

Who We Are: Constructivism and the Dual Personality of American Nationalism

by Michael A. Thomas

Constructivism, as an approach to the study of nationalism, best explains American identity as perceptions of ourselves and our destinies “constructed” or shaped through messages from various media. In America, various messages and myths based on ideas rather than ethnicity continually shape identity. Formation identity involves debate between competing liberal and civic ideologies. In addition, American national identity finds beginnings in religious imagery and linguistic commonality. Key American values such as equality receive lip service and then come under attack as forces attempt to define a uniform American identity in the name of cultural assimilation. Counterattacks come as multiculturalists see protection of liberty and individuality as key to American identity. Enigmatic, contradictory and continuously changing, American nationalism at times becomes a battle between extremes.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AS AN APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF NATIONALISM

Nationalism is the embodiment of sovereignty, self-determination and autonomy for groups. To the extent that these ideals find translation into political reality, nations are born and destinies are forged. As an approach to studying nationalism, constructivism maintains that communities are formed with ideas, becoming a function of imagination and that identities continue to evolve over time with exposure to media influences. In other words, constructivists believe that print media, technology and standardized language become building blocks for nationalism in an ever-impersonal society. In America, media images create constant evolution and metamorphosis of perceptions. As such, printed, broadcasted and spoken media become the battlefield for competing ideologies seeking to define American identity. Sometimes this bears electoral implications as in California's Proposition 187 during the 1994 election cycle. On the surface, American nationalism rejects notions of ethnic requirements for inclusion, although practice reveals that exclusion sometimes carries the day. Americans appreciate individual cultures, but believe that assimilation into one national culture requires relinquishment of foreign practices and ethnicity.

Despite walking this tightrope between belief and action, American nationalism becomes an imagined “civic ethnicity”

best explained by constructivism. American identity finds a basis in competition between political ideas about roles of government, namely civic thought coupled with liberal ideology, belief in a national mission heavily influenced by religious symbols, and the battle of cultural uniformity with diversity.

POLITICAL IDEAS DEFINING AMERICAN IDENTITY

AMERICAN IDENTITY DEFINED IN TERMS OF INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

American identity rests on notions of freedom, rights, self-government and insuring equality of opportunity to pursue self-interest. Michael Barone believes that “the path of progress” involves finding nationalism that works to build “decent societies and a peaceful world,” namely that of America (1993, 52). He states that American nationalism

is far better than any other, because it has room for all the rest. The definition of an American has proved through our history to be happily elastic: [A]nyone can belong. American-ness has as its source not a plot of ground [n]or a strand of genes, but a set of principles which assert the moral equality and human rights of every person (Barone 1993, 52).

Jack Citrin, Ernst Haas, Christopher Muste and Beth Reingold agree that American identity rises from loyalty to ideas. They claim that, “in most countries, national identity is expressed in terms of common linguistic, religious, and racial characteristics, or what collectively we call ethnicity” (Citrin et al. 1994, 6). However, adding to Barone they state that American identity finds basis in ideas and beliefs.

Michael A. Thomas is a recent Political Science graduate from the University of Utah. He is now a student at the University of Oregon School of Law.

The foundations of American identity, however, [are] fundamentally different. Not ethnicity, but a commitment to liberal political principles...held out by the founding elite as the leaven of American identity. Whatever one's ancestry or background, to be an American one had only to adhere to a set of ideals: liberty, individualism, popular sovereignty, and egalitarianism defined as equality of opportunity and respect...(Citrin, et al. 1994, 6).

Belief in equality of opportunity, conditional upon obedience to rules and norms leads American nationalism to being available for anyone willing to consent to those rules. One metaphor portrays America as "God's Crucible, the great melting pot where all the races...are melting and reforming!" (Citrin et al. 1994, 7). Such language proves inclusive, positioning America as a country where success results from merit rather than ancestry or ethnicity. Rogers M. Smith contributes the view that "whenever the United States becomes severely divided, the nation's liberal democratic ideals serve to restore unity more inclusively than a focus on common ancestors, language or religion would permit" (R. Smith 1988, 225). Though strengths exist, inconsistencies crop up when one examines the notion that theory translates into practice only to some extent. Rogers Smith also states that "there is always a gulf between these principles and the practices of American institutions" (1988, 226). He maintains that

adherence to the "American Creed," either as a matter of law or of social psychology, is at best a half-truth. If it were so, this conception of American nationality should be clearly embodied in the nation's laws governing citizenship. Instead, [lawmakers] have established and sometimes later reestablished civic laws based on non-liberal ideals (R. Smith 1988, 226-27).

