The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration

Michael Kammen


Your use of the JSTOR database indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use. A copy of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use is available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html, by contacting JSTOR at jstor-info@umich.edu, or by calling JSTOR at (888)388-3574, (734)998-9101 or (FAX) (734)998-9113. No part of a JSTOR transmission may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except: (1) one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or (2) with prior written permission of JSTOR and the publisher of the article or other text.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

*American Quarterly* is published by Johns Hopkins University Press. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/jhup.html.

*American Quarterly*
©1993 Johns Hopkins University Press

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

©2000 JSTOR
The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration

MICHAEL KAMMEN
Cornell University

"National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension."

—Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (1966)

Several new and important publications have appeared recently concerning a subject that has engaged many of us for decades—one that we discuss with colleagues and advanced students on a regular basis. I am inclined to suspect that we continue to do so largely because the issue remains so intriguing. One striking feature of the latest contributions is that they differ so radically among themselves. The most visibly polarized are Ian Tyrrell’s “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History” (which repudiates American exceptionalism) and a collection of essays edited by Byron Shafer entitled Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism (which reaffirms the notion). Moreover, I have noticed two other quite recent contributions that reinforce American exceptionalism as a historical

Michael Kammen is currently writing a book about the question of cultural stratification and the development of cultural criticism as a vocation in the United States, circa 1915 to 1965.

This paper was presented on April 3, 1992, at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Chicago. I am grateful to my designated critics—Marianne Debourz, Akira Iriye, and Rebecca Scott—for their thoughtful comments on that occasion. I also thank Stuart M. Blumin, David Brion Davis, John Higman, R. Laurence Moore, Richard Polenberg, Nick Salvatore, and Laurence Veysey for their constructive criticisms. Needless to say, I have not been able to satisfy all of their suggestions.
phenomenon from diametrically opposite perspectives: management and labor, plus a third work that examines urban development in four "fragment" societies of Great Britain.¹

Understandably, my initial response was to wonder about the dramatic discrepancy, particularly in view of the fact that Tyrrell is a historian while most of the rest are political scientists, sociologists, authorities on management, economics, religion, and education. An admittedly impressionistic pattern began to occur to me that is curious, indeed, because it seems the reverse of what one might expect. For about a quarter of a century following World War II, while tough-minded social scientists became increasingly wary of national character studies in general and American exceptionalism in particular, professional historians of diverse ideological persuasions (including Daniel J. Boorstin, David M. Potter, Frank Tannenbaum, Carl Degler, John Higham, and myself inter alia) continued to make inquiries and ventured generalizations about such slippery subjects. Subsequently, however, and for more than a decade now, such historians as Laurence Veysey, C. Vann Woodward, Eric Foner, Sean Wilentz, Akira Iriye, and Ian Tyrrell have expressed profound skepticism and have made American exceptionalism extremely unfashionable in their guild, whereas prominent social scientists such as Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Alex Inkeles, Sanford M. Jacoby, Samuel P. Huntington, Mona Harrington, John P. Roche, Peter Temin, Aaron Wildavsky, and Richard Rose have comfortably resuscitated and reaffirmed the whole gnarly matter and have done so largely on the basis of empirical studies.²

As a humanistic historian who has never been a card-carrying social scientist, my impulse would ordinarily be supportive of the currently skeptical historians. Yet in this instance, respecting this particular topic, I find the social scientists more persuasive—perhaps because they are, in fact, heavily reinforced by recent historical scholarship, as I hope to demonstrate below.

Before doing so, however, I want to address a few of the broader procedural and conceptual issues that have been raised in the most recent literature. The call for an internationalized historiography voiced by Tyrrell, Iriye and others has been accompanied by a curious tendency to disparage or even discount the work of comparative history, especially if it happens to highlight differences rather than similarities. I find that tendency strange as well as sad because we waited so long for comparative history to really develop; and when it did, as it turned
out, differences appeared to preponderate. Scholars such as Peter Kolchin and Alfred D. Chandler, whose work I regard as superb, had no problem with that outcome, yet the transnational enthusiasts seem to be morally or ideologically disposed to minimize all those irritating yet illuminating differences.

Surprisingly, few scholars have noted an inclination (less than a decade old) to believe that looking at subnational units of social organization might actually help us to get a better handle on the problem of American exceptionalism. I have in mind, for example, Richard Oestreicher’s fine study of the working class in late nineteenth-century Detroit, which concedes that the dynamics of class formation and consciousness varied from one American city to another; or James McPherson’s interesting suggestion that prior to the Civil War it was the North, rather than the South that was “exceptional,” that is, a deviation from what the United States traditionally had been and valued; or Carl Becker’s droll assertion that if the United States was exceptional, Kansas was distinctive within it!13

What develops, then, from reading such studies end to end? Perhaps a realization that because of American heterogeneity we have not had a singular mode or pattern of exceptionalism. Rather, we have had a configuration of situations that are not static (see McPherson on regional exceptionalism), and consequently they reveal why it is both difficult and dangerous to conclude that the United States as a whole, over an extended period of time, is different from all other cultures with respect to some particular criterion.

Therefore, the next step in this necessarily intensive process may well be the internationalization of history pari passu the comparative history of American cities and regions, American unions and voluntary associations, American patterns of internal migration and mobility, American modes of advertising and expressions of taste, or even the geographic configuration (distribution) of syndicated columnists. That kind of domestic comparative history will have to be diachronic as well as synchronic in order to establish nuances of change over time.

I hope it will not seem banal if I suggest that international history ought to be accompanied by comparative “local history” that seeks to develop typologies; for Walt Whitman’s words, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” have become far more telling in the generations since he wrote those lines in Song of Myself.

The implications of local, national, and international history for our
apprehension of American exceptionalism (not to mention their interconnectedness) become clearer when we notice that new societies in the nineteenth century looked to the United States as a prototype—though not necessarily a paragon—because they viewed it as the first, the largest, and the most advanced among freshly emerging yet diverse cultures. As one writer for *The Australian* phrased it in 1831, the United States was commonly considered "a model for all new countries and New South Wales (hereafter) in particular." Living in France during the 1950s prompted James Baldwin to wonder, "What does it mean to be an American?," and by the time he returned home the alienated Baldwin believed passionately in American exceptionalism and even used that now despised word "unique."4

When we pursue the interconnectedness of micro and macro scales of historical analysis, we achieve considerable illumination from two important comparative studies of management and labor. Starting with the latter, we find Gary Marks (a political scientist) wanting to explain the historical absence of a major labor party in the United States, noting the remarkable range of diversity in unionism within and across western societies, and concluding that the absence of a European-style labor party resulted from the "unique character of American unionism." He insists upon the need for systematic understanding of the political orientations of particular unions, and quotes a tailor who spoke at the Denver convention of the American Federation of Labor late in 1894: "We have in this country conditions that do not exist in Great Britain. We have the 'spoil' system which is something almost unknown in Great Britain and on account of it we cannot afford to try at this time to start a political party as an adjunct with their unions."5

Marks observes that the United States was the only Western society in which workers could participate in politics prior to the institutionalization of unions and socialist political parties. He notices the persistent temptation to influence the two major political parties by participating in coalitions. He calls attention to the critical importance of closed unionism for understanding American exceptionalism. Nowhere else, Marks argues, was the "grip of craft unions on the union movement as strong or as durable" as it was in the United States from the 1890s onward. Following his in-depth case studies and systematic comparisons, Marks concludes that structural aspects of American politics posed much greater obstacles to a potential labor party than the British political system did. Marks also finds that while some
American socialists may have been even more radical than their German counterparts, "the context in which American socialists acted made their strategies particularly sectarian. Whereas German socialists played a vital role in creating the Free Union movement, American socialists from the late 1880s had to respond to the establishment of an independent union movement along economistic craft lines."\(^6\)

When we shift our attention from labor to management, the most current scholarship strongly supports an exceptionalist position also, and even contends that the comparative weakness of unionism in the United States must be attributed to the distinctive values and preferences of American managers, which caused them to be more hostile to unionism than managers in other nations. Sanford M. Jacoby, who teaches at U.C.L.A.'s Graduate School of Management, argues that business in the United States has historically enjoyed an unusual degree of political power, and that in recent decades there has even been an increase in the extent of illegal employer resistance to unions. Jacoby insists that American employers "faced a different set of incentives and had more substantial resources to resist unionization than was true of employers elsewhere. These included economic and political factors not usually considered in either mainstream or Marxist analyses, such as the size and structure of firms and the state's role in the industrial relations system, which was more variable and complex than instrumental theories would have it."\(^7\)

Jacoby demonstrates startling discrepancies between French, British, and American companies in terms of their respective approaches to long-range investment decisions. He attributes these differences to significant national variations in management education, in attitudes toward risk, in corporate career structures, and in tax laws. Not only did American managers have greater incentives to be hostile, according to Jacoby they also had available a wider range of political and ideological resources with which to implement that hostility. Labor in the United States had a more difficult time achieving employer recognition than labor elsewhere, because American employers had greater economic resources with which to carry out anti-union campaigns, both covert and overt. Finally, in Jacoby's view, what made the American situation highly unusual was not only the absence of a positive industrial relations policy, but also the government's willingness to stand aside during violent labor disputes, or even to mobilize the state's repressive means on behalf of employers.
So, what I wish to offer is an impressionistic tally, a reckoning as it were, in which the impact of critical essays that have been appearing since the mid-1970s is weighed against the substantive scholarship that has emerged in the wake of those essays. Where do we actually stand? Is there a gap between the newly orthodox homilies that we assign our students and the unsettling implications of solid work recently produced by judicious and conscientious practitioners?

