Sinclair Lewis, the first American writer to receive the Nobel Prize, called into question all general statements on the United States by saying: "You cannot generalize about America because you can prove anything about it you want to prove."\(^1\) Of course, this statement should not discourage us from researching American history on a non-arbitrary basis. However, it makes us sensitive to the different ways in which the American past has been interpreted — and not only the past, but also present-day issues.

In this article I will focus on the early twentieth century, when America became increasingly industrialized and urbanized and when popular culture, mass media, and the national infrastructure dramatically transformed the American way of life for men and women. The breakthrough of modernity led to severe cultural conflicts about how to organize and govern a democratic mass society. These conflicts touched on the public role of morality and the issue of migration in an era of eugenics, nativism, and racism. These issues featured prominently in the public consciousness when the United States was transformed into a nation of expansion in the 1898 Spanish-American War and subsequently, when the country increasingly became an economic, financial, and political world power, certainly during and after the First World War.

The first section of this article\(^2\) discusses the profiles of the so-called “quality magazines,” whereas the second and third sections focus on cultural nationalism in the United States — with Europe as a benchmark. The fourth and final section analyzes the role of the liberal magazines as transatlantic mediators — including their response to increasing European anti-Americanism. In the existing literature, these topics have usually been investigated separately.\(^3\) By connecting them, I seek to offer some new insights into the connection between cultural nationalism and transatlantic exchange in the early twentieth century.


\(^2\) This article is based on my book Amerikanismus: Kulturelle Abgrenzung von Europa und US-Nationalismus im frühen 20. Jahrhundert (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013).

\(^3\) One of the few exceptions is the investigation of artists by Wanda M. Corn, The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity 1915-1935 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), esp. 5.
I. The Magazines: A Cultural and Transatlantic Forum

At the beginning of the twentieth century, “quality magazines” such as *The Nation*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *The New Republic*, and *The Forum* provided a lively forum for national and transnational communication. These journals differed from both newspapers and popular magazines. Newspapers were usually connected to specific cities or regions, they carried a lot of advertising, and were committed to differentiating between their “objective” and “interpretative” content, while magazines remained largely dedicated to “interpretative journalism.” Although the boundaries between the different print media were fluid, the popular magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* adapted their style and subjects to reach a broad readership — in contrast to the higher standard of the so-called quality magazines. The latter did not reach a particularly high circulation; their print run usually ranged between 50,000 and 100,000 copies. Nevertheless, the quality magazines were influential in generating nationwide public debate, which was one of their main goals: After 1918, *The Nation* defined itself as a “magazine of dissent,” *The New Republic* called itself a “journal of interpretation and opinion” and a “journal of unopinionated opinion” (Lippmann), *Harper’s Magazine* aimed to participate in the “discussion of the modern scene,” and *The Forum* saw itself as a “magazine of controversy.” *The New Republic*, the progressive magazine founded by Walter Lippmann, Walter E. Weyl, and Herbert Croly in 1914, gained significant political influence by interacting with the Wilson administration. Even during the Republican period of the 1920s, the position of this and other quality magazines was so strong that it was a “must” for Washington administrations to look at these magazines in order to know what was going on in the liberal public mind. Distributed all over the country, these magazines promoted the inner nation-building processes of the time and were eager to create a “common body of knowledge.”

The magazines’ editors worked with numerous writers, many of whom were renowned cultural nationalists, such as Frederick Lewis Allen, Charles A. Beard, Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, John

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From a present-day perspective, the magazines’ writers were the first representatives of an American intelligentsia that developed mainly outside of the universities. They established a close-knit network centered around the magazines. In short, the magazines were a kind of “trade-paper of the intellectuals.” Mostly born in the 1880s and 1890s, a subgroup among these influential authors saw themselves as the “young generation” with a common and critical awareness of modern America, its people and its concerns. They came mostly from the urban middle classes, often had a European immigrant background, and included a significant number of Jews. They usually did not study at special schools of journalism, but had attended Ivy League universities, in particular Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, and some of them kept in touch with these institutions by joining the “old boys” circles. Numerous writers were free-lancers, many of them living in New York, the location of most editorial offices. Writers often had other jobs and contributed only occasionally on a particular topic discussed in the magazines. Some were academics, such as John Dewey, a professor at Columbia University. The networks included critics writing on various topics including history, arts, music or architecture. Moreover, some artists contributed drawings as magazine illustrations to make ends meet.

