

Patriotic political science

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AMERICA was "founded on a rejection of Eurocentrism." So says political scientist James W. Ceaser, and he offers the following proof-text, from the *Federalist Papers*:

The world may politically, as well as geographically, be divided into four parts.... Unhappily for the other three, Europe, by her arms and by her negotiations, by force and by fraud, has in different degrees extended her dominion over them all. Africa, Asia, and America have successively felt her domination. The superiority she has long maintained has tempted her to plume herself as the mistress of the world, and to consider the rest of mankind as created for her benefit. Men admired as profound philosophers have in direct terms attributed to her inhabitants a physical superiority and have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America—that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed awhile in our atmosphere. Facts have too long supported these arrogant pretensions of the European. It belongs to us to vindicate the honor of the human race, and to teach that assuming brother moderation. Let Americans disdain to be the instruments of European greatness! Let the thirteen States, bound together in a strict and indissoluble Union, concur in erecting one great American system superior to the control of all transatlantic force or influence and able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world!

This, the concluding paragraph of *Federalist* 11, has long been a favorite passage of mine. In his new book, *Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought*,[†] Ceaser confirms that my instincts were right. His explication of the passage, which he calls "one of the most splendid texts in American literature," makes clear precisely what is at stake

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in Hamilton's appeal. While Hamilton stirs up the pride of Americans, it is not a parochial or ethnocentric pride. Eurocentrism will receive its comeuppance—but not by the rise of a new centrism (for example, today's Afrocentrism). Instead, this mistress of a supposedly slavish world will be brought to recognize the brotherhood of humankind. The accomplishment of American Union will "vindicate the honor of the human race." As Ceaser explains:

The American experiment interests the world not just because it may humble the European and cast doubt on the idea of a hierarchy of human varieties, but also because it offers an alternative account of the primary source of differentiation in human affairs. The most important differences derive not from distinctions among biological varieties of man, but from differences caused by moral and political factors. The political regime can be decisive. All peoples could take heart in an American success, because it would show what is possible for them to accomplish by political action.

THE founding of America is simultaneously a vindication of universality—the universality of a common human nature—and a vindication of difference (or particularity), since the exercise of the human capacity for freedom takes the form of national self-determination, the choice to form a distinct body politic with a distinct form of government. Ceaser stresses that implicit in the thought and action of the founders is a vindication of political science as well; it is the discipline best able to understand and guide the articulation of the universal and the particular.

The work of vindication, however, is never done. While Hamilton's spirited vision of commercial empire and ascendancy in the hemisphere has been abundantly realized, older brothers are notoriously unteachable. Instead of learning moderation, this dominating brother of ours has exchanged dismissive contempt for corrosive hatred. The contemporary version of those "profound philosophers" mentioned by Hamilton are literary critics and postmodern intellectuals. And they continue to associate America with degeneration—no longer physical, but spiritual. As Ceaser documents, they have "made the very name 'America' a symbol for that which is grotesque, obscene, monstrous, stultifying, stunted, leveling, deadening, deracinating, deforming, rootless, uncultured, and—always in quotation marks—'free.'" After turning America into Americanization, they then view this pure abstraction of theirs as all the more pernicious, because it is not limited to the actual United States. In former times, Europe considered the rest of

mankind as created for her benefit; now, more fearful, Europe has projected this specter, "America," as a force of history bent on recreating the rest of the world (including Europe) in its own image.

For Ceaser, the task of vindicating America, and thereby the honor of the human race, must be taken up anew. This more insidious form of transatlantic influence, based on metaphor, and symbol, and ideology, must be exposed. Just as Hamilton sought to construct the real America, an America that would stand forth as a massive and irrefutable fact, Ceaser seeks to re-construct the real America—"the country where we live, work, struggle, and pray, and where we have forged a system of government that has helped to shape the destiny of the modern world." He proceeds by dismantling the meta-physical America that functions as a negative symbol in the ongoing self-criticism of modernity.