To answer those questions I shall proceed in four stages: first, a section devoted to the cultural and historical origins of American exceptionalism, included here, in part, because the full story is not familiar to everyone, and in part because the background of our problem is inseparable from its foreground—by which I mean the state of the art today. Second, I shall notice the critics of American exceptionalism and their resonance over time. It is noteworthy, I believe, that the critics are not necessarily un-American or even anti-American, just as the advocates of exceptionalist positions have not inevitably been spread-eagle nationalists. Third, I shall look at what has actually happened to the exceptionalist position in this age of careful, cosmopolitan comparisons. Has mindless self-deception merely given way to a sophisticated surfeit of national similarities? And fourth, what lessons can we learn by weighing the diagnostic against the intractably descriptive, the prescriptive against serious products of in-depth scholarship over the past dozen years?

I. The Historical and Cultural Origins of American Exceptionalism

When critics of American exceptionalism—the notion that the United States has had a unique destiny and history, or more modestly, a history with highly distinctive features or an unusual trajectory—identify those writers responsible for such objectionable myopia, their usual suspects date from the generation and circumstances directly following World War II: the Cold War, the consensus school of historians (exemplified by Daniel J. Boorstin and Louis Hartz), and ideological stimuli that shaped the American Studies enterprise. They commonly fail to recognize that American exceptionalism is as old as the nation itself and, equally important, has played an integral part in the society’s sense of its own identity. Noah Webster provides a familiar case in point, but we should not overlook Samuel Latham Mitchell (1764–1831), a phy-
sician whose passion it became to promote a particular feeling of American identity that would be manifest in government and politics, literature and science, medicine and society. There were also people, such as William Findley of western Pennsylvania, who decided even before the eighteenth century ended that Americans had "formed a character peculiar to themselves, and in some respects distinct from that of other nations." 9

Throughout the nineteenth century, imaginative writers and historians, popular orators and clergy joined a chorus that continually chanted an ode to the nation's special mission and readiness to fulfill it. Nick Salvatore has correctly argued that awareness of the republican tradition as a legacy of the American Revolution contributed significantly to a strong sense of exceptionalism, one that became pervasive in the popular culture. 10 However astute Tocqueville may have been in observing and explaining American distinctiveness, we should note that his "informants," such as Alexander Everett and Jared Sparks, insisted over and over again that the uniqueness of the United States could only be understood in terms of "our origins." A Bostonian reminded Tocqueville that "those who would like to imitate us should remember that there are no precedents for our history." Lest all of that be casually dismissed as predictable super-patriotism, we should keep in mind that Patrice Higonnet's recent study of The Origins of French and American Republicanism contrasts the individualistic character of American society with the persistence of corporatism in France. 11

What is especially striking in the literature written about the United States by foreign observers is that the emphasis upon exceptionalism is so persistent and so powerfully felt. "The position of America is quite exceptional," Tocqueville wrote; and in 1851 Friedrich Engels warned Joseph Weydemeyer (his friend and Karl Marx's co-worker) about "the special American conditions: the ease with which the surplus population is drained off to the farms, the necessarily rapid and rapidly growing prosperity of the country, which makes bourgeois conditions look like a beau ideal to them, and so forth." If it is noteworthy that most of Marx's co-workers who came to the United States after 1848 soon abandoned socialism, it is equally important that explanations that were offered for American exceptionalism by the likes of Francis Lieber, Hermann E. von Holst, James Bryce, H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, and Hilaire Belloc tended to be complementary rather than redundant or contradictory. 12 The same is true of more scholarly writers
since World War II whose concerns have ranged from the vision and venturesome nature of American businessmen to the comparative fluidity of our class structure.\textsuperscript{13}

Curiously, although foreign observers have hardly been indifferent to scenery, environment, and natural resources in the United States, they have been less disposed than American writers to invoke those phenomena in attempting to account for major contrasts. The author of an 1818 essay on “National Poetry” found a literary imperative in “our country’s being beautiful and sublime and picturesque,” while a modern scholar (known for his iconoclastic revisionism) has asserted that American farmers were distinctively confident about their ability to conquer nature and adverse agricultural conditions, and that they were markedly successful in doing so.\textsuperscript{14}

Environmental explanations for the special circumstances in North America date back to the colonial period, especially the eighteenth century, when it became virtually a cliche to call, for example, Virginia or Pennsylvania, the “best poor man’s Country in the World.” Who could have imagined such a temperate climate, such fertile land, such fecund harvests? That mythos would eventually reinforce the early New England presumption that America was predestined to be a New Jerusalem, a site specially favored by God—perhaps the very place that he had chosen to initiate the millennial Kingdom of Christ. Jonathan Edwards firmly believed that America had a unique spiritual destiny and that the millennium would begin in New England—all of which had unintended, secular implications for national self-confidence during the Revolutionary era and the young republic.\textsuperscript{15} Other New Englanders would embroider vague yet earnest variations on that theme, even in times of crisis. Hence the assertion by James Russell Lowell in 1864 that “America is something without precedent,” and hence the will to believe that artistic expression in the United States would be place-specific and therefore distinctive, not merely in its subject matter, but in its manner of expression.\textsuperscript{16}

During the half-century following World War I, proponents of American exceptionalism who felt a particular affection or concern for the arts often explained their position in terms of economic organization, or a fluid social structure, or sometimes the sheer determination of creative people to differentiate their work from modes of artistic expression produced elsewhere. Such statements, however vague and naive they may seem to us, were heartfelt and widely noticed. In 1936,
for example, Bernard DeVoto supported Gilbert Seldes’s assertion that “the mode of production of material life in the United States has been so different from what it has been anywhere else that the social and political life here is conditioned in a unique, characteristic form and function.” These kinds of sentiments came from cosmopolitan expatriates like Gertrude Stein (when she returned to the United States following a thirty-five year absence), as well as from hopeful homebodies who either extolled native voices that already sounded distinctive (Thornton Wilder) or abstract expressionism that would be different by design (Clement Greenberg).  

There has been a curious tendency, by the way, to assume that prominent Americanists of the Progressive era were provincials whose limited perspectives can be explained accordingly. Frederick Jackson Turner, for example, was indeed a patriotic exceptionalist; yet he travelled through Europe in 1900, read a considerable amount about contemporary Europe, and discussed European history at great length with his colleague, Charles Horner Haskins. Turner’s exceptionalism did not result from intellectual narrowness or ignorance. Similarly, when Lewis Mumford spent almost a year in Great Britain in 1920 he developed a desire to preserve “the valuable part of the American heritage.” Five years later, after he gave lectures in Geneva, Switzerland, his commitment to exceptionalism grew even stronger and he found in nineteenth-century American culture a fascinating wealth of native traditions in the arts. Charles and Mary Beard wrote *The Rise of American Civilization* during the mid-1920s following twenty-five years of extensive travel in western Europe and Asia. When Mumford reviewed their book in *The New Republic*, he noted the Beards’s penchant for making comparisons.  

Exceptionalism did not necessarily equate with chauvinism. Harsh critics of American culture liked to use hyperbole in order to highlight just how phenomenally mired in mediocrity the arts and intellectual life in the United States had become. H. L. Mencken is perhaps the most memorable example, but J. E. Spingarn comes to mind in literary criticism and Thomas Craven in the realm of art. “If the nations of Europe are agreed on any one thing,” Craven complained in 1932, “it is that America is a pretty distinct place—peculiar, individual, unique, characterized by certain vile traits and low habits.”  