Such inconsistencies result from debate between the desire for individual rights and the desire to be a part of a greater whole. Two strains of antithetical political thought, one embracing protection of individual rights and the other communitarianism, explain this conflict.

COMPETING IDEOLOGIES OF RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
Liberalism and Civic Republicanism. American nationalism results from competing beliefs about roles of government, namely classical liberalism and civic republicanism. Classical liberalism postulates that government exists to protect rights and property of individuals. According to this view, humans come into a state of nature with birth, possessing certain rights which government exists to protect. As humans prove self-interested, governments protect individuals from each other by consent from the governed. Intervention becomes necessary only in protecting individual freedoms to pursue self-interests of life, liberty and property. Civic republicans on the other hand believe that governments exist to grant rights protected by political participation. Here, rights are created rather than innate. Each strain of thought finds expression in pre-Revolutionary America, both contributing to advocacy for the Revolutionary War, and later forming feelings of sovereignty and self-determination.

John Locke, American Liberalism and the Language of Rights. Writings of John Locke in the seventeenth-century use the language of rights and consent that become essential for legitimate government. He claims that "the liberty of man in society is to be under no other legislative power but that established by consent in the commonwealth, nor under dominion of any will but what the legislative shall enact according to the trust put in it..." (Locke 1960, 18). According to Locke, freedom results from putting trust in elective bodies who in turn exercise the will of the people in protecting individual self-interest. To Locke, government exists at the pleasure of the governed.

Men being, as has been said, by nature all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of his estate and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent, which is done by agreeing with other men, to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living... (Locke 1960, 29).

Likewise, Lockean writers such as Samuel Adams and Thomas Paine during the period of the American Revolution emphasize individual freedoms. For instance, Samuel Adams declares these freedoms to be "personal security, personal liberty, and private property" (S. Adams 1998, 46). Invoking the language of "natural rights," Paine rallies support for rebellion against an "intrusive" outsider by saying, "the last cord is broken, the people of England are presenting addresses against us. There are injuries which nature cannot forgive; she would cease to be nature if she did" (Paine 1998a, 55). In defining who Americans are not, Paine effectively builds American nationalism as seeking justice against common oppression, and says in words which became famous, "these are the times that try men's souls" (Paine 1998b, 55).

Such examples of liberalism shape American nationalism as individualistic, defining it in terms of rights. Americans view citizenship as "securing the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and property, for all members of the American political community" (R. Smith 1988, 240). Rogers Smith notes that the "culmination of this process, the Declaration of Independence, holds that all men are created equal" and that governments are created to secure this citizenship. For example, to secure these rights Thomas Jefferson says that,

Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it... (*The Declaration of Independence* 1998, 62).

In this light, American nationalism becomes contractual. Citizens are "regarded as autonomous individuals who make choices as individuals bound together by a social contract, rather than as friends and neighbors united by common activity" according to Pamela Conover, Ivor M. Crewe, and Donald D. Searing (1991, 802). Americans see themselves as possessing guaranteed, codified rights such as "freedom of speech, freedom of religion, [and] freedom of movement" defining the "very substance" of how Americans think about

rights (Conover et al. 1991, 807-08). Liberalism influences identity as it helps Americans to see themselves as “free” to pursue Locke’s idea of happiness. When asked what Americans believe, Americans say:

Being an American is to be free, to speak up for yourself, to fight for your freedom. Being an American is to be an individual with choices, to be “in control of your own destiny.” Being an American is to savor the fruits of individual choice: “economic achievement,” Yankee ingenuity, “self expression”....As an American, you’re born with rights... (Conover et al. 1991, 819).

