BYRON E. SHAFER

Who, What, When, Where, and How

Olivier Zunz, *Why the American Century?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

Olivier Zunz knows what *really* created an "American Century." As a result, he knows that the phenomenon existed long before Henry Luce coined the phrase: Luce was effectively celebrating, not its arrival, but its maturing years. The dynamic involved was complex. It was (and is) both institutional and cultural. Nevertheless, this dynamic had its own main actors, and if their contributions did not call it forth, they did operationalize it. Indeed, the story of these actors acquires additional interest because some—Robert Yerkes or especially Beardsley Ruml—are reliably underplayed in alternative grand accounts, while others who are not—Alfred P. Sloan or even Henry Ford—acquire their role here for different, less conventional reasons.

What happened on American soil from the 1870s was a unique interaction of grand institutional sectors, where educational institutions were actually key. It was a unique reconstitution of evolutionary capitalism, in which marketing and consumerism were likewise key. It was the redefinition of a social type that de Tocqueville had long since branded unique, in which "the common man" became "the average American," where advertising and—mirabile dictu—the social sciences were key. And it was a more troubled effort to create a political theory that could both summarize and guide the result, making it more comprehensible at home and more accessible abroad. These developments implied a fundamental difference in social organization: in the institutional structure of society, in the character of economic life, in the process of individual definition, in the provision of a politics to

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go with them, and then in their international role—their export and its impact:

> Reflecting on the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union that conceded final victory to the Americans, French historian Francois Furet pointed to that fact that the former Soviet superpower may have been a formidable political and military force but never a civilization. The proof is that it could vanish without leaving any substantial legacy behind it. My premise in describing the "American century" that helped shape the "Pax Americana" is to show exactly the opposite. The United States became a superpower precisely *because of* its civilization. (Zunz, xvi)

Said differently, the composite became a "modern society" of a peculiar sort, with a historical trajectory that the developed nations of Europe, and now those of Asia as well, have only partially traversed as this is written.

The Model Elicited

Chapter 1, "Producers, Brokers, and Users of Knowledge," sets out to reveal both the substantive and the structural basis for a new form of social organization. The structural basis was the arrival of a distinctive institutional matrix, a distinctive pattern of interaction among major institutional elites. And the substantive basis was nothing less than the arrival of a "culture of inquiry," even a "knowledge-based economy," a hundred years before contemporary seers began to proclaim it. The "American System" of manufacture fits into this portrait, but it is not the diagnostic characteristic. Rather, what distinguished the United States from other developed nations of the late nineteenth century was that the emergent sectors of its economy and society were independent of the state, unlike the coordinating model of Germany, while being deeply and continuously interactive, unlike the isolated and segmented models of France and Britain.

Along with this institutional matrix, servicing but simultaneously operationalizing it, came new ways of thinking about invention and application, as well as new career patterns for moving scientific discoveries into industrial production. Crucial among the specific institutions that carried this interaction were the great research universities, the industrial laboratories of major corporations, and the agricultural stations elicited by government. What this interaction did in one sense was to allow all three to grow, as they expanded scientific knowledge and employed the graduates of a growing knowledge industry. What it did in another sense was to speed the con-

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version of new knowledge into new products and, especially, new markets. By the coming of World War I, the American military joined, and completed, the basic institutional matrix. What resulted was, essentially, a "new way of being practical":

> The "American century" was founded on Americans' increasingly sophisticated ability to turn knowledge of the physical world into market and military advantages, thus challenging Europeans' economic, scientific, and technological leadership. Starting in the 1870s, Americans created a vast institutional matrix of inquiry to promote this endeavor. . . .
>
> The American matrix possessed a critical advantage. It was flexible, allowing industrialists, managers, scientists, engineers, self-taught inventors, and other entrepreneurs to move among institutions that in Europe, as we will see, remained aloof and independent. Although their interaction was not free of conflict, it energized them. Operating within this matrix allowed Americans to integrate science into the daily economic life of the nation. It also gave them the assurance that they had the resources and the know-how to improve the quality of life at home and elsewhere. (Zunz, 4)

If the resulting society was incipiently remarkable by world standards, it did not lack for associated social problems. Chapter 2, "Defining Tools of Social Intelligence," takes up this side of the story. Once more, there was interaction between knowledge-based institutions and practical decisionmakers. Again, this featured a new substantive thrust, in the arrival of the self-conscious social sciences, of sociology, economics, political science, criminology, and so on. There was a new target for its application this time, in formal governments at national, state, and local levels, but also in the many voluntary and quasi-public organizations for addressing social problems. But again, new institutional intermediaries arose to link the two, most especially in the form of the great private foundations, which institutionalized "the new philanthropy."

