

American History: The Terminological Problem

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American History

The Terminological Problem

JOHN LUKACS

DURING THE 19TH CENTURY the main events in the histories of Europe and the United States were different. In the history of the United States they were the westward movement, the Civil War, and mass immigration. In the history of Europe they were the revolutions of 1820, 1830, 1848, and then the—much more important—unifications of Italy and especially of Germany. These events were, of course, related to some extent, involving both continents, but not greatly so. When we come to the 20th century the opposite is true. In the histories of both the United States and Europe, the main events for both were the two world wars. The rise of the United States as the greatest Atlantic power, the Russian revolution, the Third Reich, the atom bomb, the end of the colonial empires, the establishment of Communist states, the division of Europe and of Germany, the emergence of the two world superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union, the cold war between them: all of these were the consequences of the two world wars, of those two enormous mountain ranges that towered over the historical landscape of the century, in the shadows of which we were living, until now.

The 20th century was a short century. It lasted seventy-five years, from 1914 to 1989, its entire history dominated by the two world wars and their consequences. These consequences include, too, transformations of American society and transformations of American politics.

All of this should be obvious: but for many Americans it was not so obvious for a long time. For at least one American generation (and to many American historians) the most important event was the Depression and what followed it. That led not only to a change in the functions of American government. It involved, in one way or another, the lives of more Americans than had the wars. Yet the Depression and its consequences were less important than the consequences of the two world

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wars. Whereas in Europe (and in England) World War I had already put an end to the limitations of massive government intervention into the economy, in the United States these limitations lasted until 1933, when government intervention was desired by the great majority of the American people. The Depression, and the reforms of the New Deal, brought no radical changes in American ideas and beliefs. (As a matter of fact, it often brought American families closer together, as both certain statistics and the reminiscences of certain thoughtful Americans reveal.) In sum, the transformations of American government and society consequent to the two world wars (and especially to World War II) were more decisive, in the long run more drastic, and—perhaps—less ineluctable than were the changes following the economic crisis of 1929–33.

The movement of American thoughts and beliefs toward a global involvement began to take form in the 1890s. This represented a profound, though gradual, change in the character of those beliefs. During the first one hundred years of American independence, most Americans believed that the destiny of the United States was to build a new world that was, and ought to be, different from the old world of Europe. During the next one hundred years, Americans came to believe that the United States was, and should be, the advanced model for the rest of the world. In many ways this happened: the Americanization of the world, ranging all the way from the adoption of American governmental practices to the adoption of American popular culture, made the 20th century an American century. Add to this the remarkable fact (seldom seen thus by either American or European historians) that the American entry into the European war in 1917 was a more important—meaning: more consequential—event than the Russian revolution in that year. So it was, both in the short and in the long run. In the short run, in 1917–18, Russia's withdrawal from the war did not decide its outcome, whereas America's entry did. In the long run Lenin's ideas about proletarian class-consciousness and the prospects of international revolution had a lesser effect on the world than had some of the ideas perpetrated by Wilson, that pale professor-president—including his propagation of national self-determination, instrumental in the destruction of entire countries more than seventy years ago, and continuing to be instrumental in our day. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*.

At any rate, when Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*, the United States was the only democratic country in the world; whereas in the 20th century the democratization of many other societies should call for another work, a sort of Tocqueville in reverse: *American* democracy. Yes, there are elements in the democracy of the United States that make it different from, say, that of England or Germany or Spain or Japan, all democracies now. But: were the main political realities in American

history still unique during the 20th century, essentially different from those of Europe? Many Americans, including American historians, still think so. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that they were not.

II

During the 19th century they *were* different. Yes, even during that century many of the nations of Europe were moving in the direction of democracy, albeit more slowly than the United States. Yes, the so-called Industrial Revolution (in reality, an evolution and not a revolution) affected countries in both continents. But during the 19th century the history of the United States was already the history of a people; whereas European history in the 19th century was still predominantly the history of states. (I am leaving aside the crucial term *nation* to which I shall turn in a moment.)