Armed with rights, Americans work to obtain goals of prosperity. Americans generally come to “the pervasive agreement that getting ahead on one’s own is important in making one a ‘true American,’” according to Citrin, Reingold and Green (1990, 14). Further, American liberal nationalism expresses “great faith in the ability of American society to assimilate newcomers, who, if they worked hard could achieve equality in reality as well as in principle” (Citrin et al. 1990, 6). Liberalism allows Americans to “construct” who they are as individuals, all “born” with the same rights, goals and idea that “freedom” means being left alone.

Civic Republicanism, Public Participation and the Language of Duty. Civic republicanism, on the other hand, deplors individualism while embracing collective participation. Here, individualism threatens the common good as selfish pursuits may injure others. While liberalism notes this danger, it embraces notions that pursuit of self-interests in aggregate actually provides for the common good. Civic republicanism adopts views that individual actions may impede common interests, the best protection against which involves active participation and interdependence. Renaissance writer Niccolo Machiavelli postulates in reference to virtuous government that those in power conduct themselves, “in strict accordance with the laws which they had established themselves; preferring public interests to their own, and to administer and protect with the greatest care both public and private affairs” (Machiavelli 1996, 189).

John Adams, in contrast to his brother Samuel Adams, relays civic republican language as he emphasizes community. He says that, “if after the pains of ‘collecting all authority into one center,’ that center is to be the nation, we shall remain exactly where we began,” meaning that everyone must participate rather than allow centralized power to thrive (J. Adams 1998, 79). In other words, contrary to a political elite protecting the rights of individuals, “the first ‘collection’ of authority must be a unanimous agreement to form...into a nation, people, community or body politic” (J. Adams 1998, 79). Civic republicanism emphasizes public education as a means to transmit nationalism to the masses. Eighteenth-century European political philosopher Montesquieu argued that “citizens in classical republics had to be raised “like a single family”— with pervasive civic education in patriotism reinforced by frequent public rites and ceremonies” (R. Smith 1988, 231). Civic republicans adopt a communitarian

perspective where “one’s identity entails identification with a community of people,” whereas liberalism defines identity in terms of “legal rights” (Conover et al. 1991, 805). Where liberalism gains ground, educators “lament the desiccation of civic education” which seeks to “reinvolve people with one another and with their local communities” (Conover et al. 1991, 800). As liberalism becomes centered in rights, civic republicanism emphasizes duty.

American Individualism and the Victory of Liberal Thought. Outsiders observe American identity in terms of liberalism. Individualism largely overtakes communitarianism in today’s ideological battles. An early nineteenth-century foreign observer of American identity, Alexis de Tocqueville, observes that “each American relies on individual effort and judgment” (1969, 429). He adds that American identity proves unfixed in that, “there are no more classes, and such as do still exist are composed of such changing elements that they can never, as a body, exercise real power over their members” (Tocqueville 1969, 430). On the other hand, Tocqueville sees the tension between uniqueness and desire to resemble everyone else in American identity.

The nearer men are to a common level of uniformity, the less they are inclined to believe blindly in any man or any class. But they are readier to trust the mass, and public opinion becomes more and more mistress of the world...[T]he majority in the United States takes over the business of supplying the individual with a quantity of ready-made opinions and so relieves him of the necessity of forming his own (1969, 435).

To Tocqueville, American individuality becomes dualistic since “not only is public opinion the only guide left to aid private judgment,” but “its power is infinitely greater in democracies than elsewhere” (1969, 435). This nationalistic duality leads Mark Juergensmeyer to conclude that “the nineteenth century saw the fulfillment of Tocqueville’s prophecy that the ‘strange religion’ of secular nationalism would...overrun the whole world” (1969, 28). Indeed, as American democratic ideals spread, they “became the ideological partner(s) of what came to be known as nation building” (Juergensmeyer 1993, 28). From Tocqueville on, the “litany is remarkably similar: democracy, liberty, equality and individual achievement” provide the concept of American identity, and “emotional attachments to these symbols and practices that embody them,” according to Jack Citrin, Beth Reingold and Donald P. Green (1990, 1129). Though liberalism appears victorious, American national identity proves more a hybrid of both republican and liberal theory.