This story begins in the struggle of the Protestant churches to deal with the social dislocations of the industrial revolution. Here too there was an easy interaction with the great research universities, which accepted the churches' definition of the problem but sought an application of science—social science this time—that would permit effective treatment and, not incidentally, permit a reasoned consensus behind such treatment. This was fostered consequentially by the great foundations, themselves the product of similarly mixed motives: the religiosity of some of the captains of industry,

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the concern of others with securing their system of wealth creation, plus a general contemporary belief that careful measurement and analysis ought to permit parallel scientific advances in the societal sphere. In that sense, there was an ethos of social science to the United States of the early twentieth century. There were practical tools, in systematic surveys of the distribution of social characteristics, and especially social problems. And there was a "synthesis of science and conscience" as a result. By the time of its greatest challenge, another piece of the distinctive America *cultural* pattern was effectively in place:

> The Great Depression had led social scientists to focus extensively on the meaning of prosperity, which many had come to take for granted in the 1920s. The task of restoring and maintaining a political economy of abundance became a defining feature of an American social science. Early in the century, economist Simon Patten had emerged from the Social Gospel to conceptualize abundance as an attribute of the American century. As Patten had explained it in his *The Social Basis of Religion* (1911), economic scarcity produced both the old economic thinking and the old individualist Christianity, with its emphasis on sin, sorrow, and suffering. Modern industrial society instead required cooperation to distribute the social surplus and eliminate poverty. (Zunz, 44)

It was a different social science, psychology, that gave this cultural pattern a crucial shove toward full generalization, and Chapter 3, "Inventing the Average American," addresses this process. Though again, it was its interaction with major organizational sectors of society—first the military, then universities, then corporate business—that cemented its impact. World War I gave the psychologists their opportunity to move personal testing from individual therapy to mass measurement. Simultaneously, mass intelligence testing in the military moved personal measurement from individual to group characterization, and to the characterization of central tendencies for all of society. University admissions then gave this testing process its meritocratic charm: test results, not social connection, could govern entry. It was but a short hop to advertising, to an attempt to assess the market more scientifically and, ideally, to manipulate it.

The missing ingredient here was the rise of survey research, of the scientific sample survey, and this became a product of the Depression and World War II. Zunz avoids the familiar trap of accepting the claims of the initial generation of market researchers about the power of their deliberate interventions. What these techniques really helped corporate businesses to do

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was just to find their market—its potential members, their key characteristics, and the approach that best appealed to them. What Zunz emphasizes instead is the way that these developments collectively created, or least reified, the rise and growth of a great American middle class. If "the average American" was a creation of mass testing and survey analysis, such a being was still patently middle class, so that being like this middling average became itself a desirable social condition. Along the way, applied social science was creating a different society and, especially, a different marketplace:

> In a trend to develop a theoretically neutral field of applied statistics that paralleled the search for social intelligence, the United States became the land of human engineering. With an agenda that was slanted toward the moment and toward generating easily communicable results, the influence of applied statistics on a range of social sciences, first among them psychology, turned out to be critical. Human engineers created guidelines for selecting personnel, organizing hierarchies, selling goods, and winning elections. If only psychologists could get at the psyche of not just individuals but groups, starting with factory workers and continuing on to large masses of employees and consumers, they could improve the effectiveness of both private and public organizations.
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> So vigorous were America's human engineers in giving concrete form to an abstract vision of individuals and community that the concepts and methods they put forth came to define mass society. It is largely their theory of an average American and the techniques of measurement they invented to define such a hypothetical human being that accounts for our understanding of modern society as "mass." (Zunz, 48)

What finally locked this pattern into place was then a widespread cultural self-definition, a redefinition of individuals according to their consuming rather than their producing roles, within an ever-larger, national, "social contract of abundance." These are the subjects of Chapter 4, "Turning Out Consumers." A heterogeneous society with an available frontier was a long-standing explanation not just of the greater geographic but of the greater social mobility of American society. Zunz notes the way that this mobility was augmented not just by the occupationally middle-class character of the society that was emerging, but also by the comparatively early appearance of public education, as a further means by which the less privileged, and especially the newer immigrants, could acquire outward middle-class characteristics. Yet what he really adds to this picture is the place of a common experi-

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ence as consumers within a middle-class society, to the point where individuals came to define themselves in their consumption rather than their production roles—with all the further contributions that this made to stylistic *homogeneity* and social mobility.

