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Gary Gerstle: American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century

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INTRODUCTION



“America is God’s Crucible, where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming!” proclaims the protagonist in Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play, *The Melting-Pot*. “Germans, Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.” With these words, Zangwill articulated a central and enduring myth about the American nation—that the United States was a divine land where individuals from every part of the world could leave behind their troubles, start life anew, and forge a proud, accomplished, and unified people. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., writing eighty years later, endorsed the

same myth, locating the transformative power of the United States not in God but in the nation's core political ideals, in the American belief in the fundamental equality of all human beings, in every individual's inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and in a democratic government that derives its legitimacy from the people's consent. These beliefs represent a kind of democratic universalism that can take root anywhere. But because they were enshrined in the American nation's founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, Schlesinger and others have argued that they have marked something distinctive about the American people and their polity. In the 1940s Gunnar Myrdal bundled these civic rights and principles together into a political faith that he called the "American Creed." Although I prefer to use the more generic term "civic nationalism," which Michael Ignatieff and other students of the contemporary nation employ to denote these beliefs, it is clear that their role in promoting freedom and democracy in American history is indisputable.¹

Throughout its history, however, American civic nationalism has contended with another potent ideological inheritance, a racial nationalism that conceives of America in ethnoracial terms, as a people held together by common blood and skin color and by an inherited fitness for self-government. This ideal, too, was inscribed in the Constitution (although not in the Declaration of Independence), which endorsed the enslavement of Africans in the southern states, and it was encoded in a key 1790 law limiting naturalization to "free white persons." Although modified in 1870, this 1790 law remained in force until 1952, evidence that America's yearning to be a white republic survived African American emancipation by almost 100 years. As late as the 1920s, members of the House of Representatives felt no shame in declaring on the House floor that the American "pioneer race" was being replaced by "a mongrel one," or in admiring a scientist who told them that Americans "had been so imbued with the idea of democracy . . . that we have left out of consideration the matter of blood [and] . . . heredity. No man who breeds pedigreed plants and animals can afford to neglect this thing, as you know."² From the perspective of this racialized

ideal, Africans, Asians, nonwhite Latin Americans, and, in the 1920s, southern and eastern Europeans did not belong in the republic and could never be accepted as full-fledged members. They had to be expelled, segregated, or subordinated. The hold that this tradition exercised over the national imagination helps us to understand the conviction that periodically has surfaced among racial minorities, and especially among African Americans, that America would never accept them as the equals of whites, that they would never be included in the crucible celebrated by Zangwill, and that the economic and political opportunities identified by Schlesinger would never be theirs to enjoy. In the words of Malcolm X, America was not a dream; it was a nightmare.³

In this book, I argue that the pursuit of these two powerful and contradictory ideals—the civic and the racial—has decisively shaped the history of the American nation in the twentieth century. I show how both ideals influenced critical immigration and war mobilization policies, shaped social reform movements ranging from progressivism and the New Deal to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and civil rights, and animated the nation's communal imagination. I give special attention to American liberals: presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson; congressmen of the 1920s and 1930s such as Samuel Dickstein, Adolph Sabath, and Fiorello LaGuardia; government agencies such as the 1940s Office of War Information; artists such as the filmmakers Frank Capra and Francis Ford Coppola, the comic strip creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and the novelist Thomas Bell; and reformers who built the CIO and pushed through the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. These liberals and others, I contend, were the most influential architects of the twentieth-century nation. They were committed to the civic nationalist tradition in general and to equal rights for ethnic and racial minorities in particular. But many of them periodically reinscribed racialist notions into their rhetoric and policies. I examine the antinomies of the civic and racialist traditions in the writings and speeches of Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, and explore the ways in which these same oppositions figured in many of the moments that defined the

nation they built, from Theodore Roosevelt's charge up San Juan Hill in 1898 to Lyndon Johnson's confrontation with the Mississippi Freedom Democrats at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. I am particularly interested in how liberals and their supporters wrestled with the contradictions between the two nationalist traditions, how they managed to adhere to both simultaneously, and why the tensions between them did so little for so long to weaken the authority or cohesion of the nation.