Beginning in the 1930s, however, a symbolic quest for the “meaning of America” seemed to top the agenda of diverse writers: critics,
historians of literature and culture, serious journalists, and even such watchdogs of the film industry as Will Hays. Gilbert Seldes began his *Mainland* in 1936 with a declaration that it was "an attempt to discover what America means; not so much what it means to me, as what it can mean in the world."21 Jacques Barzun would echo those sentiments, virtually verbatim, in *God's Country and Mine* (1954). When Henry Luce wrote his widely noticed editorial about the "American Century" in *Life Magazine* (February 1941), he also linked the "meaning of America" to "the meaning of our time." Later that same year the novelist James Boyd published a series of radio broadcasts that he had arranged for CBS under the title *The Free Company Presents . . . a collection of plays about the meaning of America.*22

The notion that America had a palpable meaning persisted for more than two decades beyond 1941, and Luce publications played a major part in perpetuating the quest as a lofty goal. By the later 1960s, however, the war in Vietnam had become so bitterly divisive that the editor-in-chief of *Time, Inc.*, proclaimed an unprecedented situation: the country had lost a working consensus "as to what we think America means." More than twenty years after that, moreover, when multiculturalism in secondary education became a subject of intense debate and partisanship, the editor of the *Journal of American History* observed that "the debate is really about the meaning of America."23

This spasmodic yet sustained discourse about the meaning of America, recurrent for more than sixty years now, may seem to ebb and flow; but from time to time it spills over into a pool that is still murkier: the meaning of Americanism. Two points are notable here. First, those who invoke that phrase have invariably been exceptionalists; and second, the invocation is intended to have ideological force, a point that I shall return to at the conclusion of this essay. "To analyze combinations of character that only our national life produces," a New Englander wrote in 1870, "to portray dramatic situations that belong to a clearer social atmosphere,—this is the higher Americanism." More than half a century later, in 1934, Leon Samson discussed the concept while explaining the peculiar potency of American exceptionalism: "When we examine the meaning of Americanism, we discover that Americanism is to the American not a tradition or a territory . . . but a doctrine—that socialism is to a socialist."24

Irving Howe, a committed socialist with an abiding concern about the persistent power of American exceptionalism, has remarked that
it took “primarily an ideological or a mythic form, a devotion to the idea that this country could be exempt from the historical burdens that had overwhelmed Europe.” Consequently, Howe does not reject the emotional reality of exceptionalism, and he explores its affective force as an ideological surrogate in a society not given to lucidly articulated ideological effusions. Howe’s analysis is one of the most insightful that has appeared, yet it is incomplete in the sense that it is negative because it rationalizes exceptionalism as the celebration of an absence, namely, historical burdens. I am persuaded that the “meaning of America” and of “Americanism” have also had affirmative ideological content, exemplified by this representative extract from a speech given by Harry Overstreet, a philosopher, in 1937: “It is the high distinction of America to have been the first nation in civilized history to welcome different cultures and to give them free scope to participate in the building of a new nation.”

It is that kind of cosmic claim that has been featured so aggressively when Americans have attempted to explain the meaning of America. The historical narrative of nativism may suggest just how hollow such rhetoric can be. But we are not concerned here with authentic narratives. We are trying to catch hold of recurring rhetoric as a cultural reality and potent force.

II. Critics of American Exceptionalism and Their Resonance

Disdain for American exceptionalism first appeared in sustained fashion in 1975. It has not been monolithic, however, and at least five fairly discrete phases can be identified. One finds common ground and overlap, to be sure, but also disagreement and inconsistencies among the critics. Although space does not permit in-depth summaries, it is at least possible to identify some of the leading participants and indicate their points of departure.

First, essays appeared in the mid-1970s that clearly derived from circumstances involving the crisis of political morality: a national fall from grace in the wake of Watergate and, more importantly, humiliation in and about Vietnam. In “The End of American Exceptionalism,” Daniel Bell acknowledged that the United States had had a unique history but that it was initially based upon a belief in moral superiority and subsequently upon sheer power. Now that illusions about the former had been shattered, and the latter had been rendered nugatory, all that
remained of American exceptionalism, according to Bell, was the "constitutional system, with a comity that has been undergirded by history." He closed with the speculative hope that the United States would remain aware of the "moral complexity of history." Less than a year later Alexander E. Campbell, Professor of American History at Birmingham in England, argued that the United States had lost its claim to national purpose, that "most Americans are conscious of sharing problems which are world-wide rather than peculiar to themselves," and that the country had ceased to be a "great experiment" or the last best hope of earth. The American Adam had lost his innocence and given way to a helpless, tarnished Gulliver.

The next move, which still seems to me the pivotal one, involved the appearance in 1979 of Laurence Veysey's compelling essay titled "The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered." Veysey was hardly insensitive to the same stimuli that had provoked Bell and Campbell, but his revisionism also arose from academic and scholarly concerns: namely, that excessive attention to contrasts flatly distorted historical realities; that industrialism and modernism had created some pervasive international patterns that historians had neglected at their peril; that the new social history mandated much more attention to transnational themes—such as mobility studies, which clearly demolished the customary claims for American distinctiveness in that regard. "The sobering demystification of America," Veysey wrote, "the new awareness that we are but one fractional (and internally fractionated) unit in a polyglot world, and that social history is composed of a vast number of separate and distinct pieces, like a mosaic that seldom stops at international boundary lines, has enabled students of American social evolution to view their subject with fewer blinders than before." The phase three of the emerging critique appeared in 1984 when Eric Foner and Sean Wilentz, swiftly joined by other historians of the working class, sought in various ways to address and redefine the persistent line of inquiry first introduced by Werner Sombart in 1906: "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" Because the responses of these historians are wide-ranging and probe deeply, there is considerable danger in compressing a brief summary; but their principal points include the following. Socialism failed to produce a successful political and class transformation in many other countries, not only in the United States; the absence of a powerful social democratic party here does not mean that American workers passively accepted
the status quo; a vigorous tradition of radical protest has, in fact, existed in the United States ever since the later 1820s if not from Tom Paine’s time in Philadelphia; the republican ideology provided meaning and direction for artisans and mechanics as well as the elite; and ethnicity has not been an insuperable barrier to working class cooperation for political objectives.  

Phase four emerged as a familiar choir during the mid- and later 1980s, but the most strident soloist may well have been William C. Spengemann, whose *Mirror for Americanists* relentlessly argued against the distinctiveness of American literature and mocked the mindless assumptions, implicit or explicit, of those guilty of thoughtless chauvinism. “Although our feelings of cultural uniqueness persuade us that American literature is different,” Spengemann observed, “our cultural paranoia forces us to prove that American literature is just as good as European literature, in exactly the same ways, and hence to concentrate our efforts upon the very works that, in measuring up to transnational standards, may well be our least distinctive productions.” It is my impression, however, that Spengemann’s position has met with proportionately less support from literary critics than the views of Veysey, Foner, and others have received from their colleagues in history.

Phase five, which is the most diffuse and least cohesive of my groupings, concerns colonial as well as postcolonial societies and their systems of thought. Thus Jack P. Greene argued in 1988, following John M. Murrin and others, that “the central cultural impulse among the colonists was not to identify and find ways to express and to celebrate what was distinctively American about themselves and their societies but, insofar as possible, to eliminate these distinctions so that they might—with more credibility—think of themselves and their societies—and be thought of by the people in Britain—as demonstrably British.” For apparently ideological reasons, resting mainly upon his conservative hostility to the “liberal-capitalist [critical] interpretation of the American founding,” J. G. A. Pocock has condemned the Lockean emphasis that runs from Louis Hartz to John Diggins and Isaac Kramnick, and quips that Americans who prefer “the splendid misery of uniqueness” might be “happier if they shared their history with other people.”

I would be the first to confess that fault can be found with my five-phase evolution of the critique of American exceptionalism. Aside
from the historian’s penchant for imposing excessive order upon in-tractable materials, I wish to call attention to two awkward problems in particular. First, it must be recognized that some of the most prominent critics have placed themselves on record with categorical con-
cessions of distinctiveness—not necessarily the whole works, America entire, but important components thereof. Let’s look at four examples.

In 1974 I listened with rapt fascination as David D. Hall sandbagged a generation of exceptionalists, including Hartz, Handlin, Boorstin, Marvin Meyers, and Stanley Elkins, for overdramatizing a stark con-
trast between orderly societies in the Old World and disorderly ones in the New. Hall’s recent innovative book on popular religion in colonial New England, however, acknowledges many determinative distinc-
tions: the circumstances of New England in the seventeenth century were “not the circumstances to which Europeans were accustomed. The differences are great enough to force us to revise the very sense of ‘popular religion.’” Hall contends that because space was much less consequential than in Europe, ordinary people could more readily ignore the obligations of organized religion, and church membership became a more voluntary matter than in Europe. When Hall turns to relationships between religious ritual and social order, he stresses the contrast between Old World hierarchies of rank and New World em-
phases upon collective godliness. Without minimizing the European origins of popular religion in the colonies, Hall leaves the reader with a clear sense of important deviations based upon variables that ranged from the environment to social values.31

Although Sean Wilentz is customarily regarded as a critic of Ameri-
can exceptionalism, his well-received Chants Democratic insists upon “distinctively American forms of class conflict” that arose from ide-
ological differences over “fundamental American values” and led to “a distinctly American trade unionism.” Similarly, an essay published by Eric Foner in 1988 demolishes some of the foolish reasoning that has been used to bolster American exceptionalism, yet acknowledges highly significant variations that occurred in different nations during the age of industrialization, accepts the “distinctive character of Ameri-
can trade unionism,” and observes that the trajectory of socialist movements in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century varied significantly from their European counterparts.32

