American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century

Book Review

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- English - Politics -

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Today, the academic value of Gary Gerstle’s *American Crucible* could seem at first severely jeopardized. It was published in 2001, evidently before September 11th, when in its immediate aftermath the issues of race, nation were brought back to the forefront of national debate and policy-making. *American Crucible* was not updated, since the approach deliberately overlooks the last quarter of the 20th century, to emphasize on the far reaching legacy of the American nation-building process triggered in the 1890s.

As a professor of History at the University of Maryland, Gary Gerstle stays faithful to a particular American scholarly tradition which emphasizes on the anecdotal and relies on individual perspectives of history (in this case, Theodore Roosevelt) as a support base for its arguments. This certainly does not work against the analysis, as the author manages to assemble a wide variety of sources and case-studies, such as film productions, illustrations or individual writings. The style is moreover not overtly narrative, since the perspective Gary Gerstle chose to take is clearly laid out and adequately structured throughout his analysis.

The author presents in his introduction and suggests in his opening chapter the main paths of his analysis, by bringing out above all the importance of Theodore Roosevelt’s legacy in the shaping of American 20th century nation-building and nationalist discourse. The “Rooseveltian nation” and legacy, he argues, and the internal contradictions it had developed, between “racial nationalism” and “civic nationalism”, had a deep and sustained impact on American political debates and policy-making in the first half of the 20th century until the 1960s.

The disillusionings brought about by political corruption and lawlessness in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Vietnam war and the apparent failure of the 1964 Civil Rights Act to ensure social and economic equality for the Black American population, challenged “(...) the moral integrity of the American state and the American nation. The antiwar movement, as a result, speeded the collapse of the Rooseveltian nation.”

The epilogue, which attempts to summarize in less than thirty pages the entire Reaganite and Clintonian political legacies which dominated American policy-making in the 1980s and 1990s, brings out the analysis’ shortcomings, which evidently gives too much emphasis on Theodore Roosevelt’s civic nationalism as a legacy permeating American national politics throughout the 20th century.

"The Rooseveltian Nation"

Theodore Roosevelt is according to Gary Gerstle probably the most decisive historical figure of early 20th century America and its later developments. He managed, both through his personal political credentials and the different political platforms and parties he headed as president or presidential candidate, to properly respond to the imperatives of nation-building in America. He inspired and embodied the development of an openly civic and affirmative form of nationalism, which could resolve real or perceived situations of social and political crises American policy-makers had inherited in the 1890s from unbridled corporate industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as unsupervised mass immigration policies.

The author argues the Rooseveltian legacy introduced a sense of transformative nationalism which theoretically compelled all American residents to fully embrace their American identity by relinquishing their personal origins. This was the basis for recognising their rights of citizenship guaranteed and protected by a growing federal state, but also their duties to conform and accept the WASP-dominated political culture and values.

The racial boundaries of participative democracy in early 20th century America could moreover only be extended according to Theodore Roosevelt to all Euro-Americans, even the ostracized eastern and southern European immigrant communities, but no further. Rooseveltian civic nationalism needed to be rigorously controlled in racial
terms: it retained the racial boundaries fixed by early 20th century common sense: the deep-grounded conviction that "distinctive" ethnic minorities could not fully assume the responsibilities of citizenship.

In practical terms, however, Rooseveltian nationalism had been based on a relatively hazy definition of the American nation and citizenship, oscillating between "the hardening of the boundaries of the nation", in terms of race, religion and political affiliation, and the necessity to rally and incorporate increasingly wider segments of American immigrants and ethnic minorities, to consolidate and strengthen the political community (as well as the electorate), and more importantly as a policy for mobilisation in times of war.

American Crucible explains relatively clearly the persistence of this duality in the Rooseveltian Nation throughout the first half of the 20th century, and the ways each branch of its nationalist creed, racial or civic, was used by different political actors in America until the late 1960s to forward specific and sectarian political goals and demands. In other words Gerstle asserts that most, if not all, of American mainstream political history during this period was determined by the particular language and authority of Rooseveltian nationalism.

The contradictory trends of racial discrimination laws on the one hand, such as the 1920s restrictionist immigration Acts or the continued legal discrimination of blacks in Southern States until 1964, and governmental policies aiming at widening the boundaries of citizenship and participative democracy to ethnic and religious minorities on the other, were able both to refer to the precepts of the Rooseveltian nation to legitimate their demands and actions.

