

The American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century. By GARY GERSTLE. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. xv, 454p. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.)

In *American Crucible*, Gary Gerstle shows how much of twentieth-century American history can be understood in terms of the fluctuations in how Americans generally and politicians in particular balanced civic and racial nationalism. Whether or not one accepts Gerstle's division between these two forms of nationalism, this is an important study that sheds a great deal of light on American political and social history. The book never loses sight of the importance of tying rich detail to a theoretical engagement with the subject. Gerstle takes us from San Juan Hill through the multi-ethnic regiments of the "Good War," the challenges of the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam, and on to the Reaganite and Clintonite nationalist resurgence, each chapter providing important insights for the student and scholar alike.

Gerstle's historiographical contribution lies in his attempt to bring the state back into the forefront of consideration among social historians, something that he began in his first book, *Working-Class Americanism* (1989). Social historians have managed to alter our perspectives on race, ethnicity, and immigration by moving our focus from structural considerations (such as the economic conditions motivating migration or the nativist restrictions placed upon immigrants) to the lives and experiences of the immigrants themselves. In the process, however, historians have developed a tendency to romanticize immigrant culture. To counteract this tendency, some have emphasized the importance of emerging industrial capitalism, while a few focused on gender conventions among immigrants and in American society generally. Gerstle has taken us in a new direction here by focusing on the relationship between immigrants and the emerging American state, as revealed through these two manifestations of American nationalism.

Gerstle argues that racial and civic nationalism are two largely separate ideological strains that have animated the political history of the United States in the twentieth century. The former tends toward exclusion and the imposition of a disciplinary state to safeguard borders; the latter tends toward inclusion on the basis of long-treasured political values associated with freedom, equality, and civil and political rights. While supporters of racial nationalism have often attempted to impose strict immigration quotas and laws that reserve superior status for immigrants of northern European parentage, proponents of civic nationalism have

endeavored to dismantle as much of the disciplinary apparatus of the state as possible. But Gerstle is also keenly aware of nuances and deviations from script, as when he describes the work of a man like Senator Pat McCarran. McCarran, who made the first efforts to reopen American doors to immigration in the 1950s, was also a McCarthyite and a supporter of a disciplinary state. The explanation for such an awkward ideological marriage lay in McCarran's desire as an Irish American to undermine the WASP elite while also requiring immigrants to prove their anti-Communist credentials.

If Gerstle stumbles it may be in relying too heavily on Theodore Roosevelt for his inspiration in interpreting the state and nationalism. While Roosevelt certainly left his imprint on progressive politics and on the emerging American state, following other genealogies by examining theorists such as Randolph Bourne or Woodrow Wilson (who both had a greater appreciation for statist theory than TR) would perhaps have clouded Gerstle's distinction between the civic and the racial. Gerstle sees Roosevelt vacillating between these two strands of nationalism in an almost schizophrenic way, though with civic nationalism largely holding sway. Woodrow Wilson was more keenly aware of the racial origins of his own civic nationalism, and Randolph Bourne pointed clearly to the repressive tendencies of the state in both its racial and its civic guise. Wilson and Bourne were less willing than Roosevelt to separate these two ideological strands in their estimation of that "hopeless confusion" that was the state, or at least American thinking about the state.

The weakness here is most pronounced perhaps in Gerstle's efforts to distinguish his understanding of nationalism from those of liberals who have come before, such as when he suggests that Gunnar Myrdal's definition of an American creed in *An American Dilemma* "was flawed, for it presumed that racialist thought was extraneous to the creed's core civic principles and thus that such thought could be repudiated without calling into question fundamental notions of American identity" (p. 193). Any division between the civic/inclusive and the racialist/exclusive is likely to fall foul of this problem; ever since American slavery and American freedom were conceived together in the same Virginia swamp, the "civic" has never been as universal and inclusive as some Americans have hoped or claimed. Moreover, the only people covered by civic principles are those who have succeeded in winning inclusion. While exclusion can become less crassly racial in a Social Darwinist way than it was during the twentieth century, it will nonetheless exist, determined by a particular religion or belief itself, by gender, or by property and economic rights in a world where these are increasingly contested. With democracy and freedom riddled with these internal contradictions, the vanquishing of racial nationalism by a vibrant civic alternative (which Gerstle seems to be advocating here), may still leave Americans confused as to why the ideals they honor as the universal messages of their history and society can seem to others to be only reflections of their

continued privilege. But while Gerstle may not have settled debates about the parameters of the American state and its potential for reinvigorating liberals even in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, he has nonetheless provided a jumping off point for fruitful discussion.

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