A Comparative Approach to American History

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EDITED BY

C. Vann Woodward

FORUM SERIES

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Preface

The emphasis on comparison common to these essays is prompted by several incentives and a variety of intentions. The most elementary of these arises from the assumption that an interest in comparison is part of all curiosity and from the observation that historians in general-and perhaps American historians in particular-have rather neglected the satisfaction of this natural source of interest in their subject. This is not generally true of other disciplines that make aspects of the American experience the subject of their studies. Economists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and students of American literature cannot as freely be accused of neglecting comparisons that transcend national boundaries. In fact for some of these disciplines the comparative branch comprises a large and occasionally a dominant division. The comparative work in political science, for example, currently constitutes the most visible and prolific activity of that young and vigorous department of the social studies. Nothing of the sort characterizes its older sister department of history.

One purpose of this book is to explore the possibilities and opportunities of comparative history, and at the same time to experiment with comparative methods and apply some of them to classic subjects in American history. It is the hope of the editor that this effort will inspire further interest and activity in the comparative approach among professional historians and

at the same time broaden the historians' reading public by responding to a neglected source of legitimate curiosity about American history.

Another incentive for the comparative approach arises from the original purpose of these essays. The Voice of America has for several years run a series of radio lectures designed to acquaint foreign intellectual and professional audiences with the ideas of leaders in American arts and sciences. These Forum Lectures included a series on each of the academic disciplines. The editor was invited to prepare the series on American history and enlisted the twenty-two distinguished specialists who speak for their respective fields.

It was the belief of the editor that the comparative approach was peculiarly adapted to the interests and needs of foreign audiences. Since people in other countries approach American history with a different historical tradition in mind, they naturally make comparisons. They may have had their own variety of such common historical experiences as colonial rule, revolutions, founding new nations, frontiers, immigrations, slavery, civil war, racial conflict, industrialization, social democracy, depressions, and two world wars. But they are acquainted with these phenomena mainly through the history of their own societies, through classic instances in the history of societies more closely related to their own, or through examples from recent or contemporary history. They naturally want to know first of all how the American experience relates to their own-what, from their point of view, is the relevance of American history. Therefore they will inevitably draw comparisons.

Historical comparisons are notoriously dangerous and misleading, and historians as a rule are reluctant to make them. But since comparisons are inevitable, it would seem best that they be handled by expert historians. At least the experts should participate in one of the most popular uses made of their subject. They would seem best qualified to point out the fallacies of comparisons, to distinguish between comparisons that are misleading and those that are illuminating, to warn against strained and unsophisticated experiments of the sort, and to call attention to new opportunities for fruitful comparative studies.

As expected, the fruits of comparative reflection on the Ameri-

can past in these studies proved to be of as much significance for Americans as they were for other people. In repeated instances these investigations compel Americans to see their past in a new light; to revise complacent assumptions of national exclusiveness, uniqueness, or excellence; to reconsider commonplace myths and flattering legends; and to put to the test of comparison many other traditional assumptions that are rarely subjected to such scrutiny. It is hoped, therefore, that this book has something to say to the American as well as to the foreign public and that it speaks not only to the professional historian, but to the layman as well.

Four of these essays, the first of the two by the editor and the ones by Thomas C. Cochran, Peter Gay, and George W. Pierson, were read at a session of the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in December 1966 devoted to comparative history. These and the other contributions, however, are published here for the first time.

C. VANN WOODWARD

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A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO AMERICAN HISTORY

1

The Comparability of American History

C. VANN WOODWARD

To limit the subject of historical study within national boundaries is always to invite the charge of narrow perspective and historical nationalism. Historians of all nations have in some measure incurred that risk, but Americans have been accused of more than the normal share of this type of parochialism. They are said to lay excessive claims to distinctiveness and uniqueness in their national experience, to plead immunity from the influence of historical forces that have swept most other nations, to shun or deprecate comparisons between their history and that of other people, and to seek within their own borders all the significant forces that have shaped their history. These charges assume more sharpness and urgency as America approaches total involvement in world history. The striking paradox of a nation that professes historical parochialism and practices cosmopolitan involvement calls for attention from professional historians.