I am also interested in the complexities of each tradition. It is easy to equate racial nationalism with a quest for racial purity, as the Ku Klux Klan did in arguing that the only true Americans are those who have "Anglo-Saxon" blood coursing through their veins. Other racial nationalists, however, have rejected such notions of purity. Theodore Roosevelt, for example, celebrated racial hybridity, believing that the world's most accomplished races—the British, the Americans, and the Australians—drew their strength from the merging together of diverse and complementary racial strains. Roosevelt was constantly seeking situations in which different races of Americans could be brought together in crucibles, mixed with each other, and molded into one people and one race. The most important crucible, in his eyes, was that of war, for the stress and dangers of combat generated pressures to unify that no peacetime initiative could simulate. Yet Roosevelt's melting pots were invariably racialized. They always, and deliberately, excluded one or more races—usually blacks, often Asians and American Indians. Roosevelt believed that such discrimination was necessary to forge an exemplary race. Indiscriminate mixing would inevitably lower a superior race's intelligence, morals, and courage.

Many Americans shared Roosevelt's belief in the superiority of a racialized melting pot. It influenced many writers, who, like Zangwill, often did not think to include blacks, Hispanics, or Asians in their American crucible, and it guided the racial policies of nation-building institutions, such as the military, that brought together whites of varying nationalities, religions, and regions even as they separated whites from blacks. But if the effort to define the nation in racial terms was constant during this era, the precise

racial mix of groups that were allowed to contribute to American nationality was not. Early in the century, many native-born Americans thought that eastern and southern Europeans derived from such poor racial stock that they would never metamorphose into Americans. By the 1930s and 1940s, however, these eastern and southern European ethnics were challenging this characterization of themselves as racially inferior and were winning recognition for their worth as white Americans. Achieving inclusion did not mean that they were undermining the tradition of racial nationalism, for other racial groups, such as blacks and Asians, still found themselves on the outside looking in. The questions of why certain groups were able to overcome allegations of racial inferiority and others not and how their struggles for inclusion both challenged and reinforced the tradition of American racial nationalism form an important part of the story that this book tells.

The history of civic nationalism in the United States displays a similar kind of complexity. The promise of economic opportunity and political freedom to all citizens, irrespective of their racial, religious, or cultural background, was a vital component of this tradition. For most of the nineteenth century, it was thought that the mere removal of discriminatory laws would be sufficient to make the promise of opportunity real. But in the early twentieth century, the rise of the corporations transformed the economic and political landscape. The manufacture of new products and the creation of new wealth generated hopes that a society of general affluence was in reach, but the inability of millions to escape industrial poverty spread despair. Liberal reformers began arguing that corporations were occluding individual opportunity for the masses and that a regulatory state was now necessary to restore faith in America or in what the liberal intellectual Herbert Croly called “the promise of American life.” Croly coined the term “New Nationalism” to describe a civic nationalist state-building project that he outlined in 1909, and Theodore Roosevelt made it the centerpiece of his progressivism.⁴ Other liberal presidents would follow in Roosevelt’s steps, arguing that a welfare state, the protection of labor’s right to organize, and limitations on industrialists’ power were

now necessary to fulfill the nation's civic mission. Civic nationalism even became a tool in the hands of anticapitalist socialists and Communists who saw in its elastic principles an opportunity to claim that economic egalitarianism would honor America's civic creed. In the pages that follow, I reconstruct the efforts to stretch the meaning of civic nationalism in this way, showing first how these efforts enjoyed success during the progressive and New Deal eras and then how the anticommunism of the Cold War snapped civic nationalism back into an older, and less flexible, form.