RELIGION AND THE NATIONAL MISSION

ORIGINS OF THE “NATIONAL MYTH”

American Political Theory and the Influence of Early Puritan Thought. American political theory, and thus identity, finds roots in religion. The rise of Puritanism contributed religious

components to American political identity, such as notions of individual freedom and responsibility. Epitomizing thought of early American writers, John Wise states not only that “democracy is founded in scripture,” but also that

democracy is then erected when a number of free persons do assemble together in order to enter into a covenant for uniting themselves in a body: And such a preparative assembly has some appearance already of a democracy; that every man has the privilege freely to deliver his opinion concerning the common affairs (Wise 1998, 27).

John Winthrop, an American writer of the seventeenth century, offers Puritan insights to early American identity, that embody complementary civic and selfish ideals:

[T]here is a two-fold liberty, natural (I mean as our nature is now corrupt) and civil or federal. The first is common to man with beasts and other creatures. By this, man, as he stands in relation to man, simply hath liberty to do what he lists; it is a liberty to do evil as well as...good....[T]he other kind of liberty I call civil or federal may also be termed moral, in reference to the covenant between God and man, in the moral law (1998, 23-24).

Winthrop’s view of American identity forms notions of the “national myth” also known as the jeremiad, or beliefs that Americans are God’s chosen people. Puritans viewed their presence as providential; as they conducted themselves in a pleasing way to God, he in return preserved them. Winthrop cites a “covenant” relationship between his people and God.

When God gives a special commission he looks to have it strictly observed in every article....[T]hus stand the cause between God and us, we are entered into covenant with him for this work, we have taken out a commission. But if we shall neglect the observation of these articles...the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us....[He will] be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of such a covenant (1994, 39).

Puritanism contributes to American identity notions of a virtuous people connected with a democracy, a moral people in terms of liberty. This “mission” or divine commission requires that America prove to the world that democracy works when upheld by virtue, wherein success insures that “we will find that the God of Israel is among us...for we must consider that we shall be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” Therefore, if “we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world” (Winthrop 1994, 39). Invoking religion, Winthrop constructs identity where fulfilling a contract with God makes Americans a “chosen people,” in both a religious and political way.

Identity and the Necessity to Believe in God. Intrinsic in this “national myth” with religious overtones shines necessity of belief in God. Winthrop again invokes the view that “we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to

love one another...to keep his commandments and his ordinance, and his laws...that we may live and be multiplied” (Winthrop 1994, 40). Thus, belief in God in conjunction with “political participation, economic individualism, and egalitarian social manners” are “long enshrined in the American culture tradition” (Citrin et al. 1990, 1130). When overcome by thoughts of enemy advantage at the time of the American Revolution, Paine says that he has “as little superstition in me as any man living, but my secret opinion has been and still is that God Almighty will not give up a people to military destruction or leave them unsupported to perish who have so earnestly and so repeatedly sought to avoid the calamities of war” (1998b, 56). Here he successfully invokes notions of divine relationship as defense against outside encroachment. With reliance on God, “true Americans” believe in “social equality and self-reliance...and particularistic characteristics such as believing in God” (Citrin et al. 1994, 11).

The Importance of Religious Affiliation. Equally important to belief in God, religious affiliation forms origins of American identity. Alexis de Tocqueville further believes that “it was religion that gave birth to the English colonies in America,” and “in the United States religion is mingled with all the national customs and all those feelings which the word fatherland evokes. For that reason it has peculiar power” (1969, 432). He observes, however that, “the structure of religious life has remained entirely distinct from the political organization” (Tocqueville 1969, 432). Because of this, Michael Lienesch and some religious scholars credit the importance of religion in America as making it “the nation with the soul of a church” (1983, 445). Lienesch argues that,

long before the constitutional founding, a sense of national identity had been developing. But with the creation of a national government, local and state ties increasingly gave way to national identity....In the process, myths, symbols and rituals emerged to constitute the basis of a new national identity. Many of these symbols originated in Christianity...(1983, 446).

