

REVIEW ESSAY

The American Mind Is Dead, Long Live the American Mind

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Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018)

Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)

Daniel T. Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018)

The story of American intellectual history has a mythic quality: a slow beginning, a rise to great heights, and a precipitous fall.¹ Early in the twentieth century, the study of American history and literature grew in American colleges and universities, after many years of teaching European ideas in lieu of an American canon. Then, from a literature department arose Vernon Louis Parrington and from an American studies department Perry Miller—their writing compelling, learned, and suggestive. Their books and their students established the new field of American intellectual history, drawing readers far and wide into their interpretations of how not just individuals but entire peoples had “minds” that hovered above society, transmitting ideas from the past and changing with the times. Miller pioneered this approach with *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, which became required reading for historians for decades—and ever since, for Puritan specialists.² Miller used the published sermons of the most prominent theologians—and their European sources—to describe a crisis in Puritan thought over the character of

¹The original version of this article was published with an erroneous footnote and supporting clause. A notice detailing this has been published and the error rectified in the PDF and HTML copies.

²The first place to go for understanding the fall of American intellectual history from academic grace is John Higham and Paul K. Conklin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979). To get a sense of where the field has gone since then see Daniel Wickberg, “Intellectual History vs. the Social History of Intellectuals,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 5/3 (2001), 383–95; Angus Burgin, “New Directions, Then and Now,” in Joel Isaac, James T. Kloppenberg, Michael O’Brien, and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, eds., *Worlds of American Intellectual History* (New York), 343–64; Thomas Bender, “Forty Years from Wingspread: The Transformation of American Intellectual History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 16/2 (2019), 633–51.

²Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1939).

their faith and therefore purpose. The concept of the regional or national mind became so popular that when Parrington's student Henry Steele Commager published *The American Mind* at mid-century, the book met a hungry public and went into eight printings in seven years.³

And then, a generation of justice-seeking young historians began to question the legitimacy of intellectual historians' speaking for the entire American mind. The rights revolutions from Montgomery to Berkeley to Stonewall not only changed American society, but also the American historical profession. Where the old social history had frequently been linked with intellectual history, the "new" social historians who seized leadership of the profession in the thick of the rights revolutions disdained it. Seeking to represent history from below rather than from the perspective of intellectual elites, social historians developed tools for reaching underrepresented historical actors that bypassed the formal texts intellectual historians favored. They preferred undigested primary sources like probate records and trial transcripts that could provide windows onto the lives of laborers, immigrants, the enslaved, and the prostituted. Intellectual history, which seemed to have taken such lives for granted, fell from favor. By 1985, a historian reviewing a new synthesis of American intellectual history called the specialty a "declining field."⁴

Readers of this journal know that intellectual history then rose again. A new generation of historians revised methods, becoming more rigorous, tying the scope of their claims to the reach of their evidence, importing theoretical perspectives from French social thought and cultural anthropology, developing transnational approaches, and linking with cultural history. Beginning with the seminal meeting of this generation at the Wingspread conference of 1977—convened to honor one of the leading intellectual historians of the prior generation, Merle Curti—American intellectual historians questioned the practices of their predecessors, particularly the baggy notion of national minds. In a 1986 monograph, the young intellectual historian James T. Kloppenberg dismissed notions of American or European minds as "seductive but misleading fantasies."⁵ Modern intellectual history came with nuance: richly contextualized, critically engaged, and sensitive to all hierarchies. The new intellectual historians struggled to reach audiences as broad as their predecessors', given the precision and qualifications their new methods required, but they were content to advance knowledge within their guild.⁶

In light of this story, the appearance of three new books all centrally occupied with the story of American intellectual life across the centuries is both not surprising at all and quite surprising indeed. It is not surprising that three highly

³Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880's* (New Haven, 1950). Under the copyright: "Eighth printing August 1957."

⁴Fred Matthews, "Thinking Small: An Intellectual History to Fit the New Social History," *Reviews in American History* 13/3 (1985), 330–35, at 330.

⁵James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York, 1986), 10.

⁶To see a defense of specialized knowledge, and modern intellectual history, against the ambition of engaging with a popular audience, see Drew Faust, Hendrik Hartog, David A. Hollinger, Akira Iriye, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Nell Irvin Painter, David Roediger, Mary Ryan, and Alan Taylor, "Interchange: The Practice of History," *Journal of American History* 90/2 (2003), 576–611.

accomplished historians have written excellent books that treat texts carefully, attending to both the production of claims about knowledge and the reception of those claims, and including diverse perspectives while remaining lively, accessible, and free from jargon. It is rather surprising, however, that they are all written for audiences beyond professional history and that two of them resurrect the concept of the American mind.