A focus on anticommunism allows us to discern an exclusionary tendency within the civic nationalist tradition itself, one that limited its ideological elasticity and sometimes compromised the atmosphere of openness and tolerance that it bestowed on American society. Immigrants who refused to absorb and respect America's civic nationalism, for example, were often treated harshly by neighbors, employers, and the state. Political radicals of a variety of faiths, including anarchism, socialism, and communism, were also vulnerable to ostracism, persecution, and the declaration that they were un-American. During periods of perceived national crisis, nonassimilating immigrants and political radicals became the targets of state-sponsored coercive campaigns to strip them of their now alienable rights to free expression and free assembly. Many of those who attacked these cultural and political dissenters saw themselves as civic nationalists. They regarded their quarry not just as political enemies but as the nation's enemies who had squandered their right to be part of God's crucible.

Both racial and civic nationalism, then, were complex traditions, simultaneously elastic and exclusionary, capable of being altered in various ways to address new economic and political problems as they arose. Together these two traditions imparted a clear, if paradoxical, shape to what I call the Rooseveltian nation, a nation whose outlines are discernible in the first two decades of the twentieth century and whose character would define American society from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s. The advocates of this nation espoused an expansive civic nationalist creed: political and social equality for all, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or nationality, and a

regulated economy that would place economic opportunity and security within the reach of everyone. Simultaneously, many of its supporters subscribed to the racial notion that America, despite its civic creed, ought to maximize the opportunities for its “racial superiors” and limit those of its “racial inferiors.” Finally, they were prepared to harshly discipline immigrants, political radicals, and others who were thought to imperil the nation’s welfare. Such disciplining was expected either to marginalize and punish the dissenters or to tame and “Americanize” them, rendering them suitable for incorporation into the national community. Disciplinary campaigns would lift up some, but not all, groups of racial inferiors into the American mainstream.

The Rooseveltian nation flourished amid the swirl of these contradictory principles for thirty years, commanding the respect of most people who lived within its borders. During its midcentury heyday, and in the thirty years prior to then when it was taking shape, this nation depended on war to achieve its aims: against the Spanish at the turn of the century, the Germans in World War I, the Germans and Japanese in World War II, and the Soviets and their allies in the Cold War. Wars provided opportunities to sharpen American national identity against external enemies who threatened the nation’s existence, to transform millions of Americans whose loyalty was uncertain into ardent patriots, to discipline those within the nation who were deemed racially inferior or politically and culturally heterodox, and to engage in experiments in state building that would have been considered illegitimate in peacetime. Americans do not usually think of war as determinative of their nationhood, but in this book I argue that, at least for the twentieth century, war has been decisive. Perhaps no figure illustrates the association of war and the nation more than Theodore Roosevelt, which is why I have accorded him a pivotal role in the story that I tell.

In the 1960s, the Rooseveltian nation fell apart. The trigger was the civil rights revolution that began in the 1940s and reached its climax in the 1960s. In its first two decades, the movement for racial equality was civic nationalist to the core, identifying itself

with the Pilgrims, Founding Fathers, and the American dream, and calling on all Americans to respect their democratic inheritance and judge each other—in the words of Martin Luther King Jr.—by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. But the persistence of racial nationalism bred disillusionment, prompting many black activists to jettison their civic ideals and embrace black power, an ideology that rejected America as hopelessly compromised by racism and that called on blacks to break their affective and cultural ties to it.

The black nationalist renunciation of America was a stunning development. Once it occurred, the contradictions within the Rooseveltian nation overwhelmed its capacity for imparting unity and purpose to a bitterly fractured society. The rapid spread of black nationalist principles to a mostly white and middle-class university population and, then, to far larger segments of white America, including European ethnics often thought to be black power's die-hard opponents, accelerated this nation's collapse. I argue that the disastrous war in Vietnam was the decisive element in this diffusion, as it made millions of whites receptive to a radical critique of state power, nationalist ideals, and cultural assimilation in ways that most Americans had not been since the First World War. The Vietnam War, alone among twentieth-century wars, could not be turned to nation-building purposes. To the contrary, it tore apart the nation to which Theodore Roosevelt and World War I had given birth. By 1970, neither the civic nor racial traditions of American nationalism retained enough integrity to serve as rallying points for those who wished to put the nation back together.