In the work of social historian Alan Dawley, adjustments have ac-
tually moved to and fro. In 1978 he observed that Gramsci’s concept
of hegemony had been misapplied to the United States because the prevalence here of industrial violence, racism, xenophobia, and reactive ethnic cultures did not, taken together for the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conform to Gramsci’s pattern of a dominant social group diffusing its notions of normative relations and realities throughout the culture. “If there is to be a school of cultural studies in the United States,” Dawley wrote, following the lead of E. P. Thompson, “it will have to honor the ‘peculiarities’ principle and pay strict attention to special national characteristics.” Ten years later Dawley developed this assertion but with a different spin in a short paper titled “Farewell to ‘American Exceptionalism.’” There he took a position that I shall return to in my conclusion because it is judicious and has broad applicability. The United States is different but not exceptional, he remarked, not a curiosity in the political history of industrialization. Dawley urged that greater attention be given to variability in national patterns of capitalism, in the timing of capitalist development, in the disposition of social elites displaced by upwardly mobile industrialists, in the structure of state power, and in the diverse composition of various national working classes.33

I am not trying to imply that critics of American exceptionalism have been wildly inconsistent or mindlessly ambivalent. Rather, I do want to suggest that some of the most subtle among them have adjusted their views as fresh research and theoretical perspectives have emerged, that some have occasionally been misunderstood or misinterpreted, and above all that the best among them have tried very hard to be judicious, to look at all of the pertinent evidence, and to tally up accordingly. Thus Aristide A. Zolberg, who teaches political science at the New School for Social Research, is a comparativist who is quite partial to similarities. He nonetheless recognizes major contrasts between the development of capitalism (and its social consequences) in the United States and in Europe. He finds, for example, a greater degree of integration by American workers in their political and social system than occurred in Europe, particularly because of ideological tensions that were generated in Europe during and after World War I.34

An overview of the critics and revisionists, however brief, would not be complete without a look at the ideological Left because here, too, simplistic generalizations are not viable. The Old Left along with some progenitors of the New Left tended to believe quite passionately in American exceptionalism. I have in mind Dwight Macdonald, for
instance, who wrote in 1959 of Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* that is was a “marvelously pure expression of our special American sort of agony, the horror of aloneness, and of our kind of corruption, that of mass culture.” In the same year C. Wright Mills declared that “in the United States there is no long-standing traditional establishment of culture on the European model.” Mills also elaborated his belief that persons with white-collar vocations in the United States were decidedly different from their European counterparts.\(^{35}\)

Connections between the New Left and American exceptionalism are more complicated. Giles Gunn has observed that critical assessments of exceptionalism within American Studies were by no means rooted exclusively in the New Left, yet they did arise during the later 1960s and early 1970s from a feeling of embarrassment with American chauvinism and parochialism, from a growing sense of international interdependence, and from antipathy to the consensus school of historiography.\(^{36}\) A more scholarly and less ideological grounding for the critique then followed in the later 1970s; what transpired in the subsequent decade leaves one feeling fairly reluctant to generalize about the New Left. Fierce critics of exceptionalism remained vocal, to be sure; but advocates of American working-class distinctiveness, such as Mike Davis, could make a persuasive case for the potency of their belief in exceptionalism.\(^{37}\)

III. Persistent Differentiations in the Age of Comparative Scholarship

Suppose we try to compile a tally, a rough and ready reckoning of major scholarship since 1980 in diverse fields and subdisciplines? The reason for choosing 1980 is not just to be recent and therefore up to date. Veysey’s landmark essay appeared in 1979 and within five years, as we have noted, quite a few vigorous voices had spoken in ways that reinforced Veysey’s critique. How far did the pendulum really swing after 1980? How much has our vocational vantage point been changed? The answer, based upon a survey of diverse books, is: not a whole lot.

Let’s begin at the chronological beginning. *The Peopling of British North America*, by Bernard Bailyn, contends that the dynamics of land speculation “shaped a relationship between the owners and the workers of the land different from that which prevailed in Europe.” Speculators
had to offer very low rental fees in order to get land developed and enhance its value. Bailyn’s emphasis upon the contrast between core and periphery, between the metropolis of empire and its marchlands, causes him to highlight the “distinctive” aspects of the colonial society and culture. That word, the “d” word, recurs frequently in Bailyn’s recent work and represents a clear continuity with his earlier analyses of pre-Revolutionary politics. Similarly, Jon Butler’s reinterpretation of the first centuries of American Protestantism seeks to explain, among other things, why religious development in the New World differed so markedly from Britain’s.

Comparable conclusions emerge when we look to politics and public life. Leon D. Epstein is impressed by the limits that historical American circumstances have imposed upon the growth of political parties and their clout. “The distinctiveness of American parties is old and well established,” he explains. “It is not mainly the product of the last few decades of widely perceived decline. As governing agencies, American parties have nearly always been less cohesive in national policymaking than parties in parliamentary regimes. And as extra-governmental organizations, their strength, where it existed, was traditionally state and local rather than national. Moreover, American parties have ordinarily been without the dues-paying mass memberships characteristic of European parties.” Turning to public policy made manifest in historic pieces of legislation, Harold M. Hyman concludes that American exceptionalism “is not a busted superstition suitable only for the trash heap of history.” He finds in certain key statutes a pattern of access to socioeconomic mobility and personal fulfillment that is “unique in the world.”

Recent historians of American literature, especially those whose orientation is more cultural and contextual than structural and textual, also tend to be exceptionalists. A notable example is David S. Reynolds’s study of “subversive literature” during the early and mid-nineteenth century. While acknowledging its roots in earlier criminal and Gothic British fiction, Reynolds insists repeatedly, with multiple variations, that “it took on distinctly American characteristics when reinterpreted by authors who wished to find literary corollaries for the horrific or turbulent aspects of perceived reality in the new republic.” He bolsters his case with numerous expressions by native writers that indicate just how earnestly they sought an American voice and vision. Not once but twice Reynolds quotes Ahab’s eulogy for the
sinking Pequod: "Its wood could only be American!" (8 and 549).41

In addition to numerous utterances of that sort by Herman Melville, Reynolds cites still others by Emerson, Whitman, Bushnell, obscure writers of sensational pulp fiction, and frontier humorists. The author also demonstrates just how many genres and subgenres lacked counterparts elsewhere: the dark adventure style, the irrational mode, and the confidence man as an ironic character type are a few of Reynolds's illustrations. Whether he is examining Crockett almanacs or George Lippard's grim urban melodramas, Reynolds insists that the blend of egalitarianism, frightful situations, and unorthodox literary strategies ("intentional disruptions of linear patterns and wholesale assaults on conventional literary rules," 198) is "at once totally American and totally bizarre" (452). Reynolds has added a considerable dimension and documentary depth to general themes long accessible to students of American literary history.42

There has been even greater unanimity among folklorists in assuming that American folk life reflected a distinctive national experience. Nevertheless the scope of what folklorists and historians of folk culture do has broadened during the past twenty-five years. In 1966 Alan Dundes complained that Americanists tended to neglect festivals, folk dance, art, cuisine and related phenomena.43

In recent years, however, Mary Ryan has scrutinized the civic parade as a mirror of the nineteenth-century social order in the United States. She concludes that Americans devised a "distinctive and curious mode of public celebration" in which a sizable portion of the urban population organized into platoons, companies, regiments, ranks and columns, and marched through public thoroughfares. "This particular type of celebratory performance seems to have been an American invention." It was also more socially inclusive than its European counterparts. Similarly, David Glassberg's thorough study of American historical pageantry, which focuses on a period more than half a century after Ryan's, finds that civic pageantry provided a uniquely American form of "social ceremonial" even though it had obvious English models.44

If space permitted we could also look at the claims made recently for American distinctiveness in terms of middle-class values (rooted in "widespread economic opportunity"), in terms of the "uniquely American proclivity for joining voluntary groups," in terms of the functions of symbolic ethnicity and what Mary C. Waters has called "personally constructed American ethnic communities," and in the
activities and assumptions of philanthropic organizations in relation to
the responsibilities that government will and will not undertake. Also,
a meticulous study of Thomas A. Edison’s reputation in American
popular culture concludes that the aspect of American exceptionalism
that appeared most often in conjunction with the Edison image “is that
which glories in ‘American inventive genius,’ of which Edison is nat-
urally seen as the ‘incarnation.’” The literature is characterized by
such phrases as “we are the most ingenious people in the world” and
“America is the chosen home of invention.” Other claims for American uniqueness that have appeared in the past
decade, however, are less persuasive because little or no evidence is
presented to show whether any empirically comparative inquiry has
been conducted. This is true of assertions on behalf of environmen-
talism, historic preservation, the situation of art and artists in the
marketplace, and the overall configuration of governmental institutions
in the United States.