AS the passage from the *Federalist Papers* indicates, the Apolemic symbolization of America began early with the thesis of New World degeneracy. *Reconstructing America* traces this idea from its first appearance in the thought of the Count de Buffon through its subsequent permutations. Although a variety of lesser figures assist in its peregrinations (Cornelius de Pauw, Josiah Nott, Oswald Spengler, Nikolaus Lenau, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Ernst Jünger, Alexandre Kojève, and Jean Baudrillard), the thesis has three essential formulators: Buffon in the eighteenth century, Gobineau in the nineteenth, and Heidegger in the twentieth. As Ceaser shows, none went unopposed. In each era, friends of America rose up to contest this anathematizing of the nation: first the Founders themselves, then Alexis de Tocqueville, and finally Leo Strauss. Accordingly, Ceaser's book is structured as a series of matches between the denunciators and the defenders. As a ringside commentator, Ceaser is unsurpassed. He provides concise, yet highly nuanced and immensely readable, summaries of the positions and strategies of the combatants.

What emerges very sharply is that these contests involve not just specific individuals but specific intellectual disciplines. The fighters come out of opposing corners, and as every boxing fancier knows, a good corner can make all the difference (on this analogy, "corner" would mean something like the knowledge claims and methods of each discipline). Publius, Tocqueville, and Strauss all emerge as practitioners of (or in Strauss's case a theoretical defender of) traditional political

science—of the sort that has been around since Aristotle. A genuine political science regards political life as having a dignity and independence of its own, not resolvable into either sub- or supra-political factors (like biology, race, culture, or the movement of history). It examines “the merits and qualities of different political systems.” Ceaser stresses that “this kind of knowledge has in principle the character of being helpful [note: not determinative] to those who act in political life,” both statesmen and citizens. Inescapably, “political science is a moral science.” And it is one we cannot do without: Its existence is “one of the conditions for maintaining freedom.”

Normally, political science does not go looking for quarrels. It is content to leave rocks to geologists and rats to biologists, so long as regimes are left to it. But then along come these newfangled disciplines (often really ideologies masquerading as disciplines) which purport to replace political analysis proper with other forms of analysis, and which stake claims that undermine political science and, indeed, the possibilities of human freedom.

THE first interloper was Buffon, the founder of anthropology or ethnology. Good natural scientist that he was, Buffon was interested in classifying and accounting for species variation. Mankind was divided (and ranked) along racial lines, with recourse to climate to explain the degeneracy of non-Europeans. Climate was accorded such potency as to affect not only indigenous peoples, but immigrants as well—Europeans themselves were held to retrogress on American soil. According to Ceaser, this thesis, astonishing as it seems, “dominated advanced scientific thinking in Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century.”

The founders of the United States rallied to the New World. Franklin, Adams, Washington, Jefferson, and Hamilton all did their part. At stake were tangible political goods, such as diplomatic recognition, financial support, and immigration figures, as well as the intangible, but no less essential, good of self-respect. Ceaser focuses on Jefferson and Hamilton, finding Hamilton’s response (in his guise as the *Federalist’s* Publius) far preferable, because it is thoroughly political. By contrast, Jefferson gave too much to the positivistic, scientific approach. In essence, he ceded it legitimacy. When it was a matter of refuting the claim that animals in America were smaller and

feebler than their European counterparts, it was perhaps permissible to proceed by inundating Buffon with the bones and skins of American cougars. But Jefferson embraced "natural history" in its application to men as well. One can see the result in his assessment of blacks in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, a book conceived as a response to Buffon. In calling for an end to the manifest injustice of slavery, Jefferson relies on the teaching of natural rights (i.e., political science). But, in his call for the colonization of freed slaves, he turns to the new "scientific" method of natural history, which provides evidence of Negro inferiority and thus argues for the impossibility and undesirability of a biracial society.

Here is Ceaser: "The new science of natural history, [Jefferson] believes, has much to say about no less fundamental a matter than who should be members of which political communities, or about what makes a people. Natural history contains a clear inference about the question of racial mixing." Ceaser exposes the inconsistency of Jefferson's views. His attempt "to graft natural history onto natural rights" was a failure. Unfortunately, it was a failure with pernicious consequences, for Jefferson's embrace of the principle of racial hierarchy damaged the case for natural rights and "helped," writes Ceaser, "to spawn an entire school of American social science based on racialist categories and to legitimate the formation of racialist ideology." By the time of Calhoun, the self-evident truth of human equality, to which Jefferson had given immortal expression, had come to be denounced as a "self-evident lie." To be forced to lay a measure of the blame for that turn of events on the author himself is, as Ceaser acknowledges, a sad duty. But in showing the source of Jefferson's error—the theoretical error of false philosophy, not the personal error of prejudice or hypocrisy—Ceaser frees the foundations of the regime itself from the deviation of one of its founders.