The increasing tension between racial and civic forms of nationalism, which Theodore Roosevelt initially had not managed to resolve in his political platform and which had both radicalized through non-governmental action and legislature, eventually brought the downfall of the American modern nationalist experience.

"The bonds of nationhood had weakened, and the Rooseveltian program of nation-building that had created those bonds in the first place had been repudiated. A nationalist era that had begun in the early decades of the twentieth century had come to a stunning end."

Are Civic and Racial Nationalism distinct?

Gary Gerstle regularly approaches racial and civic nationalist movements as two separate entities, but highlights as well how both in many ways had managed to coexist until the demands for immediate civic and economic equality became too bearing. Generally speaking, the author argues that even if progressive civic nationalism increasingly opposed itself to overt and institutional discrimination on the basis of race or creed since the 1920s, it nevertheless systematically relied on traditional forms of racial sense of belonging to express itself, even in its most liberal and pluralist phase during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency.

The author points out the persistence of the Nordic Scandinavian ideal-type in propaganda art of the NRA and the Unions in the 1930s, as well as the refusal to include black Americans or any other distinctive ethnic group in illustrations supposed to represent the American workforce. The emblematic photo Migrant Mother is understood here as the reproduction of such stereotypes and the refusal to show a multiethnic reality of the United States.
One could consider however that because of her Nordic features the Migrant Mother symbolises the fact that the Great Depression encompassed all racial, social or religious barriers. This confirms the author's argument that as a deep and profound national crisis, the Great Depression brought to the Americans a common experience, which was positive as it forged new forms of solidarity and a sense of urgency for progressive reforms.

The author contends that the Rooseveltian civic nationalism had proved hostile, reluctant, but always powerless to bring peacefully, and through legislature, tangible and immediate tokens of socio-economic equality and civic freedom to all Americans. This incapacity of the Rooseveltian Nation to effectively eradicate racial-based discrimination is closely related to the conformist and unilateral cultural model it had instilled on American political life.

Gerstle stresses that the main reason for the downfall of the Rooseveltian nation-state indeed lies in its coercive and conformist nature. It had led several cultural wars against diversity and plurality (the anti-Semitic and racist features of the Red Scare rhetoric in the early 1920s, The Dies Commission in the 1930s, or McCarthyism in the 1950s), as much in domestic affairs as in its foreign policy.

In the chapter concerning the Civil Rights movement, a political phenomenon which the author unfortunately neglected to thoroughly analyse the developments prior to the 1960s, the frustration, persecution and sense of powerlessness encountered by Black American leaders and activists are highlighted to explain the shift from a civic and universal rhetoric favoured by early 1960s Black Christian Civil Rights Movements, to a racialized, sectarian sense of Black identity. This shift is interpreted in American Crucible as contributing to the overall decline of the "hyper-rational" state-led culture of conformity, based on the Rooseveltian precepts of a racially-controlled and supervised civic nationalism.

In other words, the preservation of the traditional racial order in the United States was partly due to the culture of conformity- ostensibly civic in its form- instilled through coerciveness and periodically through terror campaigns of intimidation on the diverse elements of the American population. This according to the author confirms the interdependency between racial and civic definitions of the nation which persisted under the Rooseveltian nationalist legacy.

The centrality of war in modern American nationalism

Countless studies have been made on the formative and determining effects of war and mobilisation in the development of modern nationalisms throughout the world, but the author tends to argue that Rooseveltian nationalism was particularly reliant on war and the political benefits it bestowed to affirm and develop its own authority in domestic affairs.

The first chapter is a comprehensive analysis of Theodore Roosevelt's interpretation of American history, which Gary Gerstle repeatedly uses as a reference point to explain later developments in American war mobilisation campaigns. This interpretation of national history, grounded in social-Darwinist precepts of nations and races competing for survival and supremacy, understands war as an essential component of the common national experience, one that sustains a "regeneration of the race", and guarantees unity and a sense of national belonging.

This discourse was of course certainly not specific to American politics. However, the way Theodore Roosevelt sanctified war determined the way pro-war parties from the 1890s up to the 1960s justified their demands and policies that the federal government should wage wars as a means to reach "higher standards" of existence, for the benefit of reinvigorating patriotism at home as well as serving the advancement of ideals, perceived to be universal.
and undisputable, overseas.

The author however argues that war not only contributed most effectively in establishing the 20th century federal state and the modern sense of American nationality, but also precipitated its collapse. The US army had been established on racialist and segregationist principles, which moreover were radicalized in the early 20th century. Yet, the author argues, American immigrants and ethnic minorities, particularly black Americans, benefited collectively from their enrolment in America's 20th century wars.