There were also a considerable number of women among these writers. Although women’s influence had increased due to their work as muckraking journalists and transatlantic networkers in the period of urban and social progressivism of the 1890s, the debates on cultural nationalism remained mainly the domain of male writers. After the First World War, women usually wrote either short stories or covered issues of gender, family, welfare, modern lifestyle, and social order. Occasionally female writers such as Beatrice Hinkle, a social psychologist, challenged anti-feminism and narrow-minded nationalism in favor of a more cosmopolitan way of thinking. As a rare exception, The Nation included Freda Kirchwey in its editorial team in 1923.

We know much more about the writers and editors of these magazines than about their readers. The most important readers were the...
opinion leaders at the country’s main institutions and the magazines’ writers themselves. Historian Casey Nelson Blake has written: “At its most democratic, the journal of opinion provides a forum where intellectuals can discover one another.” Other readers probably belonged to the upper classes and academic middle classes. The readership spectrum was, however, clearly limited in terms of race and class. While the majority of working class readers preferred popular magazines or tabloids, some groups among them such as African Americans and Socialists had their own journals. The new white, professional, managerial urban classes certainly were the main target audience of liberal magazines, but the actual number of readers among these social groups was clearly not as high as was hoped for, a fact that was said to be caused by a generally weak interest in politics, public issues, and foreign affairs.

II. Debates on Liberal Cultural Nationalism

Cultural nationalism is a term used by intellectuals at the time as well as by some historians. Cultural nationalists believed that literature, arts, and architecture not only had to be of great quality, but also had to substantially serve the nation-building process and the search for national identity by creating genuine American works of art. Accordingly, cultural nationalism was also closely linked with the desire for a high national (and international) reputation. Sheldon Cheney, a literature and art critic and an outspoken defender of modern theatre, argued in 1938 that a nation’s standing “will be judged ultimately almost solely upon the evidence of surviving works in the field of arts.”

A large number of magazine articles complained that in terms of arts and literature, America remained a British colony — more than a hundred years after the formal foundation of the United States. For example, Randolph Bourne, the well-known liberal pluralist and cultural nationalist, stated during the First World War: “The Englishman of to-day nags us and dislikes us ... He still thinks of us incorrigibly as ‘colonials.’ America — is still, as a writer recently expressed it, ‘culturally speaking a self-governing dominion of the British Empire.’” Fellow cultural nationalist and writer Harold E. Stearns expressed a similar opinion when he stated in 1922: “whatever else American civilization is, it is not Anglo-Saxon, and ... we shall never achieve any genuine nationalistic self-consciousness as long as we allow certain financial and social minorities to persuade
us that we are still an English Colony.” Bourne and Stearns referred to English culture (and finance) here, but many similar statements also rejected American cultural dependence on Europe as a whole.

In particular, the authors detected a lack of cultural independence in contemporary arts and literature. They complained that American literature was often no more than an imitation of English and European models. In this context, the authors criticized the dependence of influential American academies and numerous museums on European art traditions. They also blamed the cultural deficits on America’s frontier heritage; moreover, they blamed the genteel tradition because of its anglophile inclinations and its exaggerated moralism, and they blamed the Puritan heritage for its alleged disinterest in the arts. Finally, they blamed the churches and the state for their lack of support for the arts.