There is no denying a certain justification for such charges. It will appear on further analysis, however, that they have had more validity in some periods than in others, that there have always been exceptions among historians, and that of late a significant countercurrent has asserted itself in American historical thought.

I

From the start of settlement certain aspects of the American experience undoubtedly encouraged among the transplanted Europeans, and to some degree justified, an emphasis on distinctiveness and an aversion to comparison. This was for the settlers in many ways a new world. Both the uniqueness and the influence of free land and the fabled frontier that advanced steadily across the continent for three centuries have probably been exaggerated, but they were impressive evidence of distinctiveness for those involved in the drama. Americans were slower to grasp the distinctive significance of their having skipped the feudal phase of history that was common to all the older nations and not wholly avoided by some of the newer ones. They thought they understood what Alexis de Tocqueville meant, however, when he wrote that they were "born equal." Whatever equality meant, the American brand was assumed at the time to be something distinctive.

Still another historic circumstance that Americans enjoyed for a long and crucial period without fully comprehending it was the blessing of military security that was not only effective but relatively free. It came as a bounty of nature and benign circumstance—the presence of vast oceans and the absence of powerful neighbors. It was free in the sense that it took the place of costly fortifications and even more costly armies and navies that burdened less fortunate people with crushing taxes and harsh discipline. Between the world wars of the eighteenth century and those of the twentieth the only major military burdens Americans bore were due not to foreign attack but to domestic quarrels—the first two of them to establish independence from the mother country, the third to deny independence to the southern states. In the century from 1815 to 1914 the United States enjoyed a security from invasion so complete and so free as to enable the government virtually to dispense with an army and

for the greater part of the period with an effective navy as well. Americans came to regard free security much as they did free land and equality, as a natural right. Since they neither possessed the instruments of power nor incurred the guilt of using them, they fostered the myth (ignoring certain adventures in Mexico and the Caribbean area) that they were an innocent nation in a wicked world and resented comparisons with nations that had to seek with the sword what Americans enjoyed freely and, they believed, without guilt.

The very absence of powerful and rival nations on the borders of the United States or, indeed, within its entire hemisphere was not only another circumstance that set the American experience apart as unique. It also removed a powerful incentive and stimulus for international comparison. Britain, America's nineteenth-century foreign standard of comparison, cultural irritant, and model, was across the wide Atlantic. Nearly all other nations lived constantly with the physical proximity of strong national rivals for territory, influence, prestige, markets, or priority in science, the arts, and technology. While rivalries foster stereotypes, the comparative frame of reference is an ingrained habit of mind and sometimes a condition of survival among rival nations. For America alone among the major nations, this incentive for comparative analysis and reflection was long absent or physically remote.

As "the first new nation," the first to break from colonial status as well as the one to inaugurate the age of democratic revolution, America found no suitable models among her eighteenth-century contemporaries and few precedents for her experiments. Founding fathers often cited models of antiquity and theories of John Locke, but the patriot was impressed with the originality of their statecraft, and insistence on the uniqueness of national institutions became part of conventional patriotism.

Emphasis on uniqueness and distinctiveness, not only of national institutions but of national character, became an important means of asserting and defining national identity. The new nation suffered from an understandable insecurity of identity. Older nations were secure on this score in their common ethnic, or religious, or linguistic, or political heritage. Some nations could lay claim to unity in several of these important sources of identity and a few in all of them. The American nation could claim unity in none of them. With the exception of the aborigines the Americans were immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from all parts of Europe, many parts of Africa, and some parts of Asia. Lacking a common racial, religious, linguistic, or political heritage, they had to look elsewhere for the bases of nationality. Their anxiety over this quest for national identity helps explain what David M. Potter has described as "a somewhat compulsive preoccupation with the question of their Americanism." This preoccupation has found expression in innumerable, often confusing and contradictory efforts to define the national character. Such attempts have naturally emphasized what was assumed to be unique or peculiar to America. The effect of such inquiries was to minimize comparability or to use comparison only to stress distinctiveness.