TRANSLATING RELIGIOUS IMAGERY INTO POLITICAL SYMBOLS

Early American nationalism assumed religious shape in “political millennialism,” or the belief that democracy brings peace characteristic of the Christian notion of a thousand years of divine rule. Political millennialism caused nationalists to rely “on these prophecies concerning the end of the world to make predictions about the fate of the new nation,” and these “political prophets” assumed that the “founding would usher in a new era of republican peace and happiness” (Lienesch 1983, 446). In this light, victories of enemies become “transitory” in that they only “confirm our faith, for the forces of darkness” are “really, though ignorantly working their own destruction” (Lienesch 1983, 454). Though talk of Armageddon proved premature, “Americans did not need to abandon the millennium, instead they could set to work cre-

ating it themselves" (Lienesch 1983, 458). Political millennialism became key to early construction of American identity, influenced by Puritan thought in terms of America's divine mandate and obligation as a "chosen people," to share democracy and help others shed yokes of despotic oppression. In the *Gettysburg Address* (1863), Abraham Lincoln likewise invokes the notion of Americans as a virtuous people in terms of freedom. To solidify the people politically, he says that, "our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" (1995, 482). He further states that the actions of the soldiers who died fighting to preserve the Union, "consecrated" the ground by their actions, and invokes unity when he says "we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people shall not perish from the earth" (Lincoln 1995, 482). Most importantly, Lincoln suggests that as a democracy, the United States is watched by the world. To Lincoln, in the Civil War America was "testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure" (Lincoln 1995, 482). Lincoln defines Americans as moral, virtuous and God-fearing in terms of democracy, underscoring the importance of religious overtones in constructing nationalism.

CULTURAL PRACTICES: INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND COLLECTIVE INCLUSION

MULTICULTURALISM VERSUS ASSIMILATIONISM

Currently, American identity debates take place between supporters of multiculturalism and assimilationism. American multiculturalism extols retention of cultural and ethnic traditions by immigrants. Assimilationism disregards these by arguing for uniformity over individuality, further extending the argument between civic republicanism and liberal individualism. American multiculturalists claim that both civic and individual identities can find expression, echoing sentiments of Anthony D. Smith who claims that two sets of allegiances operate,

...one public and political with its official symbolism and all-embracing mythology, and one semi-private and cultural for each ethnic community...between the 'home' and the 'world,' between the enclosed, warm but narrow, networks of familiar ethnic and the broad, open but impersonal ties of citizenship in the state and its public community and the professional world of work (1994, 151).

To this end, multiculturalists advocate preservation of several unique cultures while maintaining loyalty to the state. Smith maintains that "this kind of 'dual loyalty' is common in all complex societies with their main cross-cutting ties and different objects of attachment" (A. Smith 1994, 152). Assimilationists on the other hand possess overarching belief in a single identity for everyone in the state, largely expressed in terms of language, ethnicity and culture.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE IN DEFINING AMERICAN IDENTITY

"English Only" and Calls for Linguistic Uniformity. Both language and ethnicity become key to construction of American identity, particularly speaking English. As minority language groups seek recognition, debates about language policy "come to symbolize a larger set of issues about the relationship between ethnic and national identity," according to Ronald J. Schmidt (1993, 88). He states that

reacting against the exclusion of "racial" minority groups from the dominant (and largely subconscious) image of "the American people," this culturally based political campaign is fundamentally about "constructing" a new prototype for full membership in the American political community, a new understanding of the national identity (Schmidt 1993, 88).

Speaking English becomes desirable in a nationalistic sense as unifying Americans. Here, constructivism helps to explain "both the strong emotional trigger...and centrality of power" in a battle about who determines American identity (Schmidt 1993, 89). Consequently, Americans "in some contexts...are willing to curb individual rights to further the good of the community," because requiring immigrants to learn English reflects the "need" for a "common language to run the country" (Conover et al. 1991, 816). This rises out of "insecurity about national cohesion," prompting a "movement to designate English as the country's official tongue" (Citrin et al. 1990, 1125). In their research, Citrin and colleagues find that "the staying power of Lockean liberalism in American political culture is impressive. As long as it is spoken in English" (1990, 1134). English serves to unify Americans in interactions with each other, and the media.