Liberal cultural nationalists not only demanded a higher standard for the arts, literature, and criticism, but also a genuine, authentically American art that was not only clearly different from European art, but also of equal or even higher quality. Their conviction that America was destined to reach such a goal sooner or later was mainly based on a strong belief in the evolutionary progress of history. In one of his articles for Harper’s Magazine, Philip Gibbs, an English Americanophile, journalist, and novelist, predicted that “... there will come great minds, and artists, and leaders of thought, surpassing any that have yet revealed themselves. All our reading of history points to that revolution. The flowering time of America seems due to arrive, after its growing-pains.” While Europe was highly regarded as the leading art continent of the past with its rich cultural heritage, great American art was supposed to determine the (near) future — due to the evolutionary progress that had already led to the so-called machine age dominated by the United States.

The transatlantic cultural “contest” turned out to be very complicated, however, because the European avant-garde severely challenged many Americans in their search for a genuine national art. Vis-à-vis the European avant-garde the question arose whether U.S. artists also needed to search for a genuine American modern art of high quality. Was this not a contradiction in itself? Could art, especially modern art, be nationalized, anyway? Robert Henri, a leading painter of the Ashcan School of American social realism, belonged to the few who recognized the contradiction inherent in this idea. In 1926 he stated that looking at the past one could speak of a Greek, Spanish...

or French art, but that this was no longer possible for the future: “... people all over the world are no longer living within the confines of their own geographical barriers, but are in touch with everything that is going on. The art of today cannot be confined to nations, but must be — without barriers — a world art.”

There was another obstacle to introducing avant-garde art in the United States at the time, namely the American audience, who were often shocked by it. Even well into the 1920s, a large part of the audience accepted and adapted European impressionism, but rejected European expressionism, cubism, and abstract painting, often criticizing them as decadent. In contrast to some private collectors and galleries, most museums were reluctant to buy European avant-garde works and acquired such works (often from private collectors) only beginning in the 1940s. In music, the American composer Arthur Shattuck considered European avant-garde music “degenerate,” and he was not alone. In literature, a large part of the public did not accept naturalistic descriptions. In architecture, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, himself a committed modernist and supporter of the Bauhaus, complained as late as 1932 that many Americans “oppose[d] the [Bauhaus-] style as another European invasion.”

Among liberal cultural nationalists the rejection of European avant-garde art by many Americans met with disapproval. Alfred Stieglitz and his circle of artists, photographers, and critics in New York’s Greenwich Village promoted knowledge of European modern art and fostered European influences as general inspiration, if not necessarily as direct models for American imitation. Stieglitz’ famous Gallery 291 and his Armory exhibition of European modernism in 1913 functioned as a transatlantic art mediator. After the war, however, Stieglitz loosened his commitment to European modernism in favor of his search for what he called an authentic American organic modernism. Thus it was no coincidence that he called his new gallery, founded in 1929, An American Place. American organic modernism was conceived as a means to express modern national authenticity. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright defined his buildings not only as an expression of (transnational) modernism, but also as organic modernism, which he regarded as genuinely American and different from radical Bauhaus functionalism. Similar strivings and interpretations were also developing among American designers. Looking for an “art of use” detached from European design and defined as typically American,
Raymond Loewy developed a streamlining shape he then successfully popularized and merchandized.

III. Art Evaluations and Art Resources
The early twentieth century was a period when the arts and literature were fiercely debated. Liberal intellectuals rejected traditional notions of considering morality a main criterion of evaluation. Instead cultural nationalists referred primarily to the degree of national originality and genuineness in their assessments. In this respect, they regarded even American expatriates in Europe with some mistrust, because these writers and artists were said to be too alienated from American life and too Europeanized to be able to create genuine American art. In this spirit, the influential historian Charles A. Beard stated in 1930: “While a few critics go abroad for inspiration, the great body of thinkers still agree with Emerson that we must stand fast where we are and work out our destiny on lines already marked out.”