The history of politics is the history of words. Tocqueville knew this when, 160 years ago, drawing the conclusion in part from his American experiences, he wrote that “a new science of politics is necessary for a new world.” For 160 years this has not been really forthcoming, with the principal consequence that our political vocabulary has become antiquated and corroded, at times beyond usefulness, to the extent where not only confusion but corruption sets in.

It is at least remarkable that our present political terminology, in English, became current shortly before Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*. Of the three commonly used terms, the adjective *radical* is the only old English one. The political noun *liberal* (a positive and approbatory English adjective at that time, but only in a non-political sense) appeared in England in the 1820s; it was a political word borrowed from Spain. (For a few years the English used it in its Spanish form—that is, “*our Liberales*.”) It was in the 1820s, too, that *conservative*, as a political term, was beginning to be employed in England; and it took another decade and a half before the Tory party began to call itself the Conservative one.

More remarkable is the fact that these terms—as well as those of *Right* and *Left*—rarely appeared in American political usage until well after the Civil War. The reason for this is simple. There was a fundamental difference between the United States and Europe, including England. All over Europe and England the debate and the struggle in most of the 19th century involved conservatives versus liberals. In the United States it did not. There was no conservative party in America. The very word *conservative* had a pejorative tinge in American usage when applied to politics (and even to other matters, on occasion). It may be argued that the Federalists were an American conservative party until

their demise after 1816, or that the South was “conservative” when compared to the North (some of the southern political theorists and spokesmen began to employ the term in a positive sense, here and there, during the 1850s). In reality, they were not. Both the Federalists in the period 1810–20 and the Southerners in the 1850s were a peculiarly American mix of conservatives and radicals: both of them professed to believe in the sovereignty of the people—while in Europe no conservatives, and not even all liberals, had, as yet, accepted that. It was not until after the middle of the 20th century—in 1954–55—that *conservative*, in the United States, began to acquire a positive meaning, and that a “conservative” political movement in the United States began to rise—one of the results of the decline of liberalism in America.

But in Europe the decline of liberalism had begun already around 1870. This has been remarked, and occasionally described by some European (and especially British) historians. They saw the change from “classical”—that is, individualist liberalism—through the acceptance of universal suffrage, toward mass democracy, indeed toward the welfare state. What they often did not see was that after 1870 the entire antithesis of conservatism and liberalism (and, in some ways, that of Right and Left) was losing its meaning. Until about 1870 in England, and in much of Europe, the main debate and struggle was the one between conservatives and liberals. After 1870 this was less and less the case.

There were two factors in this transformation. One (and perhaps the less important) factor was that the advocacies of conservatives and liberals had begun to overlap. The British and European conservatives were becoming liberals, since they were now prone to accept (and were even willing to profit from) the functioning of mass democracy, including extensions of universal suffrage, the gradual disestablishment of state churches, the abolition of censorships of various kinds, and the predominance of industry over agriculture. The remaining old-fashioned liberals, on the other hand, had become conservatives, at least in the broad sense of that word. The liberal parties were still, by and large, the parties of reform, but less and less so; and their opposition to authority evoked fewer and fewer echoes in the minds of the masses. (There were exceptions to this, of course, old-fashioned liberals such as Gladstone or a newer type such as Lloyd George who was, in reality, a nationalist radical of sorts.) Something else had begun to appear, with plentiful echoes among the masses. This was the novel phenomenon of popular nationalism (misunderstood and ignored by Marx, who could not distinguish the *nation* from the *state*).

That was the second, and probably more important, factor of the piecemeal fading of the great conservative-liberal division. Unlike the Hegelian (or Marxian) scheme, the main result of the fading of the

antithesis was not that of a new and transcendent synthesis. In reality, conservatism versus liberalism was being replaced by a new and near-universal antithesis—antithesis at first, conjunction afterward—of nationalism and socialism. For about one hundred years, from 1770 to 1870, the main political realities were those of conservatism and liberalism, their struggles and their relationships. For the next hundred years after 1870 these were replaced by nationalism and socialism.