Despite Jill Lepore's fame for her work at the intersection of journalism and scholarship at the *New Yorker* since 2005, she is not primarily known as an intellectual historian, but she has done much intellectual history in her monumental *These Truths: A History of the United States* (2018).⁷ In almost eight hundred pages of text, Lepore spins a narrative of American history that skips along quick close readings of sources both seminal and obscure, interspersed with critical events and a lot of presidents.

An entirely different tone is set by Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, who has compressed the chaotic complexity of American ideas into a slim narrative, the first complete synthesis of American intellectual history since Lewis Perry's 1984 *Intellectual Life in America*.⁸ Ratner-Rosenhagen's *The Ideas that Made America: A Brief History* (2019) is sure to be assigned in many an intellectual history course to come because it is so clear and so lively, describing such a range of ideas.⁹ In an alternative approach to the sweep of American history, Daniel T. Rodgers's *As a City on a Hill* uses one key text—the lay sermon that the Puritan John Winthrop delivered (or may have delivered?) on ship on the way to New England—and parlays it into a reflection on the entire course of American history as it unfolded and as it has been told. All three books are worthy of the attention of serious students of American intellectual history as well as more casual readers.

Of the three, only Rodgers undertook a traditional monograph reliant on original research framed by his own historical question. In contrast, by saying “yes” to publishers who saw a market for syntheses, Lepore and Ratner-Rosenhagen agreed to impossible tasks. They had to massage irreconcilable facts into unified national narratives, despite knowing that no fully true story can be fashioned out of the overdetermined and multifarious American past.¹⁰ Narrative arcs and the tedious truth cannot line up without artistry even when the entire scope of colonial and national history need not be limned. Yet Lepore and Ratner-Rosenhagen succeeded in their impossible charges: they wrote valuable books. They accepted the terms dictated by editors—that one could write long, and the other must write short—and they fashioned their contributions within those parameters.¹¹ Lepore

⁷Here I must disclose that not only do I know personally and feel professionally indebted to all three of the authors under review, but also I am particularly indebted to Jill Lepore in ways that are both well documented and beyond all reckoning.

⁸Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America: A History* (New York, 1984).

⁹One line in the original article and the footnote supporting it were erroneous. Therefore the original wording of this footnote has been removed.

¹⁰On overdeterminism in historical argumentation see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988).

¹¹Ratner-Rosenhagen's charge is implicit in her subtitle “A Brief History,” and she notes in her acknowledgments (ix) that Nancy Toff invited her to take on the project. Lepore acknowledges that “John Durbin at Norton asked me if I would write this book” (792).

wrote a captivating history full of fresh stories, like about how one of the enslaved men who ran away from George Washington helped found Sierra Leone (148). She also voiced occasional timeless truths, such as how wars expand the powers of the state (397). Ratner-Rosenhagen also wrote an absorbing history, but a pithy one, condensing hundreds of years into a tidy package of two hundred pages, explaining as often how intellectual historians think as what they think about. Intellectual historians seek “to comprehend the factors that shape historical actors’ intellectual options,” Ratner-Rosenhagen says, “and to see how their moral horizons and habits of thought played decisive roles both internally in their acts of intellectual volition and externally in their thoughts in the world” (77). Following the Wingspread pioneer Thomas Haskell with her attention to moral horizons, Ratner-Rosenhagen gauges what went into the American republic and what eventually led to—according to the title of her chapter 7—“The Opening of the American Mind.”¹²

Not just a chapter title, the notion of the American mind recurs in Ratner-Rosenhagen’s book, which stands out because she was a student of Kloppenberg’s, but makes sense because her project is shackled to the concept of American nationhood. Despite the flaws of the notion of the “American mind,” especially the incontrovertible fact of American intellectual and cultural diversity from the founding to the present, Ratner-Rosenhagen created a narrative that skips from mind to mind, and text to text—yet she wanted these minds and texts to hang together, and so the innate consciousness of all her subjects as American supplied the thread.¹³ So, too, for Lepore’s *These Truths*. Both Lepore and Ratner-Rosenhagen take the central concept of distinctive American nationhood for granted as a cornerstone of their projects—they must, as this distinctive nationhood is intrinsic to their impossible charges—and the thing that seems to carry American-ness forward from the Puritans to the present is some cast of mind, which Lepore invokes when she quotes Thomas Jefferson claiming that the Declaration of 1776 was meant to be an expression of “the American mind” (98). She allows his words to seem to speak for her, too, but surely Jefferson had in mind only a few Americans for constituting such a mind, where Lepore takes care to be inclusive while suggesting that such a mind nevertheless existed. For Rodgers, however, the premise of particularly distinctive American nationhood is not a given fact but an ideological specimen to put under his analytical lens, and nothing, not even the written word, is stable.