With respect to the level of quality, comparisons with European arts penetrated many evaluations. When well-known American literary critic Henry Hazlitt presented a list of great American writers in 1932, he argued that among American writers only Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Eugene O’Neill stood a chance of staying relevant in the long term. In his prediction, only European writers such as Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce would be remembered one hundred years later. Many liberal cultural nationalists also continued to be influenced by the conventional European construct of a dichotomy between high art and popular culture such as cinema. The so-called “little magazines” like Dial, Smart Set, Seven Arts, or Broom initiated many debates on film as a possible artistic expression of modern America. Most of the liberal intellectuals, such as Charles A. Beard, were however still reluctant to accept film as a genre of modern American art. These wide-spread doubts about the value of cinema were only beginning to subside during the 1930s.

Cultural nationalists also faced serious problems of evaluation when considering black spirituals and jazz, even though they recognized them as cultural expressions that were independent from European influences. For most cultural nationalists, African American art was at best an admirable cultural achievement, but it was not at all seen as an essential contribution to the search for national identity. By contrast, the African American writer Alain Locke insisted that the art and music of African Americans should not only be valued as a

“black” achievement, but also as a national American achievement, as “nationally representative” music. Thus Locke defined African American art both as “black modernism” and as an integral part of a new, racially open-minded idea of American national culture, which had so often been considered exclusively white. Music critic Samuel Chotzinoff had a similar view: “It is that genius which has produced the American jazz, the only distinct and original idiom we have.” The director of the National Conservatory in New York, Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák, also emphasized the relevance of black spirituals for the creation of national American music. These assessments did not receive widespread support in a very much racially minded and racially divided American society. Within as well as outside the Ku Klux Klan, the common argument of numerous white opinion leaders was that non-whites, especially African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans were to be excluded from the cultural nation-building process and the search for a national identity. Thus Virginia composer John Powell stated: “We Americans, so-called, are no more black Africans than we are red Indians; and it is absurd to imagine that the negro idiom could ever give adequate expression to the soul of our race.”

While liberal cultural nationalists were, as a rule, culturally open-minded individuals, the liberal magazines did not openly promote an ethnically and racially pluralistic idea of national culture that included non-whites. Although the editor of The Nation, Oswald Garrison Villard, for example, supported the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), his journal offended some African Americans by publishing a 49-part article series titled “These United States” in which African Americans were scarcely mentioned at all. In an expression of opposition and self-confidence, the African American journal Messenger published a series with the provocative title “These ‘Colored’ United States.”

If liberal magazines were reluctant to actively support ethnic pluralism in art, the American publicist Randolph Bourne and the German-born Jewish philosopher Horace Kallen did. In their transnational and pluralistic concept of the U.S. as a [white] “nation of nations” Bourne and Kallen championed a pluralistic idea of what national art should and could be in modern times as early as 1915/1916. Their positive references to the millions of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe not only met with reluctance at the liberal magazines, but with massive disapproval by influential eugenicsists, nativists, and racists who regarded these ethnic
groups as “degraded” European races. This changed only gradually during the (late) 1930s and 40s, not least in reaction to Nazi racism, the influx of refugees from Nazism, and the Holocaust.

The rise of regional identities also challenged the liberals’ search for a nationally authentic art. Was this considered a contradiction? Frederick Jackson Turner affirmed cultural differences between the “sections” and mainly supported separate cultural identities especially of the West and South as creative regions distinct from the Anglo-American East. He combined his admiration of those regions with the idea of a symphonic nation: “We are members of one body, though it is a varied body.” When reflecting on the question of how national American music could be created, composer John Powell opined that an “adequate expression to the soul of our race … must be based [only] upon Anglo-American folk-song.”

Most liberal intellectuals and some artists — Lewis Mumford, Constance Rourke, and Charles Sheeler, for example — valued regional white folk songs, folk art, and the wide-spread historic pageants as sources for artistic creation. Moreover, painters like Georgia O’Keeffe discovered Native American indigenous art as inspiration for their work or as resource for creating genuine modern national art, beyond European influences. Self-confident regionalist artists from the South and Midwest, such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, were convinced that their regionalist vernacular and popular art represented true modern American art, not least because it was allegedly created without any influences from Europe or the hated urban industrial American North, which, in their view, unjustifiably dominated the U.S. While the liberals regarded regional culture primarily as a resource for creating national art, regional artists considered their art a direct representation of national American identity.