Marianne DeBouzy has tactfully noted the tendency of some Amer-
icans to make unwarranted assumptions about working-class
people in Europe. I worry about colleagues who are insufficiently
empirical and self-critical—who proceed, as Carl Becker once put it,
without fear and without research.

This brings me to the crux of this post-1980 reckoning: what happens
to American exceptionalism when scholars take seriously the imperative
to do comparative work? Laurence Veysey has been saying for twenty
years that “careful comparison lies close to the heart of historical
explanation.” His distaste for the negative consequences of nationalism
has caused Veysey (and more recently Akira Iriye) to call for trans-
national investigations and to assume that, in modern history especially,
the quest for comparisons will more likely than not turn up similarities.

Both C. Vann Woodward and Carl Degler, however, like to quote
Marc Bloch, who pioneered in calling for comparative work and re-
marked in 1928 that “it is often supposed that the method has no other
purpose than hunting out resemblances.” Bloch contended that “cor-
rectly understood, the primary interest of the comparative method is,
on the contrary, the observation of differences.” In my judgement,
comparative scholarship produced in the past decade bears Bloch out—not because researchers preferred differences but simply because their
investigations turned up a disproportionate imbalance favoring differ-
e
Based upon the survey of recent literature that I have made, it is my impression that researchers were not predisposed to find a preponderance of similarities or differences, and certainly that they had no stake in defending or propping up the precarious remains of American exceptionalism. In fact, most of the works that I am about to cite were undertaken during the later 1970s and early 1980s, when the very notion of American exceptionalism seemed to be least credible and most unfashionable. Although it may be excessively schematic, I am going to organize the overview that follows in terms of the three categories (or lines of inquiry) that have generated the greatest amount of comparative interest: race relations, class formation and attendant ideologies, and the role of the state in terms of active intervention versus degrees of restraint.31

With respect to the history of slavery, emancipation, and race relations, I call to your attention the consistent pattern that appears in four overtly comparative efforts. In White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History (1981), George M. Fredrickson is ultimately more impressed by differences. Race relations in the United States acquired a highly particular character for several reasons: the geographical setting, the political origins and assumptions of the settlers, the overall population being constituted in a certain way, and because the indigenous peoples could not be readily recruited as a labor force. In Peter Kolchin’s extraordinary book, Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom (1987), the author is even more impressed by contrasts than by similarities. Whereas the latter are structural and to some extent causal, the differences are demographic, ethnic or racial, involve degrees of autonomy, more impersonal relations between masters and serfs in Russia (an absence of paternalism there), divergent modes of seeking redress and patterns of resistance, and differences in the ways the two systems of unfreedom were terminated, to mention only some of the contrasts. Ultimately, as Kolchin writes in his conclusion, “despite many similar features of Russian serfdom and southern slavery, there was a contrast in their viability. By the middle of the nineteenth century, as southern slavery was flourishing as never before, Russian serfdom constituted a bankrupt system widely recognized as on its last legs. . . . After the 1820s, when southerners were elaborating with increasing frequency and forcefulness their arguments in defense of the ‘peculiar institution,’ public defense of serfdom in Russia virtually disappeared.”32
In 1969 C. Vann Woodward called the pattern of racial classification in the United States "unique"; twenty years later he rejected an exceptionalist interpretation of Reconstruction. Instead he urged historians to give "scrupulous attention to uniquely American conditions, but also to remember that the post-emancipation problem they attack was not unique to America." Rebecca Scott, effectively sustaining that point, highlights the particularity of geography and environmental patterns, contrasts the goals and political behavior of poor nonslaves in Brazil with the southern United States, and notes the absence of white violence aimed at former slaves in Brazil.\textsuperscript{39}

When we turn to social structure, class formation, and attendant ideologies, the dynamics get somewhat more complex yet the outcome is essentially the same. A massive and nuanced study of Buffalo, New York, prior to 1860 demonstrates the development of what David A. Gerber considers a distinctively American situation. Bourgeois businessmen and their allies exercised social and moral authority in such a way that class differences among artisans and other occupational groups were muted. Moreover, temperance and related reform energies helped to integrate various strata into a common effort to create a bourgeois social order.\textsuperscript{56}

Although Herbert G. Gutman always insisted that many Old World cultural traditions persisted in the New, he too believed that, in Ira Berlin's words, Protestantism and political access "clarified the special circumstances under which an American working class came into being. While religion might be central to the experience of workers on both sides of the Atlantic, there were still important differences of politics, class composition, and national domain." American workers had the vote and became active in partisan politics long before the Reform Act and Chartism began to effect slow changes in nineteenth-century Britain.\textsuperscript{55} Gutman also believed that workers in the United States self-consciously sought to "assert their rights as Americans by distinguishing themselves from workers in other countries." And he proclaimed the "unique history" of the American working class by calling attention to the "continued reinvigoration of preindustrial culture by wave upon wave of new preindustrial recruits." Gutman reached these conclusions precisely \textit{because} he was familiar with European labor history and admired the work of E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Sidney Pollard, and Eric Hobsbawm.\textsuperscript{56}

Laurence Veysey suggested in 1979 that the onset of widespread
industrialization during the later nineteenth century meant that nations undergoing the process, and their work forces, became more alike. But Aristide Zolberg, who is not sympathetic to conventional notions of exceptionalism, has recently concluded that the United States grew more distinctive rather than less as a consequence of undergoing the process. Why? According to Zolberg, the reason is that American industrial workers "constituted less of a critical mass in the United States than they did in Britain or Germany, and there is little doubt that the precocious development of a large segment of white-collar workers also contributed to the formation of a more diffuse sense of class among Americans more generally." Zolberg points to the development here of a form of capitalism organized around a segmented labor market, and in a variation of Gutman's view, Zolberg contends that the immigrants contributed to institutionalized segmentation as a "particularly pronounced feature of American industrial capitalism." He, too, believes that American workers consciously differentiated between their status as "labor" and their role as citizens more generally.57

Although Werner Sombart's famous query in 1906, "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" and his own response are no longer compelling, the issue will not disappear and elements of Sombart's answer still surface in scholarship stimulated by his question. Morris Hillquit once complained that the Socialist Party in the United States had to publish its literature in twenty different languages. For a union trying to organize a steel plant in Pittsburgh, where the work force was ethnically diverse, that could be a very serious problem. Hence Mike Davis observes that whereas the western European class struggles of the 1880s and 1890s elicited a web of integrating proletarian institutions, the labor movement in the United States at that time was unable to generate a working-class culture that could overcome ethnic and religious bonds that remained powerful beyond the workplace. By 1910, Davis concludes, the American industrial city had developed a "strikingly different social physiognomy from that of European factory centers."58

Last though certainly not least, I find increasingly that when scholars function comparatively they are struck, in one way or another, with the state's relatively decentralized or noninterventionist nature, historically, in the United States. Aristide Zolberg makes a persuasive case that the most important "determinant of variation in the patterns
of working-class politics” for the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems to have been whether, “at the time this class was being brought into being by the development of capitalism, it faced an absolutist or a liberal state.” In the Western world prior to World War I, “the relevant range of variation was defined by the United States as the democratic end of the continuum (at least for the white majority) and Imperial Germany at the other, which may be termed ‘modernizing absolutism.’” Alfred D. Chandler’s magisterial study of American business management finds that in Europe,

the much larger military and governmental establishments were a source for the kind of administrative training that became so essential to the operation of modern industrial, urban, and technologically advanced economies. In Europe, too, the government played a much larger role than it did in the United States in financing, locating, and even operating the transportation and communication infrastructure. . . . In Europe, public enterprise helped to lay the base for the coming of modern mass production and mass distribution. In the United States this base was designed, constructed, and operated almost wholly by private enterprise.\textsuperscript{52}

The role of the state also turns out to be a crucial variable in the comparative history of women, as Kathryn Kish Sklar and others have shown. The state has been a major factor in France, for example, by providing public assistance for migrating single women. In the United States, by contrast, the presumption in favor of limited government created major opportunities for activism and social service by women reformers. The situation in Great Britain fell in between these two “extremes”: a fairly strong state policy implemented by means of voluntarism. Moreover, while prostitution tended to be regulated or licensed by the state in Europe, American morality could not countenance such flagrant tolerance, even in the interests of public health; so we substituted hypocrisy for “mere” regulation: payoffs to the police as a cover for free enterprise in sexual gratification.\textsuperscript{50}

To summarize this section, then, a pronounced increase in comparative work since 1980 by historians of the United States has caused a very marked enhancement in our awareness of differences, but only a modest increase in the frequency and importance of similarities. Even among studies that do not attempt to be comparative in a systematic way, such as books about immigrant communities in the United States, sharp contrasts with group life in the Old World become compellingly noticeable.\textsuperscript{91} And authors who choose explicitly to contest the idea of
American exceptionalism are nonetheless obliged to acknowledge variations in racial attitudes, in the role of class in popular entertainments and their audiences, and in the uses of leisure. If anything, the outcome in 1993 is very much at odds with the apparent agenda a dozen years ago and what that agenda caused me, for one, to anticipate in the historiographical trends that lay ahead.

