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NATIVISM ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: THE END OF EXCEPTIONALISMS?

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Ever since Alexis de Tocqueville famously claimed America and Americans to be "exceptional", comparisons between the United States and Europe have privileged differences over similarities. We have seen this in many scholarly fields, but the emphasis on differences is particularly noticeable in the field of migration studies. While immigration and diversity are burning issues on both sides of the Atlantic, the framing of the debate in the United States – at least until recently, and in contrast to many European countries – did not focus on the failure of ethnic and racial minorities to integrate into the native majority. Blacks in the United States are of course not postcolonial immigrants, but the descendants of slaves with histories in the country going back centuries. Many authors thus consider blacks in the United States as natives, as African-Americans.

But what about the rise of political nativism in the United States today? "The rapid growth of Mexican immigration and most especially undocumented immigration since the early 1990s has led to a growth in nativist rhetoric and punitive laws targeting both legal and illegal immigrants and even their children" (Waters 2014: 153). Is the new American nativism comparable to developments in Europe? How did nativism emerge in a country where immigration is so central to national identity, where nobody (except Native Americans) can claim proprietary rights based on historical rootedness?

Myths and ideologies

A common claim is that nativism as an ideology is more likely to flourish in Europe because of how countries construct and teach their national histories. Scholars here suggest that migration plays a limited role in the "origin myths" and "national identities" of European countries; while the history of immigration is mobilized as a core feature of American identity, European national myths

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hold that there are "true" Europeans who are geographically and historically rooted in the land. Alba and Foner (2015) suggest that it is much more challenging for European societies to include newcomers in the national "we". North Americans, looking at West European anxieties about immigration – especially the cleavages between the European secular/Christian mainstream and Muslim immigrants and their children – often see confirmation of this idea. In a similar vein, recent scholarship notes that nativism as an ideology to limit further immigration is more heatedly contested in North America. The United States – the ultimate immigration country – cannot experience (a return of) nativism such as that seen in many European nations.

But when we dig deeper into the debate on where nativism most easily takes root, we see surprising similarities between the United States and parts of Europe (this line of reasoning draws distinctions between the countries of Europe). Some claim that the rise of nativism remains improbable in both France and the United States, given their laws on citizenship. In both countries, citizenship is based on the principle of *jus soli*: that anybody born on national territory has automatic access to citizenship. This principle is often claimed to serve as a bulwark against nativism, as children of immigrants are as French or American as children of parents born in the country. In contrast, the ground is fertile for nativism in countries with a *jus sanguinis* tradition, such as Germany, and countries that combine *jus sanguinis* and *jus soli*, such as the Netherlands.

Law and identity

As Rogers Brubaker argued in *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, the legal differences between France and Germany are consequential, not only because they determine who gets access to citizenship, but because of the national self-understandings that these laws give rise to. In much of the literature, France is the embodiment of a country that wishes to be inclusive – to its minorities as well as to immigrants. But this universalism comes at a price: all aspiring French (wo)men must assimilate into a cultural unity, embracing French values and speaking the French language. "The rhetoric of inclusion is not disembodied or free-floating. It is grounded in a distinctive national self-understanding, in the sense of the grandeur of France, the assimilatory virtues of French territory and institutions, and the universal appeal and validity of French language and civilization" (Brubaker 1992: 111).

As many scholars have argued, the alleged universalism of the French state is also a particular form of group identity. Although mobilizing around "particular" identities is frowned upon as non-republican, the pronounced cultural content of French-ness suggests that the clash is not between "universalism" and

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"particularism" but between different cultural identities. Can cultural homogeneity and national groupthink be the outgrowth of universalist republicanism? Do the seeds of nativism lie within republicanism as such? While the origins of French and German national self-understanding may differ, don't the nativist consequences look very much alike?

Does this again imply a gulf of experience between Europe and the United States? Is there once again an American exceptionalism when it comes to nativism? We should not be too hasty in drawing this conclusion. John Higham's seminal *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* convincingly showed us that nativism is not alien to American political culture. Although many see in Trump's rise to power a new wave of nativism, the phenomenon as such dates to the country's founding. Being a "country of immigrants" does not mean that all men and women equally belong. White propertied Protestant men saw themselves as the core of the new nation, and for a long time thereafter. Immigrants perceived to be close to this core group enjoyed easier access to the country than those perceived to be "different". Polish, Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants suffered exclusion because of language, religion, and suspicions of maintaining "foreign" loyalties. Such discrimination lessened over the decades as these groups started to be considered white, which at the time was not self-evident at all. Passing the color line made them American, relativizing their other differences.

There has thus long been a hierarchy between those who "own" the country, those who truly belong, and those who are, in one way or another, "foreign" and "not like us". As in France, American policies encourage assimilation. But in the United States, belonging to the nation is more compatible with maintaining other collective loyalties and identities. Hyphenated identities – Asian-American, Latino-American, African-American – emphasize the American-ness of various minority groups while giving space for diversity within American unity. This respect for group identities – dismissed by French politicians as multiculturalism or "communitarism" – should not be misunderstood: the United States seeks to assimilate newcomers, but this does not require them to give up all other group identities and loyalties. Whereas in France the push toward a homogeneous cultural unity privileges a "native" group to define what Frenchness is, in the United States it is the flipside of heterogeneity, of hyphenated identities that produces American nativism: hyphenated Americans are American to a lesser degree than those who don't need such hyphens.

More similar than exceptional

The rise of nativism in both France and the United States may seem surprising given the access to citizenship on the *jus soli* principle. This political openness,

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however, comes with cultural closure: the openness is only possible because of the assimilatory powers of state institutions. The alleged universalism of both France and the United States is in fact a very particular form of "group identity" that allows for nativist discourse to flourish – as in other European countries with different citizenship traditions.

For empirical reasons, then, I hope that, in the next 50 years, we focus more on similarities than exceptionalisms across the Atlantic. Similar empirical developments on the two continents require new concepts and theories. Rather than looking for explanations at the level of nations – while assuming or exaggerating differences between them – we need to explain why developments have been so similar, even in contexts that some of us are used to seeing as very different.

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