In their search for art sources in their own country, the cultural nationalists refused to recognize women’s potential as artists. Brooks, Mumford, Mencken, and Stieglitz even advocated a so-called re-masculinization of arts and literature, including their audiences and readership. Re-masculinization was supposed to stop the “effeminacy” that had allegedly intruded into society after the end of the frontier period. It was the progressive reformer Theodore Roosevelt, U.S. president from 1901 to 1909, who proclaimed not only a “new nationalism” and “new patriotism,” but also advocated a “new masculinity.” This plea for a renewed masculinity appealed to numerous men, not least because the English translation of Otto Weininger’s antifeminist
book titled *Sex and Character* (1906) had gained considerable influence. Moreover, the popular adoption of Sigmund Freud’s doctrine also implied the degradation of women compared with men. As a consequence, numerous cultural nationalists believed that only a re-masculinization of American arts and audiences could lead to the creation of genuine American artistic achievements of the highest quality. Furthermore, “effeminacy” was considered European and sometimes associated with the anglophile genteel tradition. Such views on gender, and especially the idea of genius as exclusively male, defined cultural nation-building in the arts as primarily a male project. Surely, that was one of the reasons why most female artists remained outsiders.33 Such views were embedded in a society where cultural conservatives, nativists, and eugenicists wanted (white Northern) women to stick to their primary role as (child-bearing) “mothers of the nation.” Of course, this view did not meet with the approval of (young) liberal women, who hoped to emulate the role model of the “New Woman” by pursuing a modern, self-determined way of life, which they hoped would eventually lead to more equal gender relations. (Older) liberal female activists also rejected all attempts at re-masculinization and at limiting female roles in society. Many of these women were strongly committed to the nation-building processes in their own ways, that is, by supporting progressive urban reforms, especially by their work in settlement houses and neighborhood centers to foster the integration and Americanization of European immigrants. Moreover, they represented the nation’s interests through their engagement in international organizations and their commitment to a new liberal and peaceful world order.

In sum, cultural nationalists tended to recognize the relevance of traditional regional sources while excluding other influences for creating great modern American art. First, they dismissed the mass media, female artists, women’s achievements in the nation-building process, and African American art as components of national identity. In the liberal magazines of the 1920s, an open debate about, let alone a plea for an inclusive concept of ethnic pluralism in art and literature, as put forward by Bourne and Kallen with regard to European immigrants, was notably absent. Second, from today’s perspective, the search for national authenticity expressed in high-brow, re-masculinized, national modern art tended to underestimate the quality of contemporary American works of art, including works of Anglo-American imagism as well as American Dadaism and cubism. Historian Nathan Miller characterized this decade as “the greatest period of creativity in the nation’s history.”

IV. Transatlantic Mediators

As transatlantic cultural mediators, the liberal magazine authors were committed to introducing modern European art and literature to Americans, not least by reviewing European works. In doing so, they contributed to the creation of a common transatlantic knowledge and public debate among their readers. Magazines like The Nation reviewed newly published literary works from Europe, especially when they were translated into English, such as Franz Werfel’s Abituriententag (Class Reunion), for example, which the well-known literary critic Joseph Wood Krutch reviewed. German-born literary critic Ludwig Lewisohn, too, introduced Franz Werfel and the German expressionists to the American public. In architecture, the transnational and modernist painter Louis Lozowick reviewed the “Bauhaus-books” favorably. In 1932, Lee Simonson, director of the American Theatre Guild, informed American readers about Max Reinhardt’s modern drama performances at Berlin’s Deutsches Theater. Meanwhile