Such a development was intellectually dependent on a high-wage/low-price theory of economic growth. Just as it was practically dependent on the willingness of corporate giants in the early twentieth century to view high wages as means to buying more products rather than viewing low wages as means to line their own pockets directly. This development was challenged, critically, by the Great Depression, with its heightened class conflict and the possibility that redistribution would be the main policy response. Yet the argument from underconsumption rather than overproduction ultimately carried the day—Roosevelt sought multiple means of boosting consumer spending—so that mass consumption returned as "the American means of social cohesion." Social welfare conflicts did continue to characterize the immediate postwar years, yet labor and management nevertheless managed to remain united on a general access to mass consumption. In the process, unionized labor was now able to become just another segment of that broad and diagnostic, American middle class:

> If Americans have been reluctant to resort to a rhetoric of class conflict in the way that citizens of other modem industrial societies have, it is because the process of inclusion has been driven by the growth of the middle class. This is a phenomenon that the social engineers who invented the concept of the average American understood. The expansion throughout most of the twentieth century of a large, urban industrial middle class of white Americans, with an extraordinary capacity for enlargement as well as internal segmentation, has facilitated and eased tensions among parts of society. Americans have been committed to an open class structure and have counted on an expansive and absorbing center as a key to the realization of their social contract. They have promoted a model of social integration from the middle out. (Zunz, 74)

What remained was merely to reintroduce differentiation into mass marketing, without introducing social division. This is the subject of Chapter 5, "Deradicalizing Class." Once more, there was a social science at the heart of the matter, this time sociology, with its description of the full range but stratified clustering of consumer behavior. And once more, there was a marketing strategy, predating "applied sociology" but heavily informed by it in the postwar years: provision of modestly diversified products to appeal to

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different social situations while giving them a sense of membership—even mobility—within a broader social mass. Self-betterment and self-expression were the promise. Status and prestige, not class conflict, were the means. The analysis of consumer behavior was the tool. If this is a substantively thinner chapter than its predecessors, that is because its main points have largely been prefigured:

> What made American corporate capitalism distinctive was not its superior technological prowess, for competition with Europeans for technological innovation was fierce. It was instead the ability of American managers to put technological innovations to the service of an organizational revolution promoting mass consumption. In this endeavor, the difficulty was to reconcile mass and class. Satisfying a fictional average customer was one procedure; producing different versions of the same product for average consumers in specialized markets another. To reach as large a mass as possible, American marketers sought to meet people's real expectations while downplaying the significance of their class divisions. Whereas nineteenth-century plutocrats had looked to the workings of the market to justify social inequality, twentieth-century marketers saw themselves as modem-day levelers who could accommodate different groups within a single deradicalized class.
>
> Their vision of a market society at once homogenous and diversified developed during the interwar years just when pollsters and other applied psychologists attempted to bridge the ideas of the average American and of social stratification. (Zunz, 94)

The Argument Affirmed

These first five chapters are thus a powerful and coherent argument about the evolution of American society, even about an innovative societal distinctiveness sufficient to create an "American century." Such a search for distinctiveness is always problematic, in that all nations (like all individuals) are reliably distinctive when observed closely. But the problem is effectively sidestepped here, courtesy of the mission organizing this book from the title onward. No one is tempted to go off in search of a French analog, for example, at least not this century; nor of a German counterpart, nor, any longer, of a Soviet variant. Which is to say: for this argument, the distinctions that created a metaphorical *American* century are the distinctions that matter.

An American distinctiveness still faces serious analytic problems. For the

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phenomenon is, in the jargon of the social sciences, "overdetermined." That is, there are far more explanations for the composite distinctiveness of this single nation than there are phenomena to be explained. Worse yet, these explanations are nearly impossible to isolate, given that many are simultaneous and most require some counterfactual to dismiss them. The triumph of these first five chapters, then, along with their cumulative argument, is less that they trump all prior alternatives: Zunz is in some sense pursuing half of Tocqueville's "contradictory synethsis"—the half involving dedicated pursuit of material wealth without the half involving dedicated pursuit of spiritual uplift and moralism. Rather, the triumph of these first five chapters is that they add a significant and substantial, fresh causal contender to a large, established, and ongoing argument about national distinctiveness, when even devotees must have felt that the field was exhausted.

There is little further point in a compare-and-contrast approach to these grand alternatives. Candidates for the engine of American distinctiveness include society, state, ideology, culture, geography, and historical path. All these bid to be the driving force behind a specifically American model, without which other factors are alleged to array themselves as (mere) further implications. Thus the United States is still the great *postfeudal* nation; or it is the great civil society; or the great liberal ideologue; the great populist heterogeneity; the isolated giant with an endless frontier; the heir to a democratic revolution that survived civil war, industrial revolution, economic depression, and cold war. To these, Zunz forcefully adds that it is the nation that has most clearly made "marketing" its central institutional process, "consumerism" its basic social dynamic.