Ratner-Rosenhagen agrees with Rodgers on the instability of ideas. “Ideas are never frozen in place or time,” she states. Rather, “they are historical forces that move—and thereby change—from one interlocutor to another, one place to

¹²Ratner-Rosenhagen mentions Haskell’s seminal essay “The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in ‘the Age of Interpretation’” (1987) in a chapter on the late twentieth century (171), but here she seems to be signifying his debate with David Brion Davis over antislavery, collected in John Ashworth, Thomas Bender, David Brion Davis, and Thomas Haskell, eds., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, 1992). One of the valuable aspects of Ratner-Rosenhagen’s book is how she both represents seminal works of intellectual history from the past several decades and provides pointers for interested readers to find that work.

¹³Her use of the concept of an American mind may thus be said to be a fiction in the sense not of something false, but of something made; see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

another, and even one time period to another” (5). Throughout her book, Ratner-Rosenhagen synthesizes recent scholarship into a primer on American ideas over time as an education for the general reader. With a crisp, expert tone, she charts an intellectual course from before European contact with Native Americans across the centuries to the age of globalization. Centering the theme of “crossings”—thereby signifying an important Rodgers book from two decades ago—Ratner-Rosenhagen focuses on the “intellectual transfer” of ideas across national, temporal, and cultural boundaries (4–5).¹⁴ Although her title suggests that the national project is finished—that America was made by ideas—her text is dynamic and open-ended, starting with a world of empires and moving into the Puritans, the Enlightenment, the making of the republic, and its unmaking and remaking through struggles over slavery and industrialism. Ratner-Rosenhagen addresses the role of women and the nature of art, the career of higher education and the business of philosophy in a country that appears to be a republic of letters, even when the last page is turned. Whatever Americans’ disagreements, for Ratner-Rosenhagen, what is most important is that “the conversation of American thought continues” (180). Point, counterpoint; assertion, rebuttal; claim, qualification: these are the mechanisms by which Ratner-Rosenhagen’s American mind changes, and so as long as dialogue continues, progress of a sort may continue, too. Hers is not a Whiggish narrative—in which Americans advance from superstition to enlightenment—but the act of critical engagement itself supplies the forward motion.

Ratner-Rosenhagen’s approach to American intellectual history is very different from that of Henry Steele Commager or any of the other pioneers of the field, including Merle Curti, after whom the chair in history that Ratner-Rosenhagen holds at the University of Wisconsin is named.¹⁵ Her complete history of American ideas is a quarter the length of their tomes but considerably more diverse in cast. Commager, in 450 pages, mentioned zero black American thinkers and a half-dozen Anglo-American authoresses in his dense book of triumph over dogma; Curti, who must have considered himself quite advanced against chauvinism, named three dozen Anglo-American women in his book, plus Phyllis Wheatley.¹⁶ Neither Commager nor Curti nor any other (white) American intellectual historian before the Wingspread generation really considered the most important problem in American history—the disjunction between the profession of American democracy and the practices of American slavery and discrimination—to be worth investigating, so they acted like they and prior American intellectuals always understood that problem already, when they did not, not really.¹⁷ Almost

¹⁴Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

¹⁵I put this adventitious circumstance in historical perspective in “Philosophy vs. Philosophers: A Problem in American Intellectual History,” IN Raymond Haberski Jr and Andrew Hartman, EDS., *American Labyrinth: Intellectual History for Complicated Times* (Ithaca, 2018), 55–70.

¹⁶Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York, 1943, 1951).