34 Nathan Miller, New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America (New York: Scribner, 2003), 201.
35 The Nation (July 1929): 120-21.
socialist writer Max Eastman expressed his fascination for early Soviet art.39

Magazine articles on Europe were based on various sources, among them the United Press Association (UP), founded in 1907. Moreover, editors invited many European authors to publish their opinions on transatlantic issues in American magazines. The Nation also established close ties with some foreign authors by making them “contributing editors”; these included the English economist and critic of imperialism John A. Hobson, the German philosopher, pedagogue, and pacifist Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster, and the French writer Anatole France.40 This diverse range of sources of information about Europe diminished the primary relevance of travel reports — although artists and intellectuals from both sides of the Atlantic used their own travels in other countries for inspiration, communication, and information more than ever before.41

American liberal intellectuals and their magazines also regarded themselves as initiators of contact between liberal American and European elites. They hoped to serve as cultural brokers and peace-makers beyond the official diplomatic corps. Convinced that all like-minded Europeans, especially in England, were also interested in a vibrant mutual culture of transatlantic communication, they distanced themselves from the so-called herds and the mob, because they were said to be hostile to the other continent. Resembling Walter Lippmann’s concerns about democracy in mass society and in the age of complicated politics,42 the wide-spread skepticism of democracy at that time also advanced transatlantic elite concepts.

In some ways, European anti-Americanism became the driving force behind numerous American disputes about the old continent. There were reports on translated European books that were very critical of the U.S.43 In quality magazines, headlines such as “Does England Dislike America?”,44 “Does France Hate America?,”45 or “What’s Wrong with the United States?”,46 appeared. American liberals asked: Why is it that Europe hates us? “Uncle Shylock we are called,” lamented the American historian Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker. In Europe, America was seen as the most hated nation according to economist and Presbyterian lay-man Francis Miller, historian Helen Hill, and George E. Catlin, an Englishman who taught in the U.S. for many years.47 American neurologist Joseph Collins published his observation in Harper’s Magazine that other nations considered the Americans as if they were a
“conglomeration of business wizards, unbeatable polo-players, peerless cup-defenders, whose days are given over to making money.”48 Many commentators suggested that Europeans were angry about the decline of their own continent and their diminishing influence on America and that this was why they embraced anti-Americanism. The Southern writer John Crowe Ransom confirmed the revulsion in the European public mind and was shocked by the “almost solid barrier of hostility.”49 American social philosopher and Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr stated: “Any cursory glance at the journals of Europe must convince even the most heedless American that tides of hatred, mixed with envy, are rising against us in the world.”50 In these debates, American liberals supposed that European anti-Americanism was informed by a developing European identity. Stefan Zweig was characterized as one of the militant Europeans while Thomas Mann was said to be a convinced cultural Europeanist.51 In 1927, John Dewey similarly stated in Harper’s Magazine that “literary folk” in Europe were developing a consciousness for a “culture which is distinctively European.” In his view, there was an increasing number of Europeans who began to consider European culture a precious culture that needed to be defended in the face of “the invasion of a new form of barbarism issuing from the United States.”52

There were a lot of reasons why European anti-Americanism was rising in the 1920s. European cultural conservatives feared the Americanization of culture and daily life while other Europeans criticized an attitude ostensibly wide-spread among Americans, namely to regard their country “as an exception to the rules which he would like to see enforced upon others.”53 English columnists were shocked by the vulgarity of the Americans, especially as tourists in Britain. Politically interested people did not agree with the hardline position of Republican administrations, who insisted on the repayment of the Allies’ war debts despite protective U.S. import tariffs that exacerbated European exports. And while it is true that Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight in May 1927 positively affected Europeans’ opinion of the U.S., the executions of Italian-born anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti on charges of murder with robbery some months later, in August 1927, once again stirred negative feeling towards America.