IV. What Have We Learned? Some Reconsiderations

What have we learned? What can be concluded? And where do we go from here? I believe we are obliged to acknowledge the swiftly spreading perception that “every country is different” and that each society or culture is exceptional in its own way(s). The most enlightened historians, irrespective of their national fields of inquiry or topical concerns, have recently begun making that point with some consistency. This awareness warrants at least a mini-survey because Laurence Veysey insists upon the fundamental similarity of all claims to national distinctiveness—a point with which I cannot agree.

E. P. Thompson inaugurated the “multi-pecularity” approach in 1965 when he published an essay critical of structuralist theorists, such as Perry Anderson, who sought to assess and explain the course of British history since the seventeenth century in terms of a Marxist model that regarded the pattern of modern French history as normative. Thompson insisted that “each national bourgeoisie has its own peculiar nastiness” and argued that the ruling class in eighteenth-century England constituted a “unique formation.” Subsequently, Linda Colley has contended that class consciousness and national identity were not antithetical in Britain between 1750 and 1830, which historians had previously argued must inherently be the case. “Because British political, military, social and economic conditions were quite unique,” Colley wrote, “national consciousness here assumed a peculiarly pervasive but also a peculiarly complex form.”

Manifestations of French exceptionalism with varied emphases and concerns—Tocqueville’s proposition concerning the implications of a long history of governmental centralization, Jerrold Seigel’s belief in the uniqueness of the French Revolution, the widely shared notion that for geographical and economic reasons France has a split personality—have been propounded by French, American, British, and other scholars of diverse nationalities. Advocates of Russian exceptionalism have
emerged from academe as well as from activists and journalists in the political arena.65

Turning to a country where the issue of exceptionalism has aroused powerful passions during the past decade, in particular, Gordon Craig informs us that Germans have long been preoccupied with the question: “What is truly German?” Distinguished historians in Germany, such as Karl Dietrich Bracher, have been committed to exceptionalism for reasons intensely critical of the Reich; and George L. Mosse, who left Germany as a young man, finds distinctiveness in the Enlightenment’s failure to sink significant roots in German soil. Consequently, he believes, no German literature founded on revolutionary principles emerged, which provided the opportunity for a twisted national mystique to develop that would solidify national unity—a propensity that evoked a radically destructive response.67

The most provocative book in recent years about German exceptionalism, however, The Peculiarities of German History by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, actually argues just the opposite of what its title would seem to suggest—sort of. The revisionist authors are critical of the widely held belief that liberalism failed to take hold in nineteenth-century Germany, that consequently the bourgeoisie could not develop and play the positive role that it did elsewhere in the West, and that an autocratic, militaristic class of antidemocratic landowners put Germany on its disastrous path to the Third Reich. Without a successful bourgeois revolution in 1848, catastrophe became virtually inevitable: that has been the conventional wisdom.68 (Here we have a fine illustration of why I disagree with Laurence Veysey. The notion of exceptionalism emerged in Germany to justify social and political failure, whereas it developed in the United States to explain moral and political success.)

If I may reduce a complex and controversial thesis to just a few of its most essential points, Blackbourn and Eley reject any attempt to assess nineteenth-century Germany by some external and abstract standards of liberal democracy. They acknowledge the singularity of British and French history; assert that each national case is different; and suggest that similar results may be produced by different modes of development or patterns of evolution. They believe that the basic characteristics and chronology of capitalist industrial development in Germany and the United States were comparable. They also detect parallel histories of trade union weakness and employer intransigence in the
two countries, the latter manifest in ruthless forms of company paternalism.  

Blackbourn and Eley have managed, without any apparent attempt at irony, to produce an attack upon the historiography of German exceptionalism that tends, nonetheless, to leave the reader with a profound sense that German history has, indeed, been different if not "peculiar." Intentionally or not, their book suits the spirit of Johan Herder's relativism, a social philosophy that acknowledged the existence and importance of national differences while rejecting the assumption that one group's development or customs could be judged by the measure or achievement of another. It is that outlook and set of assumptions, in my opinion, that underpins much that is best in comparative historical inquiry today.

Blackbourn and Eley also believe that the public and moral implications of historical writing have been felt with particular acuteness in Germany. They may very well be right, though similar implications (nuanced in different ways) have also emerged from New Left scholarship in the United States and Great Britain since the later 1960s. Prior to that time, at least in the United States, the quest for the "meaning of America" that I referred to earlier may have served to give historical writing about the United States an upbeat rather than a critical moral dimension. Surely, understanding the past in moral terms is considered desirable in many societies, yet I am not aware of any other that has been preoccupied with its own meaning, in a moral sense, for such a long time as ours. Given the persistence of American present-mindedness for several centuries, and given the Emersonian notion of the past as a burden to be shed, perhaps the "meaning of America" (as a quest) seized the imagination of people who lacked a secure sense of history. The "meaning of America," so rich with moralistic implications for the future, and for people not fortunate enough to be Americans, perhaps served as a surrogate for history.

Because a few scholars who are interested in this whole issue (including Dorothy Ross and Ian Tyrrell) have begun to acknowledge that the fervent belief in national exceptionalism has a political and cultural history that is consequential, perhaps the time is now ripe for some sort of transnational team to undertake a comparative history of various national "exceptionalisms." If and when that happens, I suspect that some surprises will emerge involving differences as well as similarities. Students of comparative urban development have noticed cultural,
along with political, variables in attempting to explain why cities such as Chicago and Toronto developed in such divergent ways despite similar prospects and possibilities. I must say that I find the cultural explanations (an aggressive future-oriented elite in Chicago versus a more cautious, conservative, genteel elite in Toronto) considerably more persuasive than the political and governmental ones.  

Unanticipated outcomes emerge when we look at recent work, for instance, by an astute younger Australian historian who insists upon an *absence* of exceptionalist thought in Australia during the first century of its existence—a very stark contrast to the situation in the United States at the same time. Richard White found that:

> It was difficult in the nineteenth century to pin down what was distinctive about Australia, apart from its unique flora and fauna. On the one hand, the Australian colonists were busy identifying themselves with wider loyalties, considering themselves primarily as British, or as being one of the new societies, another America. On the other hand there were narrower loyalties competing with the sense of being distinctively Australian. Politically Australia had no formal existence until Federation: the colonies were separate political entities owing their allegiance directly to Britain.

White acknowledges that while "some sense of Australian identity" did develop during the nineteenth century, it occurred primarily in the 1890s and then during the Boer War. As late as 1887 the popular *Bulletin* perceived nothing distinctive about the Australian: its editors simply applied that label to a composite that it called "The Coming Man." National identity remained inchoate, perhaps a coming attraction.  

The writing of history is commonly affected, even driven, by a sense of moral mission or by ideology. Those kinds of connections are common if not universal. I am inclined to wonder, however, whether the sense of moral mission has not been peculiarly prominent in American culture in a rather perverse way. On the one hand, it appears with amazing frequency and in many guises. On the other, it usually is invoked with a vagueness that encourages misunderstanding, elasticity, distortion, and hypocrisy. Irving Howe, who believes in American exceptionalism as a cultural reality, insists that "to recognize the power of the American myth of a covenant blessing the new land is simply to recognize a crucial fact in our history." Who could refuse to
acknowledge the sheer force of that myth, despite its vagueness? Then Howe calls our attention to the power of Americanism; and once again one wants to affirm his acuity, but Americanism is even vaguer than that covenant. So we begin to balk.\textsuperscript{75}

But important new work, especially in the field of labor history, has provided us with abundant evidence that Americanization as a social construct, as well as political and governmental process, flourished as a result of diverse stimuli for more than half a century following the 1880s. Catherine Collomp, for instance, has observed that in the 1890s and beyond both the American Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor responded to the menace of mass immigration by stressing their firm allegiance to an American sense of national identity rather than a transnational or even domestic working-class alliance. Organized labor deliberately emphasized "its American character." Collomp notes, "and becoming an agent in the regulation of the components of immigration. In this respect citizenship, as an incorporating value, was a more potent factor than—and directly in opposition to—working-class identity, an ideology that reinforced the political and national consensus." For Samuel Gompers, trade union membership became a surrogate form of American citizenship and, wherever appropriate, a prologue to it. Collomp concludes with a strong affirmation of American exceptionalism in the labor movement at the turn of the century, because the constricted scope of what Gompers perceived as a "legitimate working class" only reinforced a sense of union elitism, thereby creating, as she puts it, "a wider gap between skilled and unskilled workers than in other countries."\textsuperscript{76}

In the decades that followed, government, visible intellectuals, unions, and large business firms all reinforced these powerful pressures for "Americanization," a quadripartite ideological phalanx that had no counterpart elsewhere in the world. Three examples will have to suffice. First, between 1902 and 1909 Woodrow Wilson used diverse occasions to articulate his favorite speech, "What It Means to Be an American," a theme that he continued to voice later throughout his presidency. Then, in her extraordinary book titled \textit{Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939}, Lizabeth Cohen describes the Americanization programs privately developed and maintained by employers in Chicago during the 1920s.\textsuperscript{77}

