

AHR Roundtable

The Irony of Un-American Historiography: Daniel J. Boorstin and the Rediscovery of a U.S. Archive of Decolonization

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The historian is both discoverer and creator . . . While the discoverer focuses our vision anew on something already out there, the creator, of whom the historian is a peculiar breed, makes the object for us to see.

Daniel J. Boorstin

Jean-Baptiste San Souci was silenced not only because some narrators may have consciously chosen not to mention him but primarily because most writers followed the acknowledged rules of their time.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

Of course, we are ex-colonials, and we have only recently begun to move our cultural capital within our own borders.

Daniel J. Boorstin

HAS A CERTAIN CONCEPTUAL BLINDNESS, a myopia of the imagination, prejudicially colored how we identify the archives of decolonization? After all, even though the republic forged out of British North America was obviously the first modern political community obligated to “decolonize,” this fact has been trivialized—when it has been noticed at all—by most historians practicing since the Cold War. In the North Atlantic, the U.S. example is almost always excluded from professional deliberations about decolonization. This exclusion, however, is unnatural, and is, in fact, a by-product of the ideologically worried postwar North Atlantic worldview. When decolonization entered the academic lexicon in the 1930s, it was used to refer explicitly and principally to the North American republic. Not until the anxious Western imag-

I am grateful for the generous feedback and professional criticism of many colleagues. This support was all the more inspiring given that these scholars largely differed with the general interpretations and conclusions advanced here. These colleagues include, from my “home” department at Temple University, Travis Glasson, David Farber, Bryant Simon, Ben Talton, and, in particular, David Waldstreicher. Critical testing of my arguments came too from students: Alex Elkins, Elliot Drago, and Samuel Davis stand out for particular praise. Thanks are also in order to the anonymous reviewers at the *AHR*, Todd Shepard, Dorothy Ross, Lara Putnam, Paul Kramer, Anne Eller, and Yarimar Bonilla. The ideas in this article benefited greatly from cultivation beyond the professional world. The field of amateurs to whom I am deeply indebted includes Clarissa Cummings, Selwyn Williams, Bernadette Neptune, Lyndon Neptune, Santiago Neptune, Brian Thomas, and Rachel Nicome-Cowan.

ination conjured up the fiction of “three worlds” did historians begin to (mis)take the theme of decolonization as incongruous with portraits of the “First World” U.S. experience. Thus, while U.S. materials have been neglected as ineligible for “the archives of decolonization,” there is convincing evidence against this conventional view, this unspoken rule of “American exceptionalism.” Indeed, within the field of postwar history-writing about the republic, there are (dis)contents that deserve to be archived as critical studies in decolonization.

Perhaps the most dramatic example—and certainly the most controversial—is the work of U.S. historian Daniel J. Boorstin. Boorstin has been long and infamously condemned in the nation’s historiographical archives, the various agencies that prepare and assemble evidence for histories about the production of historical knowledge. His scholarship, according to archival guides (first and foremost professional academics), constitutes a source of cheerful nationalist championship. This designation, though, does Boorstin a grave injustice. Specifically, it represses his deeply humbling historical depictions of the U.S. as a New World society struggling with the “left-overs of [European] colonialism.”¹ A better way to comprehend his texts would be to read them, instead, through the lens of decolonization. From this perspective, which radically deranges historiographical assumptions instituted in the postwar West, Boorstin’s corpus becomes legible as documents of a North Americanist variation on postcolonial studies, an approach concerned with the historically Eurocentric limits of nationalism’s promise to decolonize in former European dependencies.²

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Discourses of Rule and the Acknowledgment of the Peasantry in Dominica, W.I., 1838–1928,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 704–718, here 715. My conceptualization of the “archives” is most heavily indebted to Trouillot, who granted archival power to “not only the libraries or depositories sponsored by states and foundations, but less visible institutions that also sort sources to organize facts according to themes or periods, into documents to be used and monuments to be explored.” Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York, 1995), 52. Other instructive works include Daniel J. Boorstin’s essay “A Wrestler with the Angel,” on what he calls the “quest for history,” in Boorstin, *Hidden History*, selected and edited by Daniel J. Boorstin and Ruth F. Boorstin (New York, 1987), 3–23; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Calif., 1987); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along The Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, N.J., 2009); and Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26, no. 2 (2008): 1–14. Here might also be the appropriate moment to clarify that Boorstin’s scholarship counts not as a secondary but as a primary source in the following discussion. Such is necessarily the case in historiographical analysis. Similarly, the archives consulted in the course of research for this project consisted largely of libraries (public frequently) and of virtual venues such as JSTOR. So unstuffy and, at times, even open-sourced are some of these sites that their archival functions might go unnoticed.

² In my use of the postcolonial idea, I conveniently follow the lead of Gyan Prakash, who defines postcolonialism as a body of historical critique that aims “to undo the Eurocentrism produced by the institution of the West’s trajectory” despite operating with “the acute realization that its own critical apparatus does not enjoy a panoptic distance from colonial history but exists as an aftermath, as an after—after being worked over by colonialism.” Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1475–1490, here 1475. The literature on postcolonialism is so rich that any effort at comprehensive citation threatens quickly to become an exercise in embarrassment. Still, students interested in the emergence of the concept in the North Atlantic will learn plenty from reading—alongside the *AHR* Forum that includes the aforementioned Prakash essay—*Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories*, Special Issue, *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992); and *Third World and Postcolonial Issues*, Special Double Issue, *Social Text* 31/32 (1992). In the U.S. field, “postcolonial” as a key concept in cultural politics has been resisted, not surprisingly. For an instructive example of this rejection, see the discussion around Jack P. Greene’s essay “Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2007):

Dissolved in this recuperation of Boorstin's work is one of the most enduring and most pivotal illusions among those who maintain the archives of U.S. historiography. Archival discussions of his corpus dutifully trash it as the most egregious source of the pathetically patriotic consensus trend that supposedly swept the field of history-writing in the decade and a half after World War II.³ Along with Louis Hartz, Richard Hofstadter, and David Potter, Boorstin is routinely repudiated for founding an unapologetically nationalist and exceptionalist school, one, significantly, against which many Americanist practitioners have oriented and measured their progress since the 1960s. To be sure, the condemnation of consensus has attenuated over time, with some authors rightly redeemed as ironic critics.⁴ Boorstin, however, survives as the proverbial black sheep, disavowed in the archives as the high priest of a group once demonized as a cult.⁵ Dorothy Ross, for example, despite astutely rediscovering in the studies of Hartz, Hofstadter, and Potter the sense that "American success had

235–250. For an exception to this resistance, see Kariann Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (Oxford, 2011). See my review "The Postcolonial Genius of *Unbecoming British*," *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 2 (2013): 335–343.