About socialism there is not much to say, since its development has been (or, rather, should be) obvious. Democracy, as Tocqueville saw, involves the propagation and the extension of equality even more than that of liberty. The welfare state was in the making a generation before, say, Franklin Roosevelt or Léon Blum, by such diverse men as Bismarck or Theodore Roosevelt. Nothing is inevitable in history; but by the beginning of the 20th century the inclinations of governments—whether freely elected or not—to provide for the welfare of the majority of their peoples was about as inevitable as anything. In 1894 Sir William Harcourt, an old and respected liberal leader in the House of Commons, uttered his celebrated and melancholy exclamation: “We are all Socialists now!” Only it was national, not international, socialism that was in the making. The first of these adjectives turned out to be more important than the second. “Socialism” was becoming a general phenomenon; but the word was avoided in certain countries and qualified in others. In England, the conscious and cautious policy of the early Labour movement to eschew, at least for a while, the very word *socialist* attests to this. Another example was the emergence of “Christian” socialists in central Europe. Despite their assertion of respect for the positive social teachings of the Catholic church (anti-Marxist as well as anti-capitalist), the new political adjective *Christian* was a nationalist term, negative and exclusive, meaning non-Jewish, non-liberal, non-Marxist, non-cosmopolitan, non-international. Where the socialists had a bad reputation this was not because they were dangerous radicals; they were dangerous because they were anti-national.

Our problem with “nationalism,” perhaps especially in English, is more complicated. The reason for this is its relatively late appearance in English (also in some other European languages)—an indication, in itself, that nationalism is a very modern, and not at all a reactionary, phenomenon. *Nationalism*, in English, appeared first in 1844 (*OED*), by and large within the same quarter century when *conservative*, *liberal*, and *socialism* (as well as *capitalism*: 1854 [*OED*]) acquired their political meaning. Among all of these terms, the reality of nationalism is the least outdated, since it has proved to be the most enduring and powerful of all of them.

That *nationalism* differs—and often profoundly—from *patriotism* is

something to which we should have paid more attention, especially in the United States where the two terms are still regrettably confused: when Americans speak of a super-patriot they really mean an extreme nationalist. When Dr. Johnson pronounced his celebrated phrase, "Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels," he meant nationalism, since the latter word in English did not yet exist. When Hitler, writing about his youth in *Mein Kampf*, said that "I was a nationalist; but I was not a patriot," he knew exactly what he meant, and so ought we. Patriotism (as George Orwell noted in one of the few extant essays about its distinction from nationalism) is defensive, while nationalism is aggressive; patriotism is rooted to the land, to a particular country, while nationalism appeals to the myth of a people, indeed to a majority; patriotism is traditionalist, nationalism is populist. Patriotism is not a substitute for a religious faith, whereas nationalism often is; it may fill the emotional—and at least superficially spiritual—needs of people. It may be combined with hatred. (As Chesterton wisely said, it is not love, which is personal and particular, but hatred that unites otherwise disparate men. "The jingo nationalist," said Duff Cooper, "is always the first to denounce his fellow countrymen as traitors.")

One hundred years ago it seemed that nationalism and socialism were antitheses, respectively on the far Right and the far Left of the political spectrum. The reason for this was not that of the difference between their economic, or even social, ideas. The reason was that socialists, at that time, were internationalists, anchored in the belief that class-consciousness was stronger than the sense of nationality. They were wrong. The Marxist idea failed—and how thoroughly!—not by 1989, at the end of the 20th century, but in 1914, at its very beginning, when international socialism melted away in the heat of national enthusiasms like a pat of cold margarine in a hot skillet; when it appeared that a German (or a French or a British or an American) workingman had almost nothing in common with workingmen of another nation, whereas he had plenty in common with managers or even industrialists within his own nation. But already a few years before 1914 Mussolini, the young radical socialist and the brains of the Italian Socialist party, discovered that he was an Italian first and a socialist second—that is, a nationalist, and not an internationalist, socialist. All of this corresponded to another important change in the political vocabulary of the Western world. During the 19th (and late 18th) centuries, the words *people* and *popular* belonged only to the Left. Some time after 1890 these terms (in Germany, Austria, and also elsewhere) were beginning to be appropriated by the Right. In 1914, when he broke with the Italian Socialist party, Mussolini named his new nationalist newspaper *Popolo d'Italia*. This was five years before he would announce a

new party, the Fascist one, and five years before Hitler joined a small National Socialist—*völkisch*, that is, populist—party in Munich. National socialism (and not only in Germany) was becoming a general phenomenon. The universal application of the adjective “Fascist” to what people see as “the extreme Right” is wrong, and it confuses the issue. The worldwide phenomenon was not Fascism; it was national socialism. Neither Hitler nor Stalin were Fascists; both of them were extreme nationalists, though the latter was careful not to admit this openly.