“We are not so bad”54 and have a great future was one of the deliberately dispassionate responses from American liberals. The authors of several articles stressed that Americans invented many things and

49 Ransom, “Reconstructed.” 222.
contributed to modern civilization through peace, democracy, liberty, science, and prosperity as well as the standard for cleanliness and the art of engineering. Moreover, they emphasized that Europe also had its dark and decadent sides.

European anti-Americanism also supported and strengthened the trend in the U.S. to Americanize America, not least by means of its own interpretation of democracy and modern civilization. Various efforts were made to Americanize many other social and cultural phenomena of the 1920s, including space and time. Meanwhile notions of a typically American national character were often combined with the belief in a "single national mind," for instance when anthropologist Constance Rourke published a book on what she considered typical American humor.

In his frontier thesis of 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner had emphasized the transformation process based on "freehold property" that Americanized the European settlers in the West and led to an allegedly democratic and civilized culture that became the typical American way of life. In arguing this, Turner and other influential opinion leaders not only marginalized the violence of everyday life in the American West, but also downplayed the relevance of the European Enlightenment for the development of U.S. democracy and civilization — a civilization that was said to be in contrast to the wilderness as well as to "Indian barbarism." Whereas Turner Americanized the settlers’ culture in the past, the influential historian Charles A. Beard (and other magazine writers) Americanized both the present and the future. Beard declared the Americans “the people of destiny” and the present as an “age of machine” that implied U.S. leadership over Europe. Hiram Motherwell, a well-known magazine author at the
time, expressed this kind of American emancipation from Europe by saying: “At the precise historic moment when the question who should command the machine age, hung in the balance, America went into high; Europe went into reverse.”

The liberals’ defense of America against European anti-Americanism and the general trends to Americanize America did, however, not diminish their criticism of their own country, which culminated in a kind of “negative Americanism.” Thus H.L. Mencken, the well-known journalist and cultural nationalist, sharply criticized American society, putting the blame on the negative legacy of frontier culture, the genteel tradition, and puritan moralism. Simultaneously, liberal critics defended American vitality and American creative capacities in the present and the future, seeing America as “on the way up.” In this optimistic sense American writer John Peale Bishop stated already in 1925: “[W]e certainly in the last ten years become more alive to our own qualities and more anxious for their accurate definition — a state of mind — which does not in the last preclude a certain pride in whatever stands the test of being indubitably our own.”

Liberal cultural nationalists emphasized European difference and considered transatlantic differences as established fact. They were eager to determine the otherness of each side of the Atlantic by decoding national stereotypes on both continents in order to place the mutual otherness on a solid foundation. They wanted the U.S. to achieve a self-confident, but also self-critical national awareness grounded in a consensus about American difference. Contrasting the two continents, John Dewey, for example, self-confidently praised the American people’s special inclination for material things, for the body, and for social practices. Therefore, he defined American democracy primarily as “a way of life, social and individual.”

Due to the emphasis on otherness, Europe lost its role as a shining example for America.

The diverse efforts to Americanize America, based on the creed of transatlantic difference, were not the only transatlantic concepts circulating at the time, however. Although scarcely discussed in the liberal journals of the 1920s, two other concepts gradually developed in this period and therefore should be briefly mentioned: First, in their book The Giant of the Western World, published in 1930, the liberals Francis Miller and Helen Hill did not stress American otherness, but predicted the development of a common North Atlantic Civilization. The communality of this imagined North Atlantic civilization was supposed to

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emerge not only through common norms and values, but also through material goods and a peaceful Americanization of the European way of life, not least via Americanized consumerism. This concept was compatible with the widespread liberal notion that worldwide wealth, democracy, and peace could only be achieved through American missions — through missions conceptualized as peaceful penetrations of other nations in the spirit of classic American civic and political virtues.

