jews. But he was not unaware of the question of race. Kallen and Alain Locke, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance whom Professor von Saldern also discusses, conducted a nearly life-long discussion of race and ethnicity in America. This dialogue began face-to-face while they were students at Harvard, then continued at Oxford and later in the U.S. for the greater part of their lives. They

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6 In fact, during this period public discussion of Jews, as well as African Americans, tended to refer to them as members of a “race.”
came close to a mutual and viable understanding and agenda, but never closed the circle of their discussions. Nor have we yet.

As a nation, the current status of liberalism as a project is unclear, especially after the recent election. It casts doubt on our commitment to our historical challenge of racism. Racism, the founding sin of the United States, remains a challenge to both liberalism and nationalism.

Thomas Bender is University Professor of the Humanities and Professor of History Emeritus at New York University. His interests include intellectual and cultural history, as in his books *New York Intellect* (1987) and *Intellect and Public Life* (1997); cities, as in *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea* (2002) and *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Studies* (2011); and, more recently, transnational history, as in *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (2006).

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