³ The key date for so-called "consensus history" is taken to be 1948, the year of publication of not only Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), but also (and less noted) Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1948) and Louis Hartz's *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948). Most critics, of course, cite Boorstin's *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953) and Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955) as the beginning of their careers in consensus. The other consistently cited consensus author is David M. Potter for his *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954).

⁴ While the category of "consensus" has been continuously and variously revised, its recitation persists with ritualistic predictability. For recent examples, see "Conservatism: A Round Table," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (2011), organized around Kim Phillips-Fein's essay "Conservatism: A State of the Field," *ibid.*, 723–743; a similar view appears implicitly in Dorothy Ross, "American Modernities, Past and Present," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 702–714, and explicitly in Laura F. Edwards, "Southern History as U.S. History," *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (2009): 533–564, here 558. Beyond the academy, too, this image of consensus persists. See Sam Tanenhaus, "Looking for America beyond Its Borders," *New York Times*, April 11, 2014. There has been some dissension against and revision of the dominant portrait of consensus. Christopher Lasch stands out as an early dissenter. See Lasch, "Consensus: An Academic Question?," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 2 (1989): 457–459. Among the scholars who have sharpened and nuanced discussion of the category, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968), especially chap. 12; Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, Ill., 1973); Daniel Joseph Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (October 1984): 976–1004; Alan Brinkley, "Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform*: A Reconsideration," *Reviews in American History* 13, no. 3 (1985): 462–480; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Richard Hofstadter," in Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, eds., *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians* (New York, 1969), 278–315; Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73, no. 1 (1986): 120–136; Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (June 1995): 651–677; Michael Kazin, "Hofstadter Lives: Political Culture and Temperament in the Work of an American Historian," *Reviews in American History* 27, no. 2 (1999): 334–348; Leo P. Ribuffo, "What Is Still Living in 'Consensus' History and Pluralist Social Theory," *American Studies International* 38, no. 1 (2000): 42–60; Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880–1980* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); and especially Michael McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History,'" *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (October 1991): 1056–1067. None of these revisions, it is worth noting, have dared to revise Boorstin.

⁵ Typical is Peter Novick's identification of Boorstin's studies with "strident conservatism, boosterism and unabashed patriotic celebration." Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 334. For the use of "cult," see John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary* 27, no. 2 (1959): 93–100.

taken a satirical turn,” flatly dismisses Boorstin’s work. In his writing, concludes Ross, “triumphalism was unalloyed.”⁶

Yet to brand Boorstin a jingoistic embarrassment is not only misguided but also perverse. It twists and obscures the presence within his scholarship of a contrary and critical mission: revealing the vicious problems of a U.S. nationalist imagination haunted by the experience of European colonialism. Threaded through Boorstin’s work is a worry that traditional thought in the republic had failed even to confront, far less to overcome, the community’s subjection to Europe’s hegemonic fictions, especially its romance with the grand idea of American uniqueness. “[W]e still see ourselves in the distorting mirror of Europe,” he confessed in *The Genius of American Politics*.⁷ Colonial legacies had gone unexposed and untreated, according to Boorstin, leaving the U.S. suffering from “the malaise that comes from continuing to judge our culture by irrelevant European standards.”⁸ In his diagnosis is the remarkable suggestion that the British North American republic faced an affliction that we professionals now treat as endemic to “Third World” nations struggling to “decolonize” themselves. Boorstin played up U.S. problems, failures, and vices of colonial vintage as well as drew analogies with national(ist) predicaments in South America, India, and even Puerto Rico.⁹ The intent behind this perspective, it must be appreciated, was subversive: he meant to undermine prevailing historical narratives that struck him as too enamored with the patriotic romance of invincible progress. Consistently targeted in his work was the nationalist myth that Boorstin mocked as American “omnicompetence.”¹⁰ Little wonder that in his texts the U.S. appears, whatever its colossal might and commercial power, in a strangely familiar form: as a lamentable and even laughable postcolony.¹¹

The failure thus far to see this dissenting purpose in Boorstin’s accounts—insofar as they are read—reveals an unwillingness to admit his genius for self-conscious irony, a refusal to see in his prose the artful deployment of rhetorical deception. Americanists, to put it bluntly, have denied that Boorstin the author was one big mocker.¹² While his writing style has been dubbed an “haute vulgarization,” a term

⁶ Ross, “Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing,” 659–662, quotation from 662.

⁷ Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, 182.

⁸ Daniel J. Boorstin, *America and the Image of Europe: Reflections on American Thought* (New York, 1960), 13.

⁹ For the India comparison, see n. 33; for the comparison with Puerto Rico, see Daniel J. Boorstin, “Paths to National Self-Discovery: U.S.A. and Puerto Rico,” in *America and the Image of Europe*, 142–163.

¹⁰ Boorstin, *America and the Image of Europe*, 14.

¹¹ It should go without saying that this move to incorporate the U.S. within the thematic areas of decolonization and postcolonialism does not deny the nation’s dense, expansive, and adventurous past of subjugating foreign peoples and resources. If anything, this essay actually encourages a view of the republic as both an accomplished empire and an unwitting postcolony. This historical double agency might justly be considered an “irony of American history”—to recall the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, which was influential among consensus historians. It might even be taken, in fact, as one of the best clues to what has been truly exceptional about the U.S. past—thus far. See Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York, 1952).