¹⁷The historian W. E. B. Du Bois certainly understood this problem, and wrote about it skillfully, but white historians largely ignored his work, as shown in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the Historical Profession* (New York, 1998), 231–2, 249 n., 485–6. Edmund S. Morgan addressed the problem in *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975).

all Euro-American historians lived and wrote their major works at a time in American history when black Americans were excluded from the places they taught and lived, so only once the more visible phase of the long struggle for civil rights emerged in the late 1950s did most white historians begin to perceive their own blindness on the topic. Even then, Henry Steele Commager unfavorably compared the revolution of 1969 to that of 1776.¹⁸ In response, the black writer Louis E. Lomax asserted, “Professor Commager is of the breed of historians who have a compulsion about romanticizing the American past. What they do tell is fact, but what they deliberately omit creates a lie by allowing the uncritical reader to assume that our founding fathers had an audacious commitment to total individual liberty and freedom—something, of course, they did not have.”¹⁹

Ratner-Rosenthal is careful not to lie by omission, and includes black liberation thinkers from Douglass to King in her narrative, preventing the American mind from appearing entirely Euro-American. She does not include Native American voices, however, allowing the ruination of indigenous peoples to be the beginning of the story, especially as imagined by John Locke but not particularly as experienced by anyone, which reflects one of the hard choices she had to make in her selection process. She has the Puritan minister John Eliot and the Dutch thinker Hugo Grotius, but no Metamora, no Tecumseh, neither Sequoyah nor Black Elk, neither Sarah Winnemucca nor Chief Joseph. In these choices she is reflecting the drift of the modern intellectual history from which she has drawn, which has not synthesized all American voices into any single narrative. Her text reads like an abbreviated course on American intellectual history in a single semester, with guidance from the seminal reader by Charles Capper and David A. Hollinger, *The American Intellectual Tradition* (1989–2015).²⁰ Such an overview is all the more important in a country that has turned, politically, against the evidentiary basis of truth and the value of education and expertise. Ratner-Rosenthal makes a contribution simply by claiming the importance in American history of American ideas, of thinking and deliberation itself. Within the scope of her impossible charge, Ratner-Rosenthal definitively advanced upon her predecessors on the measures of method and inclusivity.

Lepore also recognizes and corrects for how prior synthesizers of American history generally fudged the nation’s profession of democracy and practice of discrimination. Indeed, while the only timeless truth in Ratner-Rosenthal’s *The Ideas That Made America* seems to be the philosophy of pragmatism (82–83, 164), Lepore’s *These Truths* is directly tied to the American dilemma, centering on the question whether the “truths” of “political equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of the people” (xiv) were demonstrated in the course of national history. “Does American history prove these truths,” Lepore wants to know, “or does it belie them?” (xv). Across the long narrative, she asks again and again whether “these truths” have been borne out in practice (411, 450, 519, 689).

¹⁸Henry Steele Commager, “Topics: Revolution 1776 and 1969,” *New York Times*, 6 July 1969, at www.nytimes.com/1969/07/05/archives/topics-revolution-1776-and-1969.html.

¹⁹Louis E. Lomax, “To the Editor,” *New York Times*, 19 July 1969, at <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1969/07/19/90112994.pdf>.

²⁰The most recent edition is Charles Capper and David A. Hollinger, eds., *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 7th edn (New York, 2015).

This is not exactly a historical question. Lepore's book is a history, of course, "an account of the origins, course, and consequences of the American experiment over more than four centuries" (xiv). Her book is no idle chronicle, though, but rather an urgent investigation of political and philosophical questions about the capacity of society to behave democratically, about the perennial human contest between reason and prejudice, rights and oppression as it has played out in the American arena, an investigation that will be unfinished as long as inequality prevails. Just as her first book—the Bancroft Prize-winning *The Name of War* (1998)—offered a history of King Philip's War as a meditation on cruelty, Lepore's *These Truths* seeks to investigate the national experiment in moral terms.²¹ The American contrast between democratic profession and exploitative practice centers, for Lepore, on slavery, an "irony" (48, 106), the country's "original sin" (191, 240), "America's Achilles' heel" (105). The metaphors do not explain the problem, but at least they help the general reader—at whom the book is aimed—see the problem clearly.

Her audience, however, does not only include general readers. Academic historians often sharpen their knives before reviewing Lepore's work, expecting her to be another kind of scholar from the one she has consistently shown herself to be.²² Her critics seem to want something more firmly in history's territory and less on its frontier with literature. Form and content, argument and narrative, fact and fancy: these are the edges Lepore is drawn to dance upon. She weaves stories about the American past and the colors and patterns she chooses reflect her singular judgment and exquisite eye for detail. In telling the story of the incompatibility of slavery and its legacy with any valid claim to American liberty, she ties together the entire history of British North America and juxtaposes telling details, like how President Johnson declared a "war against crime" the same year as the Voting Rights Act, the same year that Watts—twice the size of Manhattan yet without a hospital—burned (622–3). Her interpretation lies in her narration.