The second concept was that of “Western Civilization” (later: “Western Civ”) courses for colleges, which gradually developed in the 1920s — remarkably parallel to the introduction of American Studies. In 1921, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, AHA President Charles Homer Haskins advocated for a closer interlocking of European and American histories. This plea fell on fertile ground among historians. Ten years later, in 1931, Carlton J.H. Hayes, professor at Columbia University, published a textbook that soon circulated in colleges and universities. While liberal magazines’ authors searched for an authentic America by stressing transatlantic differences, the creators of the “Western Civilization” courses emphasized the American-European commonality of values and norms based on a common history. Europe was seen as the “seat of that high civilization which we call ‘western,’ — which has come to be the distinctive civilization of the American continents as well as of Europe.” The concept of Western Civilization incorporated European history in a grand, common European-American narrative. In doing so, the history of Europe was somehow “nostrified.” Simultaneously, the histories of Europe and the U.S. were embedded in a construct of common identity of the West, Western civilization, and the Western world. It was this construct that was considered to deserve worldwide superiority. This grand common historical narrative was based on the assumption of historical progress, allowing authors and readers to conclude that this process had resulted in the rise and hegemony of the United States in the present and future within the West — and as main power of the West. The idea of a common West, also supported by many refugees from Nazi Germany, legitimizied the “Western Civilization” courses that finally reached their peak during the first decade of the cold war. Later, beginning in the 1960s, their European-centered focus was heavily criticized.

Conclusion

Cultural nationalism was closely connected to the concept of transatlantic otherness and the project of strong transatlantic communication, which was buoyed by the hope of creating a powerful network


of transatlantic elites and intellectuals that would help to make the world better and more peaceful.

The liberal “quality magazines” provided not only a transatlantic forum for discussion, but also a forum for domestic nation building processes in an era of fundamental upheavals in American society. In this double forum, they generated public knowledge on current issues, discussed the status of America, and discussed modern art, literature, theatre, music, and architecture. European anti-Americanism strongly stimulated the American search for national identity in the pages of these magazines; at the same time, homegrown nation-building in art and literature was considered a high-brow, mostly male and white project.

The concept of transatlantic difference was compatible with various other concepts, such as the briefly mentioned populist approach of the so-called regionalists. The strong trend of cultural nationalism in the U.S. during the early twentieth century was not an exclusively American phenomenon. Rather, cultural nationalism was an inherent part of domestic nation-building processes in many countries at the time — and continues to surface to the present day. Examples for the latter are the French *Front National* and the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). Their anti-liberal ideas of national identities are based on notions of a national culture. However, as more or less culturally “closed shops,” they convey very different messages compared with those of the American liberals during the early twentieth century: Beyond their unconcerned or even chauvinistic attitude towards women and non-whites, American liberal cultural nationalists and artists were often closely linked to an open-minded, reform-oriented civic nationalism. As a result, cultural nationalism has a polyvalent shape and a high degree of multi-compatibility with other ideas and concepts, including right-wing populism in the past and present.

Even as liberal cultural nationalists eagerly searched for an original American art and literature of high or even preeminent quality, they tended to underestimate American achievements in art and literature of the time, although they offered sophisticated reviews of both American and foreign works of art just in this period. Although there was some skepticism already in the 1920s, the anachronistic idea of creating a “singular national art” in modern times only gradually weakened since the 1930s — not least due to the European avant-garde-immigrants — until the Abstract Expressionists of the (late) 1940s decisively defined their art as international.

The peculiarities of American cultural nationalism in the early twentieth century can only be understood as a product of the colonial experience and its aftermath, which found expression in a specific “late colonial mentality.”67 Although the political liberation of the U.S. from its colonial status had occurred a long time ago, the feeling of artistic and cultural dependence on Europe, and especially England, endured. In this respect, America was caught in a “period of transition” characterized by an unbalanced condition of uncertainty and self-empowerment. The more the U.S. gained economic and political power, the more cultural dependence was rejected. Most liberals did not regard their search for genuine art as an attack on England or Europe, but rather, as the well-known cultural nationalist Waldo Frank had put it in 1919, as a plea for America.68

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68 Waldo Frank, Our America (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 163.