But this is not an article about the terminology of dictatorships. Hitler was only one of many who realized that nationality was more important than class, and that nationalism was more powerful than internationalism. Hitler was not the founder of National Socialism, not even in Germany; but he recognized the potential marriage of nationalism with socialism, and also the practical—and not merely rhetorical—primacy of nationalism within that marriage. He also knew that old-fashioned capitalism was gone: that belonged to the 19th century. (Before he had come to power someone asked him whether he would nationalize the German industries. “Why should I nationalize them?” he said. “I shall nationalize the people.” Whether Krupp, in the 1930s, was nationalized under Hitler or not—and it wasn’t—made as little difference as whether General Electric in the 1950s, whose main products under Eisenhower were no longer toasters but space rockets, was nationalized or not.) The economic structure that Hitler had in mind (and achieved) had few of the characteristics of either Marxian or state socialism; but it could not be called capitalist either.

Fifty years later nationalism still remains the most potent political force in the world. In this sense national socialism survived Hitler. Every state in the world has become a welfare state. Whether they call themselves socialist or not does not matter much. Of course the proportions of the compound of nationalism and socialism vary from country to country; but the compound is there, and even where Social Democratic parties rule, it is the national feeling of the people that really matters. What was defeated in 1945, together with Hitler, was his German National Socialism: a cruel and radical and hate-ridden version of nationalist socialism. Elsewhere nationalism and socialism were brought together, reconciled and compounded, without violence and hatred and war. International socialism remains a mirage. We are, all, national socialists now.

That in the history of the 20th century the prevalence of this compound—and the primacy of nationalism within it—is as applicable to the United States as it is to Europe is the main argument of this article, to the explanation and illustration of which I must now turn.

III

The struggle between American nationalism and American socialism, their animosities and their combinations, are a—if not *the*—principal reality in American political history during the last hundred years.

Because of the American emphasis on equality, Tocqueville already foresaw that all of American “individualism” notwithstanding, democratic societies, including the United States, would eventually tend toward welfare states, administered by huge bureaucracies. Tocqueville (and in this he was not alone among foreign observers of the American scene at the time) noted, too, the extreme pride of Americans in their country and in its political system, including their often hyperbolic rhetoric. But Tocqueville did not yet distinguish between patriotism and nationalism (understandably, since the latter term did not appear until about the middle of the 19th century). Only recently did a thoughtful American historian (James McPherson) draw attention to the evolution of Lincoln’s rhetoric during the Civil War, before and at the beginning of which Lincoln is speaking mostly of *Union*, while this usage gradually gives way to his evocation of the American *nation*.

This, of course, corresponds to the coalescing opinion among American historians to the effect that among all of the multifarious and confused causes of the Civil War the principal one was not slavery but secession; what Lincoln—and, indeed, the majority of his countrymen (as the electoral statistics of 1860, too, show)—would not tolerate was the breakup of the powerful nation into two separate states, whether peacefully or not. Notwithstanding all of the bitterness between South and North that continued after the Civil War, no Southerner, after 1865, would advocate secession again: but not only because of the shattering experience of the South’s defeat in 1865. After the Civil War the South (partly because of its military traditions) became one of the most, if not the most, nationalistic portions of the United States; and so it remained. The war against Spain in 1898 had the enthusiastic support of the South. Most of the American pacifists and anti-imperialists came not from the South but from the North.