Finally, we have an illuminating recent book by Gary Gerstle called \textit{Working-class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City},
1914–1960. Its subject is the Independent Textile Union of Woonsocket, Rhode Island, arguably the most powerful textile workers’ union in New England. Its *dramatis personae* are Franco-Belgian socialists and French-Canadian Catholics who came to Woonsocket to work in the woolen mills. Its dynamic emerges as leaders of both ethnic groups, but the Belgians especially are able to fashion a critique of capitalism by using the traditional political discourse that conservative Americanizers had devised at the turn of the century—the rhetoric of Americanism.76

Gerstle shrewdly observes that a national obsession with “Americanism” occurred during the 1920s and 1930s. Although he concedes that its meaning was vague, he looks at various texts, including transcripts of interviews, and finds four basic elements in the invocation of Americanism: nationalistic, democratic, progressive, and traditionalist. Consequently these elements of discourse could and did sustain various visions of politics. Among them, radicals and ethnics could present their socialist and communitarian ideals in the language favored by old-line Americans. They would thereby gain acceptability and achieve much of a difficult agenda. To Americanize did not necessarily mean to assimilate or accept the status quo. It did mean adapting Yankee discourse in ways that makes “Americanism” seem even more vague on the surface; yet Gerstle describes particular people in particular situations using particular texts.79 The role of ideology therefore becomes palpable in ways that it does not in Clifford Geertz’s famous essay concerning “Ideology as a Cultural System.”80 And, *mirabile dictu*, because class and ethnicity are centrally involved, the links between ideology and American exceptionalism become considerably clearer than they once were.

Friedrich Engels turns out to have been remarkably prophetic. He forecast the tactics that American exceptionalism as a nativistic ideology would mandate. For success in politics, he pleaded, American socialists “will have to doff every remnant of foreign garb. They will have to become out and out American.”81 That is exactly what happened in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. When Marx and Engels actually examined particular cases, or situations, they too tended to sound like exceptionalists!

Curiously enough, however, leaders and members of the Independent Textile Union did not really disguise or fully shed their ethnic origins; rather, they simply *added* historical Americanism to their identities.
Without entirely abandoning their traditional cultural life, they explicitly identified with George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. They emphasized the constitutional rights and political opportunities of American citizens. They frequently referred to "our forefathers." Americanism mostly meant addition, but not much in the way of subtraction. The creation of compound identities has been a highly significant aspect of Americanization as a social process.

The value of books like Working-class Americanism lies in the way that they serve notice: cultural values and political discourse need not be vague or disembodied variables when we try to illuminate the particularities and peculiarities of life in the United States. They also connect with earlier studies that have been the objects of harsh criticism by skeptics of American exceptionalism. Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land, for instance, needs to be reexamined and mined for material that demonstrates a greater degree of realism about political rhetoric in the United States than we ordinarily acknowledge. In 1860 Senator Louis T. Wigfall of Texas attacked Andrew Johnson's expansionism with these words: "The Senator from Tennessee supposes that we have a sort of blatherskiting Americanism that is going to spread over the whole continent, and cross the Pacific . . . and that, in the area of freedom, we are going to take in the whole world, and everybody is going to benefit us." One of these days, someone will write a cultural history of Americanism, both the benign and the blatherskiting varieties. That will make a major contribution to our understanding of American exceptionalism because the author will want to ask what sorts of comparable discourse have occurred elsewhere.

We are aware that the problem of American exceptionalism is a matter of considerable concern to sociologists (like Daniel Bell), to political scientists (like Seymour Martin Lipset), to lawyers, to literary historians and critics, and to students of public policy whose work I have not been able to explore here. Although I see much that is valuable in what they have done, I also find most of it deficient in chronological specificity, lacking in sensitivity to change over time. I am persuaded that this is where historians can and should make a particular contribution. Gary Gerstle, for example, does an excellent job of showing the gradual process in Woonsocket whereby the French-Canadian workers shifted from extolling only their traditional heroes (early French explorers, generals who fought valiantly at Quebec, and habitants) to admiring the heroes of their adopted land as well. In
1937, none of the floats in an annual parade dramatized the familiar themes from French-Canadian history; and by 1939 the dominant refrain was "Unionism is the spirit of Americanism." These shifts occurred in increments—units of time and of a cultural process that the historian’s vocation is best suited to analyze.

Perhaps the schematization that follows, which is offered heuristically yet hesitantly, has at least three features that recommend its consideration. First, it takes change over time into account without seeking to be too chronologically precise when realism dictates only rough approximations. Second, it derives from cultural perceptions and from ideology, which have been emphasized as essential factors in the preceding pages. And third, it takes into account the inevitable presence of contradictory impulses, of yea-sayers and nay-sayers. It does not presume the existence of consensus about any system of belief, any situation, or any prospect as it appeared to historical participants. It offers a way of thinking about the elusive meaning of America as it was perceived at different times, yet acknowledges the existence of those who cried foul, sham, and hypocrisy.

During the century that followed 1775, the model of republicanism received adherence from people representing all classes of Americans and from newly arrived immigrants as well. Nevertheless, democracy was not so widespread as its devotees believed, even though political participation may have been more accessible than anywhere else in all of human history. Free enterprise and capitalism flourished, but at a high cost in terms of human exploitation and wasted resources.

For three generations following 1875 the United States became a model, even an archetype, of democratic capitalism triumphant—to many—and yet the epitome of aggressive imperialism fueled by capitalist excess to many others. The former may overestimate the accomplishments of the Progressive movement, the New Deal, and the Great Society legislation of the 1960s; but the latter unfairly demean those reformist impulses and the high standard of living achieved by large numbers of Americans.

In the decades following 1965 America entered a prolonged phase in which it resembled Gulliver: powerful yet incapable of achieving its basic objectives; willful yet indecisive; influential in an inconsistent and seemingly rudderless manner; undisciplined and increasingly plagued by gross materialism and consumerism. Others, however,
would point to numerous innovations and achievements: in civil rights for minorities, new opportunities for women in the workplace; dramatic breakthroughs in science, health care, and applied technology; and ultimately, an apparent vindication for free enterprise in the political and economic collapse of communist states.  

If this national trajectory is distinctive, it is also burdened by dualistic tendencies and perceptions. If it is comparable in certain respects to what happened elsewhere—to Great Britain in phase two, for instance—it is quite different in phase one or three or both. It takes into account how Americans have perceived themselves, how foreigners and immigrants have perceived the United States, and how we have responded to their perceptions, admiring as well as unflattering.  

Where do we stand, then, in describing cultural developments and patterns in the United States? The words “unique” and “exceptional” must be used with extreme caution because both imply the existence of a norm that describes most or all other industrialized nations—a norm from which we alone deviate and to which, perhaps, we are somehow superior. The word “different” seems to me both acceptable and accurate because the United States is different. Such usage does not deny that other societies are different, too; but it follows the fundamental assumption, voiced by Carl Degler and others, that Americans “differ in some important ways from people of other nations.”  

It seems reasonable to assert that while the United States has retained a great many differences, over time those differences have gradually become notably less exceptional. Some might even choose to argue that the “burden” of exceptionalism (i.e., profound difference) has perhaps passed to Japan. The rather lengthy historical period in which the concept of American exceptionalism carried a double meaning—one or both of which seemed compellingly persuasive—is now, I believe, over. The concept nonetheless retains its special importance for those of us who seek to understand the historical dynamics of American culture and values.  

Finally, as for the “meaning” of America, I respond positively to Degler’s suggestion that we pose the question: What has it meant, historically, to be an American or to have lived for an extended period of time in the United States? Answers to that kind of question, surely, will refresh our perennial interest in the meaning of America, particularly if we expand the question to read: What has it meant, historically, to be an American, and how have American perceptions of their ex-
perience compared with the process of self-recognition and self-deception in other societies?

The notion (or even notions) of exceptionalism is only one among various meanings that Americans can derive from and attach to their experiences as a nation—even when exceptionalism serves as a kind of compendium of other meanings, a summation that almost inevitably stimulates some sense of societal distinctiveness once the nation itself is identified as the primary locus and focus of national identity. Precisely because that same opportunity for summation is available to other self-reflexive cultures, some variant of exceptionalism has to be expected of all such collective introspection. Consequently, a crucial component in the comparative analysis of cultures becomes the comparative analysis of exceptionalism as a cultural phenomenon. Perhaps the next item on one or another agenda, therefore, will be the question: how exceptional was (past tense) American exceptionalism? I will venture a one-word hunch: Very.