Constructivists such as Benedict Anderson underscore the critical nature of uniform language in defining national identity. He believes that the start of "the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be invited into the imagined community" (Anderson 1991, 145). Thus today, Anderson adds, "even the most insular of nations accept the principle of *naturalization*, no matter how difficult in practice they make it" (1991, 145). He further claims that

what the eye is to the lover— that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with— language— whatever language history has made his or her mother-tongue— is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed (Anderson 1991, 154).

Language serves to provide a vehicle for constructing identities. To multiculturalists, language deserves preservation among ethnic groups as an individual right to cultural preservation. To assimilationists, recognition of one language contributes to one identity. This translates into actions on the part of assimilationists to force all ethnic groups to speak one language, exemplified in recent efforts to codify English as America's official tongue.

Legislative, Adjudicatory and Electoral Efforts to Impose a Single Language. Attempts to legislate English as America's official language prove pervasive with the debate of "individual rights" and unity. According to Jack Citrin, "although the Framers of the Constitution ultimately decided not to endow English with special legal status, they assumed that a common language would develop in the United States and that it would be English" (1990, 97). Cases in the United States Supreme Court illustrate the depth of linguistic conflict between linguistic assimilationists and multiculturalists. Citrin says that in *Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974), the Court ruled Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act as requiring "school districts to take steps to ensure that non-English-speaking children can participate meaningfully in the educational system" (Citrin 1990, 98). Voters in California responded to such efforts in 1986 with passage of Proposition 63, the English-language amendment to the state's Constitution (Citrin 1990, 102). However, only three states, Nebraska, Illinois and Virginia have declared English as their sole official language through legislation, whereas California, Arizona and Florida approved such measures through ballot initiatives (Citrin 1990, 100). Citrin adds that "opponents of 'official English' measures portray them as instruments of exclusion rather than assimilation," and argue further that "the predominance of English usage is not in danger; they cite studies showing that virtually all immigrants want to learn English and do so" (1990, 101). Debates surrounding "official English" and bilingualism "reflect a cultural conflict of the meaning of American identity," in that large majorities believe English necessary to becoming an American while members of the political elite view legislating it as prejudicial (Citrin 1990, 107). "English only" embodies conflict between the civic and individualist traditions.

LANGUAGE AND THE DEBATE BETWEEN MULTICULTURALISM AND ASSIMILATIONISM

Language, however, comprises one component of the overriding battle between multiculturalism and assimilation. Multiculturalism holds that individuals in American society retain ethnic traditions with loyalty to American ideals.

Arguments for Assimilationism. Assimilationism on the other hand, involves belief that full citizenship means adoption of English, American political culture and goals. In other words, questions about individual rights to retain ethnicity conflict with goals of the American "melting pot." Assimilationism poses the view that

the process of cultural assimilation that yields a people to whom American has a common meaning—remains an attractive solution. The ethos of the melting pot is universalistic and inclusive; it produces individuals who are Americans by virtue of their commitment to a democratic national creed (Citrin 1990, 109).

Assimilationists maintain that multiculturalism threatens to bring a "disunity of America" because of

emphasis on differences "over commonalities," according to Jack David Eller (1997, 250). Assimilationists state further that there is or "should be a common American identity,"

and often they argue that this identity is based less on cultural particulars than on a few universal convictions, such as the dignity of the individual and the freedom of thought and action....Americans are a "constituency of conscience" rather than a culture in the traditional sense of the word (Eller 1997, 250).

To Eller, the greatest danger raised by the multiculturalists is "that American culture and the American polity may actually fragment and collapse" (1997, 253-54). Assimilationists view solidarity as necessary for national sovereignty and statehood.