Lepore is acutely aware of the current era in which she writes, an awareness that blinks through the narrative in places and weights the tone throughout—especially heavily as the twentieth century picks up and the role of polling and a corporate-manufactured public opinion begins to have a negative impact, in her view, on popular rule. Here her dance on the border between journalism and scholarship is most evident. It is surprising to learn that newspapers in the 1930s called Nazi propaganda "fake news" (456), but then again this makes twisted sense in light of the presidency of Donald J. Trump. Trying to understand of the entire scope of American national history, Lepore kept this fact in mind as a selective principle, which serves a heuristic purpose. However, the cost is steep, as Lepore's sight of the past fifty years exhibits a foreshortened understanding of that epoch, one predicated on unreasoning polarization. In effect, Lepore blames both sides, accepting the media-driven notion that "liberals" impose ideological purity tests without sufficient evidence. By 1977, Lepore writes, "liberal feminists had driven from their

²¹Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998).

²²Richard White, "New Yorker Nation," *Reviews in American History* 47/2 (2019), 159–67. Gordon S. Wood, "No Thanks for the Memories," *New York Review of Books* 58/1 (2011), 40–42. Bernard McConville, "Of Slavery and Sources," *Reviews in American History* 34/3 (2006), 281–90.

ranks virtually all women who were opposed to abortion” (662), as though feminism were an army and the notion of forcing females to grow fetuses were compatible with a commitment to their autonomy. No instance of any such expulsion is forthcoming, but Lepore says that “pro-life Democrats” (those who would want women punished for ending pregnancies?) “were purged,” as though Stalin himself were orchestrating American democracy and those voters were barred from voting for Democrats (668). This builds her narrative of polarization, but it also reinforces a popular media story rather than contributing a scholarly perspective. (Lepore shows better understanding of how voting works when she notes that Hillary Rodham’s opposition to the US war in Vietnam “slowly drove her away from the GOP” (692).)

Lepore’s finger-pointing at liberals is particularly troubling when it comes to the university. Interestingly, although intellectual history features so strongly in her book—John Locke and James Madison, Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, Dorothy Thompson and Earl Warren—Lepore devotes very little attention to colleges and universities, which correlates with the contemporary anti-elitist smear that what happens on campuses is not real life. She seems to agree with current critics of American higher education, painting college campuses as places that became opposed to free speech and free inquiry by the 1990s. “Liberals engaged in a politics of grievance and contempt,” Lepore charges, making them out to be rather illiberal. On campuses, Lepore finds nothing good, only hate-speech codes “banning speech that they deemed offensive.” Professors turn out to be authoritarians: “They would brook no dissent” (691).

This caricature of the university fits Lepore’s narrative of polarization, one in which liberals are to blame for the presidential election of a dishonest would-be demagogue in 2016. She agrees with conservative jurist Robert Bork—who was too reactionary to get confirmed for the Supreme Court in 1987—that liberals want things that “ordinary people would not freely choose.” She also expands on Bork’s thoughts. Liberals did not even try to win popular support in the late twentieth century, Lepore claims, “spurning electoral politics in favor of judicial remedies, political theater, and purity crusades” (787). Democrats may have started dodging the L-word after the 1980s, but surely they continued running for office. It is not clear what a liberal is, for Lepore, other than effete, but this critical claim is tied through the concept of populism to another, much earlier pair of caricatures that Lepore draws for the elections of 1800 and 1824. She characterizes “the battle between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson” as a contest between aristocracy and republicanism that, “with Jefferson, republicanism won” (180–81). Adams groans in his grave. Which of the two was born to wealth, privilege, status, and power? Which of the two controlled the bodies of hundreds of others deemed lesser? And, really, were they not co-revolutionaries, co-designers of the republic? It suited Jefferson’s campaigners to paint Adams as elitist, but why the reputation sticks is much less clear. Perhaps it is too seductive.