“Your Constitution,” Macaulay wrote shortly before the Civil War, “is all sail and no anchor.” This proved not to be the case in the long run, but it was true in the short run: the Constitution proved not to be strong enough to avoid the breakup of the Union in 1861. What, then, many Americans recognized after the Civil War was that many of the American freedoms inscribed in the Constitution were either inadequate or undefined or both; that the existential and physical welfare of many Americans was endangered either by corrupt interpretations or by a maleficent neglect of those freedoms; that, in sum, the American democracy had

developed its particular social ailments and political problems. The result was what American historians, such as Richard Hofstadter, would describe later as the Age of Reform. The principal propagators—and, often, agents—of those reforms were the Socialists and the Progressives and the Populists. I am listing them not in the chronological order of their appearance, and not according to their political weight (or influence) but in the descending order of their endurance. One hundred years after their appearance the Socialists have, by and large, disappeared from the American political scene. The Progressives, too—recently, for the first time in three hundred years, many Americans have begun to question the very word *progress*, which has lost much of its earlier and universal shine. Yet American populism, albeit in somewhat changed forms, is still very much with us.

The American Socialist party did not get very far (by which I mean that while there was a moderate rise in its fortunes until 1912, the vast majority of the American working class refused to vote for it). This is at least remarkable because in few countries of the world were the unbridled ravages of capitalist greed as evident as in the United States at the time. But the main reason why socialism was unpopular in America was not because individualism or free enterprise or economic freedom were traditional American beliefs strongly embedded in the minds of the American working class. The Socialists were unpopular in America because they were (or at least they had the reputation of being) internationalist—that is, not sufficiently nationalist. American workingmen did not like American capitalists either. In that distrust, too, there was something deeper than an economic motive: they saw Wall Street and the Eastern financial establishment as dangerously cosmopolitan and un-American. (We are accustomed to attributing the origins of this peculiarly American usage of *un-Americanism* to the American right wing, especially after World War I; yet striking American workers would on occasion call their employers “un-American”—for example, as early as 1903, during the Cripple Creek crisis.)

Many American historians, including Richard Hofstadter, thought and wrote that the governing ideology of the era of the robber barons, of untrammelled capitalism in America, was that of Social Darwinism. I am inclined to believe that they were wrong. The belief, and the propagation of “the survival of the fittest” was not a typically American (it was much more typically a German) idea. What Americans took from Darwinism (or, more precisely, a much older American belief that Darwinism seemed to confirm) was the great cloudy idea of Evolution, or call it Progress. The American Progressives, beginning to coalesce around 1880, exercised as they were by the corruptions of capitalism among the fittest of Americans, believed in Evolution wholeheartedly; it was

inseparable from their belief in, and addiction to, Progress. They believed that when and where American democracy was imperfect, this was owing to insufficient education and to insufficient social and political planning. Consequently they were proponents of progressive improvement: not only of better but also of more government, of progressive education, of progressive law, in the end including international law. Thus, as time went on, the ideas and the propositions of the American Progressives differed less and less from—indeed, they often became identical with—those of American liberals and American Socialists. Many of the Progressive intellectuals became left-wingers. Those were the main reasons for the Progressives' ultimate demise. They, too, were insufficiently nationalist.

The American party, or movement, that was unabashedly nationalist from beginning to end, was Populist. The Populists believed that the trouble with American democracy was that it was not democratic enough, that the people must have more authority, that they must govern and rule. (The Progressives *seemed* to agree—but what they *really* believed was that there ought to be more authority for the educators of the people.) The social, the ethnic, the regional, the religious provenances of the Populists and the Progressives were very different; but for a while they were allied, or at least they were not in direct conflict with each other. From about 1896 to 1912 (with the partial exception of 1904) most Populists voted Democratic while most Progressives were Republicans; but during World War I these relative associations began to wash away. The break between Populists and Progressives came in 1917, when most Progressives (Republicans as well as Democrats) had become committed internationalists, championing the American intervention in the War to End All Wars, while among the minority of congressmen and senators who opposed the war, the majority were actual, or former, Populists. Like their subsequent hero Henry Ford, the Populists incarnated the peculiar American mixture of conservatism and radicalism.