There were obvious reasons why a young and relatively undeveloped country might well shun comparisons between its history and that of old and mature nations, rich and glamorous with famous names, celebrated achievements, and venerable monuments. The risks of such comparisons were illustrated by Henry James, who undertook in the 1870's to "enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life." His inventory of missing items was not calculated to flatter the pride of patriots, though good Jacksonian democrats might shrug them off:

No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow... no Epsom nor Ascot!

To invite comparison was to risk an exposure of pretensions, a withering of national pride or native complacency. The wide currency of the old chestnut that "comparisons are odious" was understandable under the circumstances. Americans have been

notoriously eager throughout their history for praise of their institutions from foreign visitors, but they have also been sensitive to condescension and fearful of being patronized.

II

If there were forces at work in American history to discourage the comparative view, there were also certain circumstances that had a contrary effect. The very fact that America was a nation composed of the people of many nations meant that nearly all Americans were the heirs of more than one historical heritage the American as well as that of the country or countries from which they or their forebears emigrated. The whole experience of emigration and immigration was charged with tensions of comparison. The decision to leave the Old World for the New often involved agonizing comparisons based on limited information and conjecture. Life for the first-generation immigrants was a daily round of comparisons, rueful or gratifying; and the second generation never ceased to hear "how it was in the Old Country." Well into the twentieth century, first-generation immigrants in vast numbers continued to repeat this exercise and to pass on to succeeding generations their comparative frame of reference. Some of the boldest recent experiments in American comparative history have been the works of historians who come of recent immigrant backgrounds.

Consciousness of the Old Country heritage and habituation to the comparative frame of reference tended to diminish in proportion to the remoteness of arrival in the New World and to decline more markedly after the first-generation immigrants. Identification with the country of origin tended also to be diffused and blurred as various nationalities interbred. Hecter St. John de Crèvecoeur knew an American family in 1782 "whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations." Most of the later generations rather arbitrarily settled upon one country (however many might actually have been involved) as the traditional place of family origin and spoke of themselves as being of "English stock," or

"Italian background," or "Scandinavian extraction." Negro Americans, most of them descended from eighteenth-century arrivals whose African culture was largely obliterated by the slavery experience, were the only ethnic exceptions to the American norm of multiple historical heritage, and interbreeding with whites mitigated the effect of this exception. Diffused, diminished, or conventionalized, the "Old Country" referent remained a part of the mental furniture of many Americans to some degree down through the generations. However cautious and reluctant the professional historian may be about comparisons, the layman has blandly indulged in them as a matter of course.

Among the historians themselves, broadly speaking, there has been over the centuries, until recent years, a declining consciousness of the European origins, context, and connections of American history. In general, and in particular the professionals among them, historians have tended to regard the fragment as the whole, to neglect the larger world for the offshoot, and to restrict their search for the compelling forces and dynamics of American history to their native soil. This has not always been true. Historians in the colonial period, when America was part of a thriving empire and they were closer to their European roots, were as acutely aware of the oppressions and conditions they had fled as they were of new problems they faced, of what they had brought with them as of what they had found on this side of the Atlantic. They knew they were a frontier, but they had not forgotten what they were a frontier of. In some ways the colonials were more cosmopolitan in outlook than their more sophisticated and worldly descendants.

Historians during the early years of the Republic, nationalistic and patriotic though they were, supported their exalted claims for American achievements in freedom, justice, and equality with comparative reference to the Old World, where they found these blessings less prevalent. The romantic school of historians in the middle and later nineteenth century may have been simple in outlook and untutored in method, but their books speak eloquently of broader and more cosmopolitan horizons than those their academic successors normally explored. Francis Parkman's great work, France and England in North America, is full of