NOTES


5. Marks, Unions in Politics, xiii, xvi, 223 note 42.

6. Ibid., 210, 212, 217–19, 231–34.


8. Ibid., 173, 176, 178–79, 182. See also Olivier Zunz, Making America Corporate, 1870–1920 (Chicago, 1990), which examines the social characteristics and values of people who participated in the formation of corporate bureaucracies.


1988), 5; Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (New York, 1989), 293 (citing a contrast made by Jürgen Kocka).


21. Seldes, *Mainland*, 6. Seldes asserted that the meaning of America was not simply part of the meaning of Europe (8), a point that echoed John Crowe Ransom’s concern for "the meaning of European history" and "Europeanism." See Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York, 1930), 4–5.


27. Laurence Veysey, "The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered," *American Quarterly* 31 (Fall 1979): 455–77, esp. 458. It should be noted that Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley, 1959), sought to show that all industrial societies have had approximately the same rates of mobility. Therefore the notion of a uniquely "open" American society cannot explain why our political history has been different, that is, no significant socialist persuasion. See also David A. Hollinger's complaint that historians of the United States "remain too concerned . . . with the uniqueness of American history and not enough with the place of American intellectual history in the history of the West . . . ." In John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), 63.


32. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, esp. 142, 156–57, 238; Foner, "Why Is There


40. Leon D. Epstein, Political Parties in the American Mold (Madison, 1986), 3–4; Harold M. Hyman, American Singularity: The 1787 Northwest Ordinance, the 1862 Homestead and Morrill Acts, and the 1944 G.I. Bill (Athens, Ga., 1986), 11, 13. The roster of American writers who have been perfectly sanguine about using the word “unique” is diverse and spans many decades. It includes Randolph Bourne in “Trans-National America” (1916), Gilbert Seldes in Mainland (1936) and The Public Arts (1956), Daniel Bell in some of the essays collected in The End of Ideology (1962), James Baldwin in some of the pieces collected in Nobody Knows My Name (1961), and Gary Marks in Unions in Politics (1989), xvi.


46. Wyn Wachhorst, Thomas Alva Edison: An American Myth (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 120. In Nathan Reingold, Science, American Style (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991), the author explicitly rejects "any assumption of American singularity" (17), in an essay prepared in 1976, yet titles another essay "Science and Technology in the American Idiom" (1970), and still another one "European Models and American Realities" (1987). The introduction to this volume does not indicate that a well-modulated emphasis upon exceptionalism characterizes several of the essays. Yankee Enterprise: The Rise of the American System of Manufactures (Washington, D.C., 1981), edited by Oto Mayr and Robert C. Post, offers essays initially presented at a 1978 symposium held at the National Museum of American History. Although the editors acknowledge that many of the phenomena discussed had Old World origins, they find "these circumstances" to have been "anomalous" there, "while in America, by contrast, techniques of quantity production—and extension of the techniques to an ever broader range of products—became fundamentals in the nation's social and economic history" (xi). Although the contributors to the volume vary in their emphases, all agree that foreign visitors to the United States believed that they were witnessing a new and different system in terms of its component elements. In the closing essay Neil Harris asserts the following: "If the American experience was not unique, it did offer, so far as historians of consumption are concerned, special circumstances" (p. 190).


51 There is actually a fourth category that is quite important and revealing because it, too, generally reinforces a sense of American distinctiveness. I have in mind a cluster of highly empirical works that compare selected issues and themes in three societies that one might expect to be more alike than they are like any others. See, for example, Seymour Martin Lipset, Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada (New York, 1990); Richard M. Merelman, Partial Visions: Culture and Politics in Britain, Canada, and the United States (Madison, Wis., 1991); Walter Kendrick, The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture (New York, 1987), 135, 142–43, 150, 158–59; and Howard M. Leichter, Free to Be Foolish: Politics and Health Promotion in the United States and Great Britain (Princeton, 1991), esp. 5, 211. John Harman McElroy, Finding Freedom: America’s Distinctive Cultural Formation (Carbondale, Ill., 1989), builds on comparisons between the United States, Brazil, Canada, and Spanish America.


55. When contrasting British and American conditions, David Montgomery suggested that the most effective deterrent during the pre–Civil War era to the maturation of class consciousness and creation of a labor party in the United States was the "ease with which American working men entered elective office." Montgomery, Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872 (New York, 1967), 215.


58. Irving Howe, Socialism and America (San Diego, 1985), 128–29; Davis, Prisoners of the American Dream, 41, 43.


60. Kathryn K. Sklar, "A Call for Comparisons," American Historical Review 95
(Oct. 1990): 1109–14, esp. 1111; Carl N. Degler, At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present (New York, 1980), 290. See also
nineteenth century, only in the United States did a separate sphere of behavior and activity emerge for women. That "separate sphere" in America would be crucial in
providing a stimulus for the growth of a feminist movement and for individual self-
realization. Meyer's rejection of any universal explanation for the subordination of
women, and his insistence upon national particularity, disturbed some prominent
reviewers of the book. Meyer acknowledges on pp. xxv–xxvi that his project reinforces
the penchant for American exceptionalism.

61. See, for example, Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street, 55, 95, 107–12. Orsi
also happens to make the intriguing point that during the decades, ca. 1890–1910, the
Vatican regarded Catholicism in the United States as deviant and problematic. At
stake, in key respects, was a conflict between the Marian Catholicism advocated by
Pope Leo XIII and a form of modernism supported by the Irish clergy in the United
States who tended to be assimilationist. (See ibid., 62–63.)

62. Richard Waterhouse, From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular
Stage, 1788–1914 (New South Wales, 1990), xi, xiii, 14–16, 28, 38, 139–41; Ian
1068–70; John Agnew, The United States in the World-Economy: A Regional Geog-
raphy (Cambridge, 1987), 15.

63. See, for example, Dorothy Ross, The Origins of American Social Science (New
Charles S. Maier, The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National
Identity (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 108; Dawley, "Farewell to 'American
Exceptionalism,' " in Heffer and Rovet, eds., Why Is There No Socialism in the United
States?, 312.

64. Veysey's letter to the Editor, American Historical Review 92 (Oct. 1987): 1081–
82.

65. E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," in Ralph Milliband and
John Saville, eds., The Socialist Register 1963 (New York, 1965), 311–59, esp. 323,
329–30; Linda Colley, "Whose Nation? Class and National Consciousness in Britain,
1750–1830," Past and Present 113 (Nov. 1986): 97–117. For additional statements
of British exceptionalism, see Gareth Stedman Jones, Languages of Class: Studies in
English Working Class History, 1832–1982 (Cambridge, 1983), 2, 4; Paul Fussell,

in François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., The French Revolution and the Creation
(Oxford, 1989), 636; Theodore Zeldin, France, 1848–1945; Politics and Anger (1974:
New York, 1979), 1–2; Roger Chartier, Cultural History: Between Practices and
Representations (Ithaca, 1988), chap. 8; James H. Billington, The Icon and the Axe:
An Interpretive History of Russian Culture (New York, 1966); George Seldes, Witness
to a Century: Encounters with the Noted, the Notorious, and the Three SOBs (New

67. Gordon A. Craig, The Germans (New York, 1982), 25, 184; George L. Mosse,


69. Ibid., 45–46, 83–84, 89, 123, 133.


77. For examples of Wilson’s many speeches, see Arthur S. Link, ed., The Papers of Woodrow Wilson (Princeton, 1966– ), XII, 265; XIV, 365–78; XV, 160, 165, 168,


81. Quoted in Howe, Socialism and America, 107.

82. Gerstle, Working-class Americanism, 178, 179, 182, 187.


84. In 1899 the Pope explicitly condemned the special heresy of “Americanism,” by which he meant democracy and its traditions. In 1918 Van Wyck Brooks referred to Americanism pejoratively because “the world” equated it with “the worship of size, mass, quantity, and numbers.” Thirty-five years later Edmund Wilson defined Americanism as an affection for and partiality toward the United States. He then suggested that “it has been made to serve some very bad causes, and is now a word to avoid.” See Sigmund Skard, The American Myth and the European Mind: American Studies in Europe, 1776–1960 (Philadelphia, 1961), 53–54; Van Wyck Brooks, Three Essays on America (New York, 1934), 127; Edmund Wilson, “The United States,” in Wilson, A Piece of My Mind: Reflections at Sixty (New York, 1956), 32–35.


88. Vecoli, “The American Republic Viewed by the Italian Left,” 37–53; Olivier Zunz, Making America Corporate, 1870–1920 (Chicago, 1990), a work that responds to the question: How did corporate capitalism succeed in creating a new work culture and new living patterns? Also Barry D. Karl, The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945 (Chicago, 1983); and for reasons peculiar to their region and sensibility, uterogenerate southern spokesmen also found this phasing both plausible and lamentable. See John Crowe Ransom’s essay in Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (New York, 1930), 17.

89. See Godfrey Hodgson, America in Our Time (Garden City, N.Y., 1976); Stanley Hoffman, Gulliver’s Troubles: Or, The Setting of American Foreign Policy (New