Neither the Populists nor the Progressives knew much history. Henry Ford's famous "History is bunk" as well as the Populist state legislatures' radically nationalist censorship of history textbooks and of history teaching show this; but so does the dictum by Julius Klein, Herbert Hoover's Progressive Assistant Secretary of Commerce in 1928: "Tradition is the enemy of Progress." During their ridiculous confrontation at the Scopes Trial in 1925, William Jennings Bryan, the Populist protagonist, proclaimed his unhistorical belief in the Bible, while Clarence Darrow, the Progressive protagonist, proclaimed his, no less unhistorical, belief in Science. For a brief time—from 1932 until about 1935—American progressivism and American populism seemed to march together again, supporting Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. But

that soon ceased to be. Roosevelt's most dangerous adversaries were not the candidates whom the Republican party fielded against him in the presidential elections of 1936, 1940, 1944; they were Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin, incarnating the potential of mass movements, populists both. The final, and irrevocable, break between American Populism and American Progressivism would then coincide with the great division among Americans as World War II approached, when the deepest of divisions were not between Republicans and Democrats, not between relative conservatives and relative liberals, not between Right and Left, but between so-called isolationists and so-called internationalists. The ideology of the former was strongly Populist, and of the latter mostly Progressive. The Progressives were mostly Democrats now, American international socialists of a sort. The Populists were American national socialists to a man (or woman).

Here I must emphasize again the concordances of European and American history. During that most decisive and dramatic quarter of our century, 1920 to 1945, the history of Europe *and* of the United States (and of many other parts of the globe, too) was marked by the struggle of three forces. There was Western parliamentary democracy, incarnated by the English-speaking nations and by some states in Western Europe. There was Communism, incarnated and represented by the Soviet Union alone. And there was a new force, radical nationalism, principally (though not solely) incarnated by National Socialist Germany. For a while the latter was the most powerful one; as World War II proved, neither the American-British empires nor the Soviet Union could defeat it; for its destruction the unusual alliance of democrats and Communists was needed. That, however, is not my main point here. The main point is that this triangular contest appeared *within* the politics—that is, within the beliefs and tendencies and allegiances of people—of many nations, including the United States. Despite the crisis of the capitalist order, the American Communists remained a minuscule minority even in 1932 (though not minuscule among American intellectuals); and during the war they were allied with left-wing Democrats—that is, with some of the remnant Progressives. Their main enemies (and, as we have seen, Roosevelt's main enemies) were the nationalist Populists (whom Hitler once, in June 1940, correctly designated as American radical nationalists). Neither the sectarian quarrels among the conventicles of the American Left nor the inchoate character of the two large American political parties must obscure this issue. There were nationalist populists in both parties, including Anglophobes among the Democrats; but Roosevelt's strongest opposition came not from the Left but from the nationalists of the Right—a new kind of Right. Only a few days before Pearl Harbor, Senator Robert A. Taft (who even after the war would

claim that the war against Hitler's Germany was a mistake) emphatically said that he was standing for American populism at its best.

The new world that came about with the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945 may have meant the final defeat and disappearance of American isolationism; but isolationism itself was an imprecise term (most of those who had opposed intervention against Germany and National Socialism were soon enthusiastic advocates of an international crusade against Russia and Communism). That was not really the issue. Hitler and his National Socialism were gone; but nationalism was not. Indeed, nationalism remained the principal political force in the world—and so it is still. Socialism, especially in the United States, ceased to be an issue. By 1948, latest by 1952, the Republican party accepted all of the institutions of the welfare state that had been erected by the New Deal. Since that time, all superficial rhetoric and appearances notwithstanding, the deep differences between the two political parties have never been economic. In every presidential election since 1948, the majority voted for the—seemingly—more nationalist candidate. In 1948, despite the Democrats' increasing unpopularity, the memories of the New Deal were still close enough for Democratic working people to produce for Truman a narrow victory over Dewey (not to speak of the circumstance that Truman gave the impression of being at least as much, if not more, of a solid American than was his opponent). But in 1952 large masses of the same people for whom Roosevelt had provided during the Depression deserted the Democratic party; in 1952 almost *any* Republican could have defeated Stevenson or Truman. Anti-Communism, that essential ingredient of populist nationalism, contributed to that, often and strongly, though not always decisively. Joe McCarthy was a radical nationalist and populist (he once proposed the nationalization of insurance), but people turned away from him after a few years; people voted for John Kennedy in 1960, and they turned down Goldwater in 1964. These were exceptions that prove the rule. In the United States—as also in other countries—most people do *not* always vote for the party or for the candidate who is the most nationalist; but they will *not* vote for a party or for a candidate that does not seem to be sufficiently—or convincingly—nationalist.