The need for a massive infantry army which could be relatively quickly set up and operational meant the elevation of sections of the population previously castigated as desperately foreign and inassimilable to the highest levels of the American modern nationalist mythology, namely the "male warrior".

The author correctly points out that the second world war melted the different European minorities, before clearly separated in Rooseveltian terms between a superior Anglo-Saxon race and inferior eastern and southern races, into a hybrid "euro-American fighter", and went as far as recruiting Japanese Americans- in segregated regiments- straight out of the West coast concentration camps.

The immediacy of war also meant the opening of unprecedented opportunities to achieve equal treatment, namely for black American regiments which had participated in all American conflicts since their introduction during the Civil War. In Gerstle terms,

"World War II's stature as the good war, a stature that would only increase with time as Americans grew resentful of Korea and Vietnam, magnified the costs of the government's decision to fight the Axis powers with a segregated military."

**Vietnam and the end of 20th century American nationalism**

Segregation in the US military was abolished towards the end of the second world war, decades before the 1964 Civil Rights Act. However, the dismantling of the legal edifice of racial discrimination in both military and civilian realms proved illusory for the black American population. In this respect the Vietnam war proved a catalyst for the decline of the rational modern state in the United States. Vietnam is considered in *American Crucible* above all for the racial issues it helped to exacerbate at home.

The modern Rooseveltian nation state had managed America's wars in the 20th century with the same internal contradictions existing in the civil institutions, a civic sense of duty nevertheless racially-supervised and segregated. These contradictions however did not jeopardize the legitimacy of these wars or the authority of the federal state. The author points out clearly that Vietnam was vilified by millions of American citizens in the 1960s even as it was the first conflict to completely end segregation practices.

The Vietnam war allowed black non-commissioned officers to command multi-ethnic platoons, as well as the development of a new generation of black American career officers in the US army. The author nevertheless balances his point by insisting on the persistence of racial tensions within the military during the Vietnam war, and the development of black separatist ideologies amongst black American soldiers. Most of all, the over-representation of black Americans in front-line infantry regiments can be more accurately explained by a more subtle form of segregation.

The author does not stress enough in my view the incapacity of the US army, and American civic nationalism in
general, to properly adapt the Rooseveltian concept of the patriotic fighter to a multi-ethnic reality. Regiments in Vietnam were in every sense multi-ethnic, but the solidarity and sense of camaraderie which may have incurred amongst multi-ethnic platoons did not serve the interests of the state: if anything, Americans fighting in Vietnam developed more than any other section of the American population a sense that state and authority were as absurd as they were criminal. Gerstle supports this argument with the fact that many officers, black and white, were killed during combat by their own subordinates.

The author focuses above all on the decisive impact of Vietnam had on the legitimacy of the US domestic state, more specifically as it triggered a strong rejection of the rational and assimilationist modern state, amongst increasing sections of white liberal and progressive circles. The Civil Rights movement 1960s had also enjoyed relatively significant support from white progressives in the United States. However, these groups were probably more determining in dismantling the undisputed authority of the US state in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Gerstle argues that the origins of the multiculturalist discourse, a product of white university academia, was the late 1960s response of the progressive Left to the impeding crisis on civic nationalism. Castigating civic nationalism as a travesty for the persistence of the racial order established under the Rooseveltian nation, these academic and policy-making groups believed the return to ethnic and racial senses of belonging would ensure a more viable political community. They associated civic forms of allegiance to the nation with the political and cultural supremacy of the WASP elite it had been serving.

Multiculturalism was in many ways an attempt to preserve social order and prevent urban race riots to undermine even further the rule of law in the United States. As Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive party was meant to replace and subdue more radical criticism of the corporate industrialisation in the United States 50 years before.

Gary Gerstle's emphasis on Theodore Roosevelt's legacy is in itself a most valid perspective to explain mainstream American politics in the last century, but it tends to undermine the more autonomous forms of political expression which cannot be credited to the Rooseveltian nation: The political weight of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s is for example hardly mentioned. Other trends such as the transformation of the status of Jewish Americans since the 1970s are too closely associated with the transformational power of the Rooseveltian nation.

Gary Gerstle's analysis could have benefited in my view from restricting its period of study to the end of the 1960s. In his last chapter on Vietnam, he admits the 50 year experience with the Rooseveltian national model to be the American variant of the worldwide establishment, and eventual decline of the modern developmental state.