Lepore devises a similar shorthand for the contest between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams, with Jackson representing democracy and Adams republicanism. Not only is the slaveholder again somehow more democratic than his antislavery opponent, but the distinction between democracy and republicanism is presented as a hard and clear difference, a distinction Kloppenber calls “nonsense”

in his towering *Toward Democracy*.²³ Lepore uses the distinction in order to get Jackson to bring democracy and, with it, “the birth of American populism” (181). This is a critical stitch in her narrative because it sets up her conclusion. She calls populism as borne by Jackson the belief in majority rule, “an argument about numbers,” which eventually becomes how the truths she is writing about get jeopardized. By the twentieth century, with the creation of the world’s first political consulting firm in 1933, “voters were now being led by a Lie Factory” (450). The vulnerability of voters to manipulation gets compounded by the stupidity of the Democratic Party, which, she alleges, started “willfully kicking its base out from under it” in the 1990s (693). She accuses the party of “abandoning blue-collar workers, especially white men,” and credits the Republicans for “courting” them without mentioning the racial politics involved in that courtship or the deindustrialization that neither party even tried to control. All of this tends toward Lepore’s ominous picture of the grim present, where populism led to Trump, elected by Americans motivated by “earnest yearnings and political despair,” not racism, nor xenophobia, nor sexism, nor whiteevangelical identity. Russian interference, James Comey’s pre-election publicity about Hillary Clinton’s emails, Trump’s loss of the popular vote: not factors for Lepore. “Liberals, blown down by the slightest breeze, had neglected to trim” the sails of the ship of state. They had lost the people because “they had failed to plot a course, having lost sight of the horizon and their grasp on any compass” (788). The story of polarization overcomes history here.

The narrative of a divided nation is understandably tempting as a story of American history and American ideas. Pro-slavery and anti-, pro-Constitution and anti-, Whig and Democrat, Democrat and Republican: these are the binary choices that have faced and vexed Americans since the dawn of the republic. What if the nation is not the enclosing frame for a historical investigation, though? What if a historian takes the career of a text rather than a nation as the spur for analysis?

Daniel T. Rodgers has been on the reading lists of graduate students in American intellectual history ever since he published *The Work Ethic in America, 1850–1920* (1978), which won the Frederick Jackson Turner Prize from the Organization of American Historians and must have made James B. Gilbert, author of *Work without Salvation* (1977), feel rather ill, because although Gilbert wrote a fine history arguing for the endurance of an idealized work ethic in American history and even included the Breadwinners’ College of Thomas Davidson—most often otherwise overlooked—Gilbert did not reach nearly as ambitiously, or capaciously, as Rodgers.²⁴ In this, the outgrowth of his dissertation, Rodgers argued that the work ethic inherited from the Puritans was contested and transformed by the real changes in work that took place as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Although wage labor challenged the idea that a man could improve his lot in life

²³James T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (New York, 2016), 592.

²⁴Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1978). James B. Gilbert, *Work without Salvation: America’s Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1880–1910* (Baltimore, 1977). I treat Davidson and the Breadwinners’ College in *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (New York, 2015), 219–20, 257, 310.

through effort, and mechanization challenged the idea that there was something intrinsically valuable in any sort of work, new ideals of leisure created a sharp contrast between work and play and allowed the old Puritan work ethic to survive into the modern era. Rodgers added to this intervention three critical follow-ups: his 1982 meditation on “progressivism,” his 1987 *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence*, and his 1992 essay on republicanism, which, like his treatment of progressivism, forever changed the way students of intellectual history would think about concepts central to their field of study.²⁵ Rodgers questioned the stability historians assign to central terms, and when he came out with *Atlantic Crossings* in 1998, he challenged the idea that America itself was as concrete as historians thought it was. The move in American intellectual history toward transnationalism had already been established by Kloppenberg in *Uncertain Victory* (1986), but where Kloppenberg took an approach he elsewhere called “pragmatic hermeneutics”—comparing close readings of texts written independently of one another while seeming to draw from the same well—Rodgers tracked the concrete ways that American and European reformers shared and transmitted ideas about social reform across an ocean that only divided them geographically.²⁶