This is not the place for an examination of the psychology of American nationalism. We must keep in mind, too—in addition to the earlier stated difference between nationalism and patriotism—that their sentiments often overlap and often within the same person. Nationalism is not always, and not necessarily, wrong. Historically, too, it may be argued that during the 19th century the comparison between the relative nationalism of the candidates was the principal issue in less than half of the presidential elections. Even in 1932, 1936, 1940, 1944, people did

not vote for Roosevelt because he was (or seemed to be) the more nationalist candidate. Yet it is the—seemingly—insufficient nationalism (together with the increasingly unpopular liberalism) of the Democrats that explains the almost unbroken decline of their presidential fortunes during the last forty years.

Hence the necessary consideration of a more accurate political terminology, reflecting the historical realities of the last one hundred years. Our political commentators and political scientists still say that the American two-party system differs from that of the European democracies, and even from that of England. This may be true: but it is not true enough. Yes: even in England, unlike here, the ideologies and the political advocacies of the two great parties seldom overlap; there have also been great changes in the configurations of the two or three principal English parties during the last hundred years, whereas in the United States the configuration, since 1860, has remained the same: two huge parties, Republicans and Democrats. We do not have much of a Socialist party, and we do not have a radical Nationalist one. What we have are the American compounds of national socialism: *the Republicans who are more nationalist than socialist, and the Democrats who are more socialist than nationalist*—whence the rise of the former and the decline of the latter during the last forty-odd years.

IV

Much of this corresponds with what may be the most significant development in American politics in the last hundred years. This is the emergence of a “conservative” movement and ideology in the 1950s. (*That* decade—and not the 1960s—was the turning point in the political history and in the character of the institutions of the United States during the second half of this century.) For two hundred years there was no conservative party in the United States. There is one now: the Republicans. The very word *conservative* was avoided by every American politician as late as 1950 (when even Taft said on one occasion that he was not a conservative but an “old-fashioned liberal”); but by the end of the 1950s, Eisenhower, that supreme opportunist, declared that he was a “conservative.” That had ceased to be a pejorative, a controversial, or even a dubious term. By 1980 more Americans designated themselves as “conservatives” than as “liberals”—partly because of some of the evident mistakes and excesses of American liberals, partly because of the positive reputation that some American conservatives had acquired, slowly but surely. However, let me repeat: both *conservative* and *liberal* are long outdated terms, well beyond the extent of their first compromising corruptions.

We have seen that, long before the conservatives' appearance, the nationalist populists had moved from the Democratic to the Republican ranks. The American "conservatives" (whose movement began as an unabashedly radical McCarthyite movement) have been overwhelmingly nationalist, and populist too. Thus their propaganda against "Big Government" has been inconsistent. (I am leaving aside the—increasingly significant—argument that our present "conservatives" are opposed to conservation—that is, to an attachment to land that is at least as patriotic as it is "environmental.") They may have argued against bureaucratic extensions of the welfare state—that is, against an American version of state socialism—but they have been enthusiastic advocates of extending the power and the purse of an imperial presidency (the size of the White House staff alone was six times larger under Reagan than under Roosevelt at the peak of World War II), of the FBI, the CIA, and, of course, of the American armed forces. The original core of the American conservatives consisted of the isolationists who had opposed siding with the British against Hitler during World War II; but their isolationism disappeared soon, while their nationalism grew even stronger than it had been before. During the 1950s (as Section Nine of the Republican party platform in 1956 shows: it called for the extension of American air and naval bases "strategically dispersed around the world") the so-called "conservative" party had become the advocate of American intervention throughout the globe, and then into space.