¹² While North Americanists’ overwhelming unwillingness to entertain the possibility of irony in Boorstin is understandable given the prevailing presumptions about his and the nation’s cultural politics in the 1950s, the failure to do so is nevertheless striking in light of their own recognition, and often, indeed, admiration, of its uses in his *The Image; or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York, 1961). It is the single Boorstin book that frustrates the denigration of his brand as a conservative. See, for example, Stephen J. Whitfield, “*The Image: The Lost World of Daniel Boorstin*,” *Reviews in American*

that has the merit of capturing his masterful mash-up of raconteur and scholar, the notion of intellectual tall tales better betrays its labor of comic ridicule.¹³ Tall tales, Boorstin himself explained, signify a form of humor founded in extravagance and soaked in ambiguous jokiness. He found in their confusion of the serious and the ridiculous great potential for sacrilegiously undoing nationalist orthodoxies.¹⁴ With tall tales, observed Boorstin, there was always the uncertainty: “was it or was it not humor?” Was it “wonderful, awful or ridiculous”?¹⁵

In the end, Boorstin merits being remembered as a seriously joking scholarly thorn in the side of patriotic narrators of the republic’s past. The U.S., he warned, had been inspired from the very beginning by a marriage of innocence and ignorance that was destined to come to a ridiculous end. “Our first popular heroes came on the scene to a chorus of horse-laughs,” reminded his analysis of nationalist cultural politics in the early years of independence.¹⁶ In his own day, Boorstin saw the gravely funny element of the U.S. situation in the incongruity between patriots’ pretensions to world leadership and the society’s manifest intellectual and moral inadequacies. A profound irony inhered in Cold War nationalists’ demands for an exportable American philosophy, he argued, when all along, the very “genius of American politics” had been the refusal of genuinely philosophical thought.¹⁷ This irreverent subversion of heroic patriotic pieties is what ultimately made Boorstin’s versions of the

History 19, no. 2 (1991): 302–312. It is equally striking, moreover, that this book’s characterization of Joseph R. McCarthy as having “buil[t] a political career almost entirely on pseudo-events” (21) goes unreferenced in discussions that politically denounce Boorstin for having “named names” in his testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1953. For this devastating “friendly witness” interpretation of Boorstin, see especially Jonathan M. Wiener, “Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959–1980,” *Journal of American History* 76, no. 2 (1989): 399–434, here 402–404. Michael McGerr, though, stands out for having recognized the irony in Boorstin, even though he does not follow through on this insight. According to him, “Boorstin was undoubtedly the most chauvinistic of the group—although we should not miss the irony of an intellectual lauding his country for having ‘nothing in the line of a theory that can be exported to other peoples of the world’”; “The Price of the ‘New Transnational History,’” 1059. Of the little critical commentary on Boorstin, among the most useful sources are J. R. Pole, “Daniel J. Boorstin,” in Cunliffe and Winks, *Pastmasters*, 210–239; David W. Noble, *Historians against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing since 1830* (Minneapolis, 1965), chap. 9; Richard Reinitz, “Niebuhrian Irony and Historical Interpretation: The Relationship between Consensus and New Left History,” in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison, Wis., 1978), 93–128; John P. Diggins, “Consciousness and Ideology in American History: The Burden of Daniel J. Boorstin,” *American Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (February 1971): 99–118; Diggins, “The Perils of Naturalism: Some Reflections on Daniel J. Boorstin’s Approach to American History,” *American Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1971): 153–180; Colin Gordon, “Crafting a Usable Past: Consensus, Ideology and Historians of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 46, no. 4 (1989): 671–695; and Kenneth L. Kusmer, “American Social History: The Boorstin Experience,” *Reviews in American History* 4, no. 4 (1976): 471–482. While, not surprisingly, there have been no books on Boorstin, there is an annotated bibliography; see Angela Michele Leonard, ed., *Daniel J. Boorstin: A Comprehensive and Selectively Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn., 2001).

¹³ Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, “Introduction,” in Cunliffe and Winks, *Pastmasters*, vii–xv, here xiii.

¹⁴ Indeed, he, more than the other consensus authors, validates Dorothy Ross’s shrewd recognition of the integral uses of satire by the members of this school. Ross, “Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing,” 659–662.

¹⁵ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York, 1965), 290, 332.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹⁷ Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, 1.

U.S. past so troubling in the censorious early Cold War years and what maintains its critical usability today.

FOR THOSE WHO MIGHT FIND DECOLONIZATION an outlandish frame for viewing U.S. national history, a quick recounting of the concept's strange career should correct this error and establish its largely forgotten North American affinity. "Decolonization" first entered the English lexicon within the international communist left as an unsettling speculation about compromise between nationalists in interwar India and their British imperial rulers. Its source was a Bengal-born activist who led a cosmopolitan life of political radicalism under the name M. N. Roy.¹⁸ In the early 1920s, as Roy sought to influence Moscow's strategy toward India, he authored a Marxist account of the colony's economy in which he speculated that the situation had reached a point where British imperialists and the local bourgeoisie were ready to cooperate. Even Indian nationalists, Roy warned, were destined to work out a political settlement with their foreign rulers akin to home rule. This hypothetical argument became known as the decolonization thesis. Politically calculated, it was aimed at encouraging the Bolsheviks to withhold support from bourgeois national parties such as the Indian National Congress, and instead to throw their weight behind the supposedly less compromising colonial masses of workers and peasants. This speculative innovation, however, had unhappy consequences for Roy's activism. He was castigated by comrades as a "lackey of British imperialism" for his theory of decolonization, which indeed was cited as the cause of his eventual expulsion from the Communist International.¹⁹

In the next decade, the concept of decolonization migrated beyond Marxist circles and into academic scholarship, where it shed its controversial hypothetical quality as well as its geographical specificity. The term (used interchangeably with "counter-colonization") appeared in a 1934 article by the German-born economist and political scientist Moritz J. Bonn. Losing its exclusive link to the likely future of India, "decolonization" was now used to refer to the modern historical fact of empire-breaking long witnessed across the globe. The process, according to Bonn, had arrived at its apogee in his contemporary interwar moment but had begun a century earlier. Notable for us is Bonn's account of the inaugural setting for decolonization. "From the day of the American Declaration of Independence," he wrote, "this movement has gone on uninterruptedly until it has achieved almost complete success in our own time."²⁰ Four years later, in *The Crumbling of Empire: The Disintegration of World Economy*, Bonn reiterated his claim that the history of decolonization began

¹⁸ "Roy" was born Narendranath Bhattacharya. For a recent biography, see Kris Manjappa, *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New York, 2010); M. N. Roy, *M. N. Roy's Memoirs* (New York, 1964).