Division then became the central theme of Rodgers’s leap into late twentieth-century America in his award-winning *Age of Fracture* (2011), which described the decade of the 1980s in the United States as an era of disaggregation, one in which old truths were contested and new ones equally doubted, where coalitions disbanded and allies turned into enemies.²⁷ This *oeuvre* of Rodgers’s makes his findings in *As a City on a Hill* quite dramatic. A lot of American intellectual historians thought they understood what John Winthrop’s sermon aboard the *Arbella* meant in 1630 and beyond: the beginning of American exceptionalism. The idea that this country was different from and better than any other country in the history of the world was embedded in the notion that England founded its colonial venture in Boston (never mind that the Anglo landing in Virginia happened decades earlier and with a very different, more proto-capitalist mission). The story of American origins rooted in a New England dedicated to becoming a shining, virtuous “city on a hill” was more appealing than a Virginian origin story in which enslavement followed rapidly upon discovery, and more nationalistic than a Spanish-centered story that begins not on the eastern seaboard but in the West.²⁸ Rodgers counters American nationalism without shifting from the English colonies to the Spanish. By rewriting the narrative of New England derived from “A Model of Christian Charity” from the traditional proto-nationalist story of excellence, and virtue, and vision, Rodgers puts little New England in a much wider context.

²⁵Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982), 113–32. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (New York, 1987). Rodgers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *Journal of American History* 79 (1992), 11–38.

²⁶James T. Kloppenberg, “Thinking Historically: A Manifesto of Pragmatic Hermeneutics,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9/1 (2012), 201–16.

²⁷Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

²⁸On thinking of American origins as Spanish rather than English see Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York, 2002).

“The impulse to set up a new, purer society as an example to a misshapen world is as old as humankind,” Rodgers claims (58). This surprising, transhistorical assertion comes early in a book that thoroughly upends the way historians who have examined the Puritan endeavor have ever thought about it before. A landmark effort to establish a godly society that would galvanize the rest of the world? Far from singular, says Rodgers. Of Perry Miller’s famous essay on the Puritans’ “Errand into the Wilderness,” Rodgers declares, “Most of the evidence for an ‘errand’ this grand was the work of Miller’s imagination” (77).²⁹ The Puritans were not even that special in the colonial world, Rodgers observes. Not only were their numbers small—the Jesuits in Paraguay were 150 per cent more numerous than the Puritans in New England, Rodgers says (64)—but their sense of a distinctive mission was just not distinctive at all. Rodgers stays true to his own earliest research by pointing out that the United States was always a “merchant’s endeavor” (96), while also staying true to his findings from so many decades of discovering contest and anti-American exceptionalism. Rodgers points out that Liberia—a colony named for freedom and intended as an outlet for ex-slaves that so-called white Americans would not tolerate within their polity—used the same rhetoric of a “city on a hill” as Winthrop (160–61). This rhetoric came from the Bible, after all, not from Winthrop, so anyone infected with the evangelical spirit of exceptionalism could harness it for their own nationalistic purposes.

Instead of the truths of Lepore or the American mind of Ratner-Rosenhagen, Rodgers finds only instability, motion, and perpetual transition as texts move across time. No composition of words can “be held within any single meaning,” Rodgers says; “no simile stays easily within bounds” (126, 139). Rodgers is not exactly a relativist, but he finds under any text “no bedrock foundations at all” (216). Intellectual ingredients—words—are “unstable ingredients” (234), like nuclear elements prone to fissure, and fracture and refracture into new elements that work differently in different times and places. Even the American exceptionalism that came from Alexis de Tocqueville—a Frenchman who wanted to see in American democracy elements he could import back to his republic—“was not a fixed thing,” for Rodgers, “but a characteristic in motion” (254).

It may seem that Rodgers contests the arguments of Lepore and Ratner-Rosenhagen, but that is not his objective. True, he says that the meanings of texts that synthesizers treat as stable is actually completely unstable. Just as Winthrop’s sermon changed meaning over time, according to context and purpose, so does any text. Not only does the meaning change, but in “the very act of reading a text, cherishing, possessing or rejecting it, its meaning is remade,” Rodgers claims. “It is, inescapably, always under construction” (280). But so is the nation. Rodgers surely contests American exceptionalism, and any claim that this rickety nation is immune to any of the ills that has befallen other nations, but syntheses like those Ratner-Rosenhagen and Lepore perform are vital to the creation of narratives that might hold this useful fiction—as in something made, not found—together. American intellectual history ought to do both what Rodgers did, in disrupting received truths, and what Lepore and Ratner-Rosenhagen did, in making connections between ideas across time. In the times in which we now live, giving up

²⁹Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA, 1956).

the concept of the American nation to the ideologues who would claim it white, and first, and exclusionary, is not morally feasible. At least some historians of American ideas ought to try to tie this disputatious American electorate together in a story of a collective past that includes the idea that every American bears an inherent dignity and owes an implicit duty, while others question this idea and every other.