I need not draw further attention to the inaccuracy of the "conservative" usage. Yet it is indisputable that the popular nationalism avowed by the conservatives has often accorded with the preferences of the majority of Americans. That Americans' electoral preferences are the result of their economic motives, that they vote with their pocketbooks, has become less and less true (if it ever was true at all); and so is that other half-truth, that Americans are not really interested in foreign policy—that is, in their country's place in the world. In the midst of the Depression, in 1932, a poll showed that a majority of Americans wanted to increase the size of the armed forces, that they were willing to pay for "defense." As I write this my eye is caught by an article in the *New York Times* (July 14, 1991) stating that 62 percent of the people polled now favor Republicans and only 52 percent favor the Democrats; and while 51 percent say that Democrats, rather than Republicans (only 22 percent state that) are likely to improve the American health-care system, the greatest discrepancy favoring the Republicans is shown in the answers of people to the question: "Which party is more likely to make sure U.S. military defenses are strong?" Sixty-one percent say that it is the Republicans, and only 19 percent say the Democrats—and, as some of

the comments of the people interviewed show, *that* is what really counts.

The history of American nationalism is still to be written. Whoever writes it ought to be aware of its varieties and mutations, including the differences between a traditionalist patriot and a radical nationalist, and including the differences (so often confused by historians of immigration) between nativism and nationalism, among other things. That historian must be aware, too, that at the very time when “nationalism” became a popular slogan in the United States, proposed as it was by Theodore Roosevelt, it meant something quite different from the nationalism current in our day. Despite Roosevelt’s Big Stick reputation, his propagation of an American nationalism was not at all populist, and his employment of the term had nothing to do with foreign policy. By emphasizing an “American nationalism” Theodore Roosevelt was anxious to promote the cohesion of the nation, worried as he was (and, let me add, worried as we ought to be) about the changing ethnic composition of the American nation. That other, more recent, phenomenon, when American nationalism was equated with anti-Communism, is largely over, too. The history of Reagan’s foreign policy alone proves that; but the unabashedly sentimental and emotional nationalism represented by Ronald Reagan is still widespread and strong (as the excessive popular reaction to the Gulf War shows). Indeed it seems that nationalism, with its symbols and its functional rhetoric, may be the only religion that masses of otherwise inchoate Americans have in common.

The appeal of socialism is long gone, and nationalism is as strong as ever. Within their compound, nationalism proved to be the more enduring element. However, it behooves this historian to propose a last observation. Nationalism, though still strong, will not last forever—surely not in the forms in which it has appeared during most of the 20th century. That century is now over. The thesis of this article was that while in the 19th century the near-universal political phenomenon was the struggle between conservatism and liberalism, leading to their eventual overlapping, in the 20th century it was that of the relationship of nationalism and socialism. That will not last forever, for two reasons. One is the near-final completion of the earlier socialist agenda: since the welfare state is a universal reality now, the conflicts and the compounds of nationalism and socialism have lost much of their meaning. The other is the gradual fading of the power of the state, by which I mean the authority of centralized government.

All over the world, especially in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, but within the regionalist movements in Western Europe, too, nationalism has been devolving into ethnic tribalism. Given the changing ethnic composition of the American people, there is, alas, reason to

fear that American nationalism, too, may devolve into tribal struggles of a peculiarly American kind. (Another factor may be the gradual growth of supernational bureaucratic authorities—the ultimate authority and efficiency of which, however, are still far away.) But this question about the primacy of the state appeared even earlier. It marked one of the few significant differences between the Fascist and National Socialist dictatorships. To Hitler, the populist, “the people” came before “the state,” both hierarchically and historically as he once said (“In the beginning was the *Volk*, and only then came the *Reich*”). To Mussolini, Fascist nationalism meant the complete obedience of people to the state. Yet the centralized state was, after all, a product of the Modern Age, beginning four or five centuries ago. (Consider the title of Burckhardt’s famous chapter in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*: “The State as a Work of Art.” It surely is not much of a work of art now.) And now, when not only the 20th century but much of the entire so-called Modern Age is passing, there are many signs suggesting that something else will replace the authority and the power of the centralized and sovereign national states of the world. We are, all, national socialists now; but not for long.