¹⁹ Quote from V. B. Karnik, *M. N. Roy: Political Biography* (Bombay, 1978), 306. For more on the story of Roy and the decolonization thesis, see Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley, Calif., 1969), especially chap. 6; S. M. Ganguly, *Leftism in India: M. N. Roy and Indian Politics, 1920–1948* (Columbia, Mo. 1984), especially 96–98. For a sample of Roy's own writing on Indian history, see *Selected Works of M. N. Roy*, vol. 1: 1917–1922, ed. Sibnarayan Ray (Oxford, 1987).

²⁰ Moritz Bonn, "The Age of Counter-Colonisation," *International Affairs* 13, no. 6 (1934): 845–847, here 845.

with the making of the United States.²¹ Thus, as the world plunged into a war that would decisively hasten the process of empire-breaking, the North American republic was accepted as having pioneered the struggle to decolonize modern political government.

Remarkably, however, once that atomic conflict came to an end, and belligerence of an ideological kind spread across the globe, Bonn's historical claim was almost forgotten. Practically vanished from the dominant historical consciousness in the West was the presumption that the North American republic had initiated the process of decolonization. That belief was gone with the gusting Cold War winds. For most professionals working after World War II, the theme of decolonization had become incompatible with the program for contemplating the U.S. past.²² This case of amnesia within the profession warrants consideration insofar as it points to the complicity of the Cold War geopolitical imagination. Prior to the invention of the global image of three worlds in the 1950s, historians in the West took for granted the existence of two: the Old and the New. In this dyadic understanding of the planet, the U.S. belonged to the New World, where it shared historical temporality with other colonized communities across the continent (Argentina and Haiti, for example). In the wake of the Cold War three-world schema, however, the U.S. was relocated from the "New" to the "First" World. This promotion, it must be appreciated, precluded the old presumption of historical commensurability across the hemisphere. The historical integrity of the New World became obsolete. North America was cast as historically ahead of the other ex-colonies on the continent, all of which were now lumped together and assigned to the lagging Third World. Accordingly, it became nearly impossible to conceive of the U.S. as caught in the same historical predicament as the backward peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean. Thus to the extent that decolonization came to be branded a Third World matter, North Americanist historical scholarship was inclined to regard it from a distance, as exotic. Historiographically speaking, decolonization was not supposed to be a First World problem.

Empirical support for this abstracted argument about the impact of the Cold War imagination on U.S. historiography can be found by comparing two programmatic essays published in the *AHR* before and after World War II. The first, which appeared in 1933, reflects the historical framing of the North American republic as an ex-colony of Europe with a familiar hemispheric past. The second, from 1946, registers the emergence of the alternative that assimilated the U.S. into Northwest Europe as part of the First World and, crucially, rendered a concern with the hegemonic effects of European colonialism nearly unthinkable. At the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Toronto in December 1932, Herbert Bolton used his presidential address to issue an enthusiastic call for historians of the U.S. to establish a New World historiographical frame. Published in the next issue of the *AHR*, Bolton's essay, titled "The Epic of Greater America," complained that "the study of thirteen English colonies and the United States in isolation has obscured

²¹ M. J. Bonn, *The Crumbling of Empire: The Disintegration of World Economy* (London, 1938), 101. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites this as the earliest known published use of the term. For more on Bonn, see his autobiography *Wandering Scholar* (New York, 1948).

²² Beyond the academy is a different matter. See, for a famous example, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1963), 236.

many of the larger factors in their development, and helped to raise up a nation of chauvinists.” Against this chauvinism, he urged his peers to imagine the nation’s past as part of the once-colonized Americas. “For some three hundred years,” he observed, “the whole Western Hemisphere was colonial in status.” Moreover, the common historical thread that ran through the continent persisted even after the break with empire between 1776 and 1825. Even after independence, his address affirmed, “The Americas . . . developed side by side.”²³

Thirteen years after Bolton, Carlton J. H. Hayes, speaking from the same commanding official position within the profession, turned away from this spirit of hemispheric good-neighborliness to steer his colleagues in a completely different direction. Addressing the annual meeting in the nation’s capital in December 1945, in an increasingly chilled international atmosphere soon to be described as a “cold war,” he chided advocates of Pan-Americanism. For Hayes, historians such as Bolton had “los[t] sight of the fact that Latin America is more closely related, in culture and outlook, with Latin Europe than with the United States.” His alternative to hemispheric solidarity was to conjoin the history of the ex-colonial North American nation with that of colonizing Europe. This combination promised a unified historiography of a Western “civilization” under threat from the “menace” of Soviet Russia, he argued.²⁴ Hayes’s proposal, practically the equivalent of the Atlantic Charter for historians of the U.S., is significant here for its effective erasure of colonialism as a meaningful force in the republic’s past.²⁵ He does not figure the North American republic as a former European colony in the Americas (like Brazil or Mexico). Unlike Bolton, this former ambassador to Spain projected the U.S. as an equal partner with Europe in the making of the West. Hayes’s words are poignant: “Of such an Atlantic Community and the European civilization basic to it,” he observed, “we Americans are co-heirs and co-developers, and probably in the future the leaders.”²⁶

By Hayes’s historical reckoning, the relationship between the U.S. and Europe had been symmetrical; nothing had been genuinely colonial about British North America, in other words.²⁷ This presumption guaranteed that it was almost impossible to imagine that the past of European rule had produced any agonizing consequences for nationalist ambitions in the republic. For Hayes, in effect, it was a given that the U.S. was exceptional, a New World ex-colony in which the issues of decolonization and, subsequently, postcolonialism did not matter. Significantly, his conceit would go on to become the professional consensus.

²³ Herbert E. Bolton, “The Epic of Greater America,” *American Historical Review* 38, no. 3 (April 1933): 448–474, here 448, 472.