Arguments for Multiculturalism. Multiculturalism becomes an "insistence on the primacy of ethnicity over the individual's shared and equal status as a citizen in shaping his or her identity" (Citrin et al. 1994, 9). The motto of the United States, *E pluribus unum* means "one out of many." Ethnic groups define "the many" in the sense that "throughout America's history, religious, cultural, and racial differences have shaped the struggle for wealth, prestige and power," and that "on several occasions the clash of ethnic strains broadened to encompass debate over the very meaning of national identity" (Citrin et al. 1990, 1124). Multiculturalists further argue that because of resistance to the "melting pot" certain constituencies are then "excluded from such important cultural domains as knowledge and scholarship, arts and politics" (Eller 1997, 249). Eller acknowledges that "American culture, the American 'master fiction,' is once again and continuously under construction" (1997, 255). "No wonder," he concludes, that assimilationists are "worried, multiculturalists are angry, and we are all a little frazzled" (Eller 1997, 255).

PROPOSITION 187 AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CONFLICT OVER ETHNICITY IN AMERICA

Modern cases of ethnicity debates in America include the 1994 passage of Proposition 187 in California. Concerns about immigration from Mexico spurred an initiative aimed at denying public assistance and education to those living in this country illegally. According to Tara Lennon, the goal of this initiative was to "correct the problems" of illegal immigration (1998, 81). Proposition 187 reads that "the people of California find and declare: That they have suffered and are suffering economic hardship caused by the presence of illegal aliens in this state" (Lennon 1998, 81). Here, California aims to "control identification because its main purpose is seen as the control of illegal immigration, that is, the control of foreigners" (Lennon 1998, 82). Lennon further argues that

Proposition 187 plays a unique role in this context of assimilation and racial neutrality. It has a main and a corollary function in achieving these goals. The main and obvious function of the initiative is to limit the flow of illegal aliens to California. By cutting off benefits to illegal aliens, the assump-

tion is that they will be less likely to immigrate. The initiative furthers national assimilation by trying to control and limit the people who would have been assimilated and neutralized. Prop. 187 has a unique role in the assimilation context in that it does not help to assimilate but rather tries to render illegal "aliens" invisible (Lennon 1998, 84).

Proposition 187 illustrates the "dual personality" of American nationalism in that at first glance, the initiative procedure "appears firmly grounded in American and democratic ideals of individual rights to self-government" (Lennon 1998, 88). In reality, it invokes collective voice to claim damage to stimulate nationalism, but begs criticism of a de Tocquevillian nature, for "what lies behind the popular legitimacy and American unity may be troublesome passions and silenced dissent" (Lennon 1998, 96). Lennon concludes that "the transnational communities' return to ethnicity in the face of America's last breaths of nationalist exclusion," could find themselves "in the odd company of some American nationalists relying on their own ethnicity in the face of what they deem an emerging 'alien nation'" (1998, 98). In this way, American nationalism works against the very principles at its core.

CONCLUSION

The competition between political ideas about roles of government, particularly civic republicanism and liberalism, the belief in a national myth with origins in religious thought, and the conflict between holding to cultural roots and imagining civic identity support constructivism in explaining American nationalism. Enigmatic and seemingly contradictory, American nationalism exists with a delicate balance between several extremes. On one hand, liberalism calls for individuals to pursue self-interest, while civic republicanism finds virtue in public participation. American nationalism preaches doctrines of inclusion, but examples of exclusion exist in great number. Stressing religious tolerance, it requires belief in God in some form of religion. Espousing individual rights, it calls for ethnic assimilation rather than multiculturalism. However, in America extremes never permanently win as the war of ideas in media provides opportunity to change minds and hearts. As media become chief in creating forums for interaction and beliefs, constructivism best explains American nationalism. With competition comes variation and with time comes change. In a land of opportunity, identity proves unfixed and malleable. On the other hand, identity may consist of specific requirements, the violation of which necessitates exclusion. Here, the "melting pot" of America comes into direct conflict with multiculturalism. However, America's success results precisely from elements perceived as weakness, in that agreement and disagreement yield competition invariably producing a better product. In this light, new ideas lead to constant change, causing America to rise to the occasion and create a "civic ethnicity" where "one out of many" become "many as one."

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