IT was a Frenchman, Arthur de Gobineau, "the Father of Racism," who gave scientific racialism its classic expression in his *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*. For Gobineau, the unit of analysis was not government, but civilization, since that was the unit that allowed for the development of a "pure science" of society, by which Gobineau meant a fully explanatory and fully predictive science. "The most important thing about social life—the rise and fall of civiliza-

tion—is not under the control of politics [which “always contains a degree of indeterminacy”] but obeys naturalistic laws of its own.” The movement of history is fixed and fated, and the monocausal agent of historical change is race, or more accurately, race-mixing. Gobineau’s thesis is that miscegenation spells civilizational death, and miscegenation is the inevitable result of the dialectic of conquest. History is the unfolding process of race suicide. America, which held out initial promise as a land of Aryan purity and renewal, has succumbed. With the arrival of so many ethnic and racial groups, America has melted, mongrelized, and homogenized. It prefigures the destined end of man.

Before presenting Tocqueville’s refutation of Gobineau, Ceaser traces the history of ethnology in America. While Gobineau’s ideas on human inequality were welcomed by both the scientists and the Southern apologists for slavery, his fatalistic historicism was rejected. The Americans, practical as ever, sought an activist racialism. I surely don’t begrudge the outstanding chapter devoted to Tocqueville’s rejoinder to Gobineau. (Given all the intellectual malfeasance on the part of the French, it’s good to remember there was one Frenchman of good sense.) Nonetheless, it might have been nice to include something of the American responses to the Americanized versions of Gobineau. My candidates for inclusion would be Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Lincoln confronted both Calhounites, like Taney, and crypto-Calhounites, like Stephen Douglas. The example of Lincoln, moreover, shows in its full extent the sublime side of the legacy of Jefferson. It was to Jefferson that Lincoln always recurred:

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.

From Frederick Douglass, certainly the address entitled “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered” would merit a close reading, along with “The Nation’s Problem,” Douglass’s powerful response to those African Americans who looked to black race pride (and black power) as the answer to white race pride (and white power).

TODAY, Gobineau's racialism appears among us as in a fun-house mirror—curiously inverted, rippled, and stretched. Here's Ceaser:

Although classical racialism has been rejected ... racist thinking has reemerged at the vanguard of modern intellectual discourse under the aegis of the school known as multiculturalism or the politics of difference. At the same time that this school has been an inveterate foe of classical racist ideology, it has made racial categories the common currency of contemporary thought. While this school claims in one breath that the source of difference in society is cultural, in the next it closely links these cultures to biological, and especially racial, groups.

This latest manifestation of racist discourse recycles the image of America as the locus of evil. Encountering yet another of these tableaux, one begins to suspect that the concept "America" is the secularization of "Hell." Intellectuals can live without the consolations of heaven, but apparently they can't do without a place to toss all that is bad. Ceaser maintains that even thought that is not racist in character, like that of Heidegger, owes its catastrophic depiction of America to the earlier symbolization. As Ceaser explains, in a passage that provides the key to the architecture of the book, "Much of the content of symbolic America today was worked out in racist thinking and then applied to nonracist discussions of technology and culture." For Heidegger and his disciples, America is seen as "the land of diminished intelligence, low tastes, and cultural homogenization," not because of its climate or its racial impurity but because of its distance from "Being." Along the same lines, some people thought Hell was to be avoided because of its insalubrious climate, others because it put one in rather bad company, and yet others—the more spiritualized sort—thought it was not good because it meant separation from God. Perhaps we need to reconstruct the real Hell in order to liberate America from its assigned role as the Abyss.

Ceaser does not suggest this religious route. He sticks to the Hamiltonian path, resolutely seeking to deliver America from these foreign symbolizations and the all-too-real academic garrisons filled with collaborators. He does so wittily, learnedly, persuasively. By book's end, Ceaser has done more than bring to light the questionable genealogy of radical historicism and postmodernism; he has raised the question of their philosophic validity or invalidity. His exposé of the distempered abuse of America, stretching over three centuries, thus leads the reader to the ultimate quarry.