²⁴ Carlton J. H. Hayes, “The American Frontier: Frontier of What?,” *American Historical Review* 51, no. 2 (January 1946): 199–216, here 212, 208, 213. For more on Hayes, see Emmet Kennedy, “Ambassador Carlton J. H. Hayes’s Wartime Diplomacy: Making Spain a Haven from Hitler,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 2 (2012): 237–260.

²⁵ For the Atlantic Charter claim, see Bernard Bailyn, “The Idea of Atlantic History,” *Itinerario* 20, no. 1 (1996): 19–44.

²⁶ The reference here is to the rhetorical question posed by Michael Warner in “What’s Colonial about Colonial America?,” in Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000), 49–70.

²⁷ Hayes, “The American Frontier,” 208.

YET THERE IS EVIDENCE OF DISSENT against this view of the U.S. past as irrelevant to decolonization that has lain silenced at the margins of the nation's historiographical archives. These works, which appeared largely in the first two Cold War decades, featured the North American republic not as somehow integrally European, but fundamentally as a "fragment" of modern Europe's colonizing "civilization."²⁸ Their authors, principally Louis Hartz, Richard Hofstadter, David Potter, and especially Daniel J. Boorstin, presumed the U.S. to be a historical product of modern imperialism. For them, the nation's history could not be legitimately excepted from predicaments familiar to other former colonies. Notorious as excessively nationalist consensus authors, this professorial quartet has been falsely advertised in the archives for more than half a century. Boorstin, in particular, warrants reclassification. He merits categorization as an author who was interested in decolonization, and indeed in a postcolonial critique of the U.S. historical experience.²⁹

To appreciate this revision of so-called consensus history, it is necessary to recognize in its authors an underlying dissatisfaction with the hegemony of a European-derived liberalism in British North America and the successor republic.³⁰ Although Boorstin, Hartz, Hofstadter, and Potter by no means collaborated as a true school, they nevertheless shared a concern with the absence of a genuine challenge to the liberal tradition in the U.S. Informed by Alexis de Tocqueville's observations regarding the new North American nation, these historians highlighted and regretted the virtually compulsory character of liberal ways of thought in the republic.³¹ To the dismay of consensus authors, the liberalism inherited from Europe had been untested in their country, and consequently had assumed a complacent, uncritical, and unchanging character. For Boorstin, in particular, the political culture of the U.S. had been exceptionally conservative, with nary a new idea emerging since the late colonial era. "We have become the exemplars of the continuity of history," he observed in *The Genius of American Politics*.³² Not even the American Revolution impressed him as revolutionary. It was "one of the few conservative colonial rebellions of modern times," wrote Boorstin, and compared unfavorably to "[t]he more familiar type of colonial rebellion—like that which recently occurred in India— . . . in which a subject people vindicates its local culture against foreign rulers."³³ The U.S. appeared to be, from his perspective, an ex-colony still desperately needing to decolonize in order to achieve genuine historical advancement.

It is little wonder that Boorstin and the other consensus authors objected to

²⁸ Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (New York, 1964), 3, 95.

²⁹ To be sure, the leading authors identified with the consensus trend did not employ the term "decolonization." This matters little, though, for few scholars writing in English did so until the middle of the 1960s.

³⁰ In this regard, their work merits comparison with Partha Chatterjee's foundational postcolonial text, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, 1986).

³¹ Boorstin described his work as "deeply indebted" to de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which "every student of American culture should read"; *The Genius of American Politics*, 191. For more from Boorstin on de Tocqueville, see also his discussion in *Cleopatra's Nose: Essays on the Unexpected*, ed. Ruth Boorstin (New York, 1994), chap. 10. C. L. R. James, it should be noted, was similarly taken with de Tocqueville's book; see James, *American Civilization*, ed. Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 31.

³² Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 70.

mainstream history-writing as romantically patriotic in its view of national progress and set their work against this scholarship. In their estimation, the historical achievements of the U.S. were ambiguous at best. These historians portrayed apparent national virtues as happy accidents, and often as inseparable from national vices. Here, indeed, lies the basic reason for the prevalence of irony within this so-called “school.” The ironic mood, as C. Vann Woodward (a consensus fellow traveler) affirmed, comported with the affective detachment these historians required for their disenchanting works. It allowed them to dissent from history-writing that betrayed, in their minds, an unreasonably faithful optimism in the republic’s capacity to overcome historical challenges.³⁴ Indeed, at their most critical, consensus authors pitched their takes on the U.S. past with an eye for the pathological. They evaluated the North American society, despite its obvious material health (a “people of plenty,” to cite the title of Potter’s well-known title), as intellectually challenged, ethically unwell, and at times even violently sick.³⁵ Hofstadter, for example, diagnosed the U.S. as a nation afflicted with “paranoia” and “status anxiety,” not to mention “anti-intellectualism.” Boorstin, for his part, detected a national case of “hypochondria.”³⁶

Though all the leading consensus authors merit reconsideration in terms of the postcolonial, Boorstin constitutes the most pronounced case. More indulgent than the other members of the school, he exceeded Hartz, Hofstadter, and Potter in critical wit.³⁷ Likewise, he wrote more poignantly about the persistent hold of Europe on the consciousness of North Americans. While students of U.S. history endlessly lambaste Boorstin as a shameless celebrant of the republic’s past, they overlook the fact that even his sharpest and most consequential contemporary detractor, John Higham, saw that he was not a nationalist booster and, further, admitted the subversive orientation of his work. Higham, the professional critic who almost single-handedly fabricated the idea of consensus, confessed that the real trouble with this school, epitomized in Boorstin’s writing, was its desertion of the patriotic duty “to rediscover [the] grandeur and urgency” of the moral issues that rendered the U.S. past admirable.³⁸ Consensus, Higham’s influential and anxious writings betray, was constructed less as a school than as a conceptual space of quarantine for histories that appeared too detached from the project of affirming the republic’s aspiration to a glorious past.³⁹

Reading Boorstin sensitively, it is not difficult to appreciate why he disturbed a

³⁴ C. Vann Woodward, “The Irony of Southern History,” *Journal of Southern History* 19, no. 1 (1953): 3–19, here 7.