The nation, of course, did not end with Vietnam. In an epilogue I explore the rise of multiculturalism in the 1980s and its significance as an antiracist and anti-American ideology. I also examine the determined efforts, first by Reaganite conservatives and then by Clintonian liberals, to revive affection for the American nation and to launch new nation-building projects. I place this nationalist renaissance into historical perspective and speculate on whether the new nation that is now taking shape will resemble the Roose-

veltian one or whether it will rest on a significantly different, and perhaps less contradictory, set of principles.

This is a work of synthetic interpretation that owes a great deal to the labors of other scholars. The notes to my chapters record the fullness of my debt. In conceptualizing this work, I have incurred several more general intellectual obligations that need to be mentioned here. First, I am beholden to those scholars who, in the last fifteen years, have revived the study of nations. Although most of these scholars have written about nationalism in places other than the United States, they have helped me to imagine how a history of the American nation might be written. Most important among them is Benedict Anderson, whose book, *Imagined Communities*, on the origins of nations and nationalist consciousness in Europe and Latin America in the eighteenth century, allowed me to see nations for what they are: invented political and cultural entities whose power rests not only on the acquisition and control of territory but also on their ability to gain the allegiance and affection of the large and heterogeneous populations that reside within their borders. Nations first appeared in Europe when dynastic realms, rooted in an older kind of political and cultural system that generated unity on the basis of vertical ties between subjects and an exalted king or God, were breaking up and changes in the materialist forces of production were making it possible to imagine new politicocultural systems built on the horizontal comradeship of citizens. Once the idea of a nation emerged, Anderson has written, it was “capable of being transplanted . . . to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.”⁵

That nations are invented and variable underscores how much they are sociopolitical creations and, as such, historically contingent. Their origins may be purposive or accidental. They can gain or lose strength, expand their territory or lose it, fortify their myths of origin and belonging or see them undermined or altered, cele-

brate aspects of their history or repress them. Nations can win the allegiance of their people through promises of liberty, prosperity, and immortality or beat them into submission through campaigns of fear and intimidation. They can subordinate, expel, or kill those identified as enemies of the nation and protect and assist those who form the citizenry or the *Volk*. Nationalist sentiment can rest on a series of rational political principles as well as on myth, emotion, and contradiction. To write the history of a nation, then, is to be alert to this range of possibilities and to identify those which seem most important.

I also owe a great deal to a distinguished line of works, stretching from W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, through Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, to David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*, that has argued for the centrality of race to American politics and society.⁶ The literature on the history of race and racism in America is, of course, enormous. Prior to the past twenty years, however, much of it tended to depict racism as the work of white southerners, the ignorant poor, and aristocratic reactionaries and others who were out of touch with the American mainstream or at least with its dominant, liberal currents. The notion that race might have been constitutive of American democracy, welfare policy, the labor movement, and other progressive developments rarely surfaced. Du Bois and other black scholars had been making this argument for decades, of course. The rescue of their work from the margins, along with the work of scholars such as Morgan and Roediger in the last generation, has now made that once submerged notion difficult to ignore. Just as other scholars have insisted on the centrality of race to notions of American freedom and class consciousness, so I argue for its importance in regard to American nationalism.⁷

I have not followed, however, the lead of some whiteness scholars in seeing race at the root of every expression of American nationalism. This view, in my mind, ignores the strength and autonomy of the civic nationalist tradition and the ways that different groups have used it to advance the causes of both social democracy and racial equality. For this reason, I have been drawn to Eric

Foner's *The Story of American Freedom* and Rogers M. Smith's *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*, both of which acknowledge the full influence of race and other forms of exclusion without slighting the power of civic ideals.⁸

Whether it is now possible to move beyond our long history of racial exclusion and build a strong and tolerant nation on the basis of a civic creed alone, a position currently advocated by prominent liberal intellectuals and policy makers, is an important question that the epilogue addresses. How it is answered carries implications for the kind of society we think Americans of the twenty-first century will inhabit. But that is getting ahead of the story. First we must gain a sense of how the American nation of the twentieth century came to be. For that, we turn to a moment in 1898 when that nation, in a victorious war against Spain and under the spell of Theodore Roosevelt's heroism, can plausibly be said to have been born.