³⁵ Violence in the U.S., of course, was one of the last subjects tackled by Hofstadter. See his collection edited with Michael Wallace, *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York, 1970).

³⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York, 1965); Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, chap. 6.

³⁷ Compare, for example, the pieces by Hofstadter and Boorstin in a *Newsweek* forum from July 6, 1970, titled “Six Historians on the ‘American Crisis.’” Hofstadter’s commentary, a mock self-interview, observed that “part of our trouble is that our sense of selves hasn’t diminished as much as it ought to.” Boorstin, meanwhile, mocked the nation as suffering terribly from illusions of grandeur symptomatic of its provincial ways of thought. See respectively Hofstadter, “The Age of Rubbish,” 20–23; Boorstin, “A Case of Hypochondria,” 27–29.

³⁸ Higham, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus,’” 100.

³⁹ Higham’s first stab at defining a new contemporary school that would be called “consensus” occurred two years earlier; it is a piece that betrays some of the dubious racial politics involved in the construction of this category. See John Higham, “Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A Reinterpretation,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43, no. 4 (1957): 559–578.

peer such as Higham, who had obvious nationalist loyalties. Higham recognized the irony, the rhetorical artfulness and playful ambiguity, in what he revealingly characterized as Boorstin's jazzy prose.⁴⁰ He was on to the fact that Boorstin was an extravagant, erudite mocker, even an absurdist at times.⁴¹ Boorstin's approach to the past did not so much deny U.S. nationalist claims as twist and turn them inside out to seriously comic effect. Typical is his description of the nineteenth-century "American Factory System" in the U.S. Northeast: for Boorstin, it was not only "a triumph of organization and of cooperation, it was also a triumph of naiveté . . . Ignorance and 'backwardness' had kept Americans out of the old grooves. Important innovations were made simply because Americans did not know any better."⁴²

This humorously humbling tone, intended to subvert the patriotic idea of national greatness, pervades Boorstin's historical scholarship. It can be found, for example, in his critical commentary on the historical significance of white supremacy in the construction of U.S. nationality. Ridiculed in Boorstin's writing was the "general assumption . . . that people who do not come from West European, White, Protestant stock are somehow unassimilable." A consistent critic of the dominant nationalist imagination, he prescribed the addition of "'un-American' vitamins . . . to the skimmed milk of Caucasian-English-West-European-Protestantism."⁴³

More substantively, Boorstin's second book, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*, poked serious fun at the founding generation of nationalist intellectuals for their disastrous incapacity to imagine the humanity of non-whites, especially those of African descent. Some of the most hilarious moments in that text appear in his dissection of a Benjamin Rush tract titled "Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition That the Black Color (As It Is Called) of the Negroes Is Derived from the Leprosy." After reproducing long passages of Rush's writing and reveling in its comic value, Boorstin finally relented to deliver his own damning judgment of the patriot's racial ideas:

Through this whole argument ran the assumption (the more significant because not explicitly avowed) that the norm for the color of a healthy member of the human species was *white*. It was inconceivable to Rush that when the Negro had been cured of his affliction and returned to his pristine condition, he would have the red complexion of the American Indian or the yellow of the Asiatic. One of his final arguments for redoubling the effort to perfect a cure was that the Negro might have the happiness of wearing the proper white color of the human skin.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Higham, immediately after noting the excessively celebratory rhetoric in the first volume of Boorstin's *The Americans*, admits room for an ironic interpretation: "But the substance of the book bears no consistent relation to these rhetorical overtones." He also claimed that Boorstin wrote history as "original improvisations" as well as "likes jazz." Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus,'" 97, 98.

⁴¹ Boorstin explicitly claimed his absurdist tendencies in *The Sociology of the Absurd; or, The Application of Professor X* (New York, 1969). "In literature some of the most characteristic words of our age, as everybody knows, have built a Theater of the Absurd. From Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* and *Rhinoceros* we learn things that our generation wants to know. What we seem unable to learn from the reasoned arguments of others we learn from their *reductio ad absurdum*. Why not, then, a 'Sociology of the Absurd?'" (88).

⁴² Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience*, 21.

⁴³ Boorstin, *America and the Image of Europe*, 167, 170.

⁴⁴ Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*, 92–98, quote from 92, emphasis in the original. Benjamin Rush, "Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition That the Black Color (As It Is Called)

His point here was to underline that when it came to an ethics around race, U.S. patriots had been clueless from the very birth of the nation. As he observed in a later essay, “we persist in speaking of the ‘Negro Problem’—though anyone looking at the facts might better describe it as the ‘White Problem.’”⁴⁵

Boorstin’s historical challenge to prevailing patriotic conceits consistently drew attention to the persistent hold of Europe, especially England, on the U.S. imagination. It is this tendency to think critically about the aftereffects colonialism that encourages reclassification of his scholarship as a North American variant of post-colonial studies. Boorstin understood derivativeness as a commonplace in this North American society and wrote histories in which borrowing from Europeans was basic and pervasive and left citizens reliant on former colonial masters for much of its orientation.⁴⁶ The very craft of history-writing, he once observed, testified to the state of literary and scholarly dependency in the early republic. “For years,” he explained in *The Americans: The National Experience*, the second volume of his first trilogy,

Americans leaned heavily on Englishmen. Accounts of the Revolution were borrowed freely from the *Annual Register*, an English Whig publication in which Edmund Burke had written a year-by-year summary of the events of the Revolutionary years . . . The first published “American” effort at a full history of the Revolution was by the passionate and unreliable William Gordon, an English-born clergyman who had come to America in 1770 to join the cause of Independence . . . It was a woman, Mercy Otis Warren (sister of James Otis and friend of Abigail Adams), who wrote the first substantial and comprehensive history of the Revolution by an American hand . . . Significantly, it was not an American but an Italian, Charles Botta, whose *History of the War of Independence* (first published in Italian, 1809; translated into English, 1820) became the first standard account for Americans of all parties. John Adams called Botta the best, and Jefferson predicted it would become “the common manual of our Revolutionary History.”⁴⁷

Historiography according to Boorstin, exposed the North American republic to be, like many other former colonies, struggling to overcome cultural provincialism and intellectual impotence.

Boorstin betrayed this postcolonial interest from the very beginning of his scholarly career, with the commanding place of England in the British North American imagination providing the major premise of his debut work, *The Mysterious Science of the Law* (1941). A detailed and mocking textual analysis of Sir William Blackstone’s eighteenth-century *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Boorstin’s first book made a number of critical contributions in connecting legal and intellectual history, not least by exposing the commercial “faith” that underlay the lawful “reason” of Enlightenment Europe. Yet what matters here is the author’s patently post-colonial point of intellectual departure.⁴⁸ Boorstin was interested in Blackstone’s

of the Negroes Is Derived from the Leprosy,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 4 (1799): 289–297.

⁴⁵ Boorstin, *America and the Image of Europe*, 167.

⁴⁶ The third volume of the trilogy, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York, 1973), for example, explicitly addresses the “cultural colonialism” of fin-de-siècle U.S. elites (504).

⁴⁷ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York, 1965), 367, 368.

⁴⁸ Boorstin’s “postmodernish” attack on Enlightenment “reason” was explicit in the introduction. “In the course of the last hundred years and under the influence of the ideas of Comte, Darwin, Marx, Freud and Veblen, we have come to minimize the importance of ‘reason’ in determining the course of history.

Commentaries primarily because this work of English history, he was convinced, had exerted a profound and enduring influence on the society that formed in the North American colonies and the successor U.S. republic.

Note how he opened the preface to the 1958 Beacon Press edition of *The Mysterious Science of the Law*: “In the history of American institutions, no other book—except the Bible—has played so great a role as Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.”⁴⁹ Readers familiar with Boorstin’s style will recognize in this statement his trademark tone of flamboyant sarcasm. Within this rhetorical style, of course, was a profound political purpose. Boorstin meant to alert (or perhaps alarm) his national audience about the enormity of the conservative hold that an English Tory had on their worldview. Extending his indictment of the U.S. political tradition for its entrenched conservative consensus, he went on to state that “From Blackstone we can learn even more about what the American colonists were defending than by reading the violent tracts of Thomas Paine.” Paine, Boorstin sought to emphasize here, was too radical to be influential in the republic; meanwhile, Blackstone’s “conservative attitude . . . was congenial to America.”⁵⁰

Boorstin’s preface drew attention not only to the sales of the *Commentaries* in North America (noting that they equaled sales in England before the Revolution), but also to its hegemonic appeal.

For decades American lawyers were less learned than their English counterparts; American judges remained mostly laymen. By English standards, they were semi-lawyers, pseudo-lawyers, or mere smatterers. To them, Blackstone had offered the best prier of the law. The elusiveness, the mysterious reverence, and the scientific over-simplicity which we read in the *Commentaries* were long repeated in the American accents of lawyers and judges who had not read much else.⁵¹

For Boorstin, the ultimate significance of Blackstone lay in the sway this Englishman’s way of reasoning held over North Americans. He regarded *The Commentaries* as a crucial institutional vehicle through which “the English tradition lived on and became the Anglo-American legal tradition.”⁵² Boorstin, it is thus important to recognize, wrote *The Mysterious Science of the Law* with a concern for the intellectual and cultural persistence of Englishness in the wake of formal British colonial rule in North America. This was a book that granted Blackstone’s legal writing the kind of authority in British North American history that Caribbean postcolonial studies tends to accord to the texts of Shakespeare.

Boorstin’s postcolonial line *avant la lettre* persisted in his next couple of works, *The Genius of American Politics* and *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*. Both books,

According to these ideas, ‘reason’ ceases to be the power holding in check the dark forces of superstition, self-interest, and unreason, and instead rational systems become themselves the expression of dark and uncontrollable forces. In the vocabulary of intellectual history ‘reason’ has been gradually displaced by rationalization.” Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Mysterious Science of the Law: An Essay on Blackstone’s Commentaries, Showing How Blackstone, Employing Eighteenth-Century Ideas of Science, Religion, History, Aesthetics, and Philosophy, Made of the Law at Once a Conservative and a Mysterious Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), 5.

⁴⁹ Daniel J. Boorstin, “Preface to the Beacon Press Edition,” in Boorstin, *The Mysterious Science of the Law* (1941; repr., Boston, 1958), n.p. (unpaginated).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

carrying on a sophisticated critique of the triumphant march of Blackstone's positivistic and pro-commercial way of thinking in the U.S., extended arguments from his inaugural text. And while space does not permit a justly substantive discussion of them, it is necessary to make a brief comment about the purpose of *The Genius of American Politics*, which may well be the most libeled book in U.S. historiography.⁵³ Starting with the title, it is important to realize that Boorstin meant by the word "genius" nothing more than what he translated as "a characteristic disposition of our culture."⁵⁴ What is more, this work of connected essays identified and lamented the "genius" of U.S. political life as one of naïve and at times even hostile thoughtlessness. Indeed, Boorstin composed *The Genius of American Politics* expressly to ridicule this national disposition. That his intent was satirical was announced two paragraphs into the introduction, where he stressed the extent of the thoughtlessness of the republic's intellectual tradition. The U.S., he wrote, was comparable to "Molière's M. Jourdain, who was astonished to discover that all his life he had been speaking prose." This reference to Molière should have been the key clue for readers to Boorstin's deliberate use of satire as a means of humbling a nationalist imagination that suffered from delusions of grandeur.⁵⁵

Boorstin's third book, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*, documents perhaps his most aggressive argument for the colonial derivativeness of the British North American, and subsequently the "American," way of life. Published in 1958 and a recipient of the Bancroft Prize the following year, this first in a trilogy hammered away at how "plainly borrowed" culture had been in the colonies reimagined as the United States. Book Three, "Language and the Printed Word," is generously packed with examples of the provincial and imitative character of North American colonials. To cite just one instance, in chapter 41, titled "An American Accent," Boorstin observed that "As soon as literary people in 18th century America became conscious of their own language, they expressed an excessive enthusiasm for the standard language of England. Perhaps this was a characteristically colonial phenomenon—people still insecure in their new culture trying to reassure themselves by showing that they could be even more proper than the people back home . . . The colonial frame of mind bred an attitude toward language which still affects the life of every American schoolboy, and shapes the American accent to this day."⁵⁶ It is this way of characterizing the cultural connections between the republic and its colonial past that makes *The Americans* so easy to consider in terms of decolonization and, in particular, the postcolonial.

Boorstin's emphasis on historical dependency, insecurity, and mimicry within U.S. culture may have reached its apex in 1960 with the publication of *America and the Image of Europe: Reflections on American Thought*. Consisting mostly of previously published essays, the collection opened with a new foreword by Boorstin that

⁵³ Moreover, the third essay in this book, "The American Revolution," offers positive evidence for a postcolonial Boorstin. One of its central themes is the unthinking mimicry of British ideas and "notably lacking . . . cultural self-consciousness." *The Genius of American Politics*, 70.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2. Beneath the satire, moreover, actually lies an anti-imperialist argument; to wit, "The thesis of this book is that nothing could be more un-American than to urge other countries to imitate America. We should not ask them to adopt our 'philosophy' because we have no philosophy which can be exported" (1).

⁵⁶ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958), 289, 277.

reflected his delight in ridiculing the prevailing nationalist imagination in the North American republic. This essay, in fact, has the makings of a kind of comic manifesto for the decolonization of the U.S. Mocking what he called a “belief in American omnicompetence,” Boorstin compared the nation to a “child who still thinks that he can at the same time become President of the United States, author of the Great American Novel, and Home Run King of the Big Leagues.” The foreword also featured him making fun of patriotic U.S. intellectuals for a “petulance” that strikingly resembles the predicament of thinkers across the postcolonial world. “Much of the petulance” of nationalist thinkers, he wrote, “is based on the surviving assumption that we can and should shape our culture on West European models. That we must Oxfordize our universities, Great-Bookify our reading matter, Left-Bankify our art, Parliamentarize our politics, Aristocratize our social life and Salonize our conversation.”⁵⁷

While Boorstin’s foreword, which is as entertaining as it is enlightening, unfortunately cannot be reproduced in its entirety, a few references should adequately convey the serious thrust of its argument about the need to grapple with the enduring effects of colonialism within the life of the republic. Early in the text, Boorstin laid out his perspective on the U.S. as an ex-colony. “Until now,” he stated in the second paragraph, “when we have started to talk about the uniqueness of America we have almost always ended by comparing ourselves to Europe. Toward her we have felt all the attractions and repulsions of Oedipus . . . We are both a happy non-Europe and a happy afterlife of Europe. Europe is both our beloved ‘mother country’ and the pernicious source of all ‘alien ideologies.’”⁵⁸ From the patience and understanding with which he began his diagnosis (“Perhaps it is inevitable that we try to distinguish ourselves from our parents before we distinguish ourselves from the whole world”), Boorstin moved into an urgently prescriptive mode. Recommending as a remedy for the republic a heavy dose of historical introspection, he made the following suggestion: “It is time we cease thinking of ourselves as an outpost of Western European civilization. Of course we are ex-colonials,” he flatly declared, “and we have only recently begun to move our cultural capital within our own borders. But we must not doom ourselves to remain an epilogue to European history, making ourselves only a newer Old World.”⁵⁹

At this point, the foreword advocates historical thinking about the U.S. that confirms the postcolonial reading of Boorstin advocated here. Boorstin, warning against the fate that awaited a nation driven by a colonized consciousness (“dominated by the specter of known foreign ancestors”), counseled that the republic could not avoid this predicament unless its citizens bade goodbye to the hegemonic image of Europe—unless, that is, they decolonized the nation’s self-image. North Americans must learn, he urged, to treat non-Europeans as equals.

Only if we can relate ourselves to, and acquire the new habit of comparing ourselves with, the cultures of Asia and Africa—with China and India, with the Arab nations and the rising peoples of Negro Africa. Only then can we remain part of a New World.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Boorstin, *America and the Image of Europe*, 13, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

For Boorstin, the just historical place of the U.S. was alongside other former colonies, the decolonizing world. He understood, of course, that this comprehension of the republic's past imposed on North Americans the enormous challenge of modesty, requiring them to (re)imagine themselves as comparable to *Nuestra Americas*. These hemispheric neighbors to the south, as Boorstin observed in his title piece to *America and the Image of Europe*, "have never been world powers to whom we wished to compare ourselves."⁶¹ Boorstin thus recognized and sought to unsettle the ultimately patriotic belief that material supremacy had made the U.S. exceptional among the world's former colonies. In the end, he clarified that at stake in the continued practice of keeping North American historical material outside of discussions of decolonization and postcolonialism were the issues of nationalist cultural politics—of power, representation, and exceptionalism.

Where and what are the "archives of decolonization"? That is the question this roundtable has asked. The answers lie ultimately in what we are conditioned to see. The documents validated and assembled as historical evidence of decolonization reflect regnant professional rules. Since the Cold War, convention has directed us to disregard the stuff of North American history as credible sources in thinking about the history of former colonial subjects. This re-designation of Boorstin's scholarship as postcolonial breaks with that rule, and, in doing so, offers a larger lesson about the value of acknowledging and questioning the conventional power of archives.

Archives, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has stressed, function as far more than passive, neutral collections of facts. Their authority inheres, rather, in their capacity to dictate, however discreetly, what can be produced credibly as historical truth.⁶² For this reason, the emergence of genuinely novel visions of the past depends less on the discovery of new "facts" than on the will to wonder about and wander away from established archival schemes and guides. Unless archives are deeply interrogated, they confine our historical imagination. Given their traditional nationalist charge, moreover, they tend to maintain "facts" convenient to patriotic illusions, to perform the labor of silencing dissent (to use Trouillot's phrase) against nationalist demands.⁶³ That Daniel J. Boorstin composed panegyrics to the nation is one of these illusions long maintained in the archives of U.S. historiography. That what Boorstin actually wrote were irreverent un-American histories in which the republic appeared as an unwitting postcolony remains a fact of scholarly dissent that has been silenced in the archives.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶² Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 52.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 68.

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