It would be possible to make even these allegedly fresh underpinnings for an American distinctiveness merely derivative of an *ongoing* interaction between culture and institutions more generally. In this line of argument, only such a society, with such a set of patterned values operating through such an institutional structure, would have been available to the dynamics and actions that produced marketing and consumerism as diagnostic characteristics over the last hundred years. But this is a pointless way to proceed: increasingly vague and amorphous, inherently uncontrolled and probably uncontrollable. Suffice it to say that it is equally possible to argue—Zunz provides copious ammunition—that marketing and consumerism were not the sole and inescapable available product of those earlier predispositions. By extension, the resulting "century" surely would not look as it does without them.

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The Model Applied

Better, then, to salute a powerful and coherent view—it hardly matters, now, whether it is a main causal alternative or a huge explanatory elaboration—as long as it is fully capable, in principle, of contributing that American century, which makes the next three chapters of the book all the more puzzling. Zunz goes on to address the politics associated with the developments of the first five chapters. He goes on to address the social extension of marketing and consumerism to parts of society initially more peripheral and distant to them. And he goes on to look at the reception of this "American model" in the outside world. Yet in each case, instead of driving the story of the first five chapters through these remaining three, he veers off and argues something else.

The charm—indeed, the central method—of those first five chapters is the attempt to drive a connecting argument through its crucial realms, seeking evidence of coherence and consistency with an overarching model. If this model cannot then be made to infuse and animate the political story, the socially excluded story, and the non-American story, however, it probably *is* derivative of some previous and larger social trends; it obviously *cannot* carry the tale of a comprehensive American century. The puzzle, then, is that the effort is not made, especially since, at least to this (increasingly convinced) reader, it seems inherently possible. Instead, one of these chapters asserts the need for patent inconsistency, one goes off in search of a different argument, and one comes close, after its opening paragraphs, to eschewing any main argument at all.

Chapter 6, "From Voluntarism to Pluralism," does take the central argument of the book to politics and government, as some chapter surely must. But here Zunz concentrates not on practical politics but on social theory, a social theory known widely as "pluralism." He finds it sadly lacking as a way to adapt the politics of a modern society to the marketplace that it was simultaneously acquiring:

> Modern political pluralism was born an abstraction and stubbornly remained one. Supporting multiple loyalties resulted in ambiguity toward all. Unlike nineteenth-century local voluntary associations, twentieth-century national interest groups were distant from their members. Even the more practical applications of pluralism, like organizing lobbies or oiling machine politics, could never match the daily face-to-face relationships of voluntarism. Voluntarism was constantly put to the test of human interaction. Pluralism, however, had trouble with realities. (Zunz, 127)

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Whether one is willing to go along with this view of the shift in dominant social theories, from voluntarism in the nineteenth century to pluralism in the twentieth, depends heavily on a view of the direction of social change as between them. Pluralism is less realistic if one believes that the move is from greater to lesser social heterogeneity, more realistic if one believes the opposite. Pluralism is less realistic if one believes that the move is from greater to lesser diversity of lifestyles, more realistic if one believes the opposite. Pluralism is less realistic if one believes that daily life involves a greater emphasis on enforced social conformity, more realistic if one believes the opposite. And so on. I believe "the opposite" in each case, but all the alternatives are arguable.

The larger point, however, is that the approach of the book has now shifted. It is as if Chapter 1 looked less at the key fact of a fluid interaction among intermediary elites, more at organizational form and elite theory. Or as if Chapter 2 looked less at the process of measuring social intelligence and applying those measurements, more at the concept of intelligence and the theory of item design. And so on. Which seems a double shame, in that the framework established in these early chapters appears so remarkably *apt* for an approach to the actual evolution of American politics from the late nineteenth through the twentieth centuries. And indeed, to an application of the same methodology, of looking at the real behavior of the marketers and the consumers by way of the story of those who actually created and implemented the practical tools that linked the two.

This is true from the very beginning, with the creation and then implementation of the institutional device that, perhaps more than any other, was to make American politics practically distinctive at the grassroots. This is, of course, the primary election, a key institutional invention of the Progressives, those models of that elite interaction with which Zunz begins his book. Primaries then proved the ideal forum, not just to link candidates who were themselves increasingly independent entrepreneurs with a mass public that was increasingly operating without partisan elites as intermediaries. Primaries also proved the ideal forum for the application of *polls and polling,* the technology which, more than any other, informed the politics that resulted—and that linked the market and its consumers once again. Why we get their story for the packaging of autos and soap, but not for the packaging of candidates and policies, is just a puzzle.

A puzzle of a different sort comes with Chapter 7, "Enlarging the Polity. This chapter aspires to carry the larger argument to those groups that did not share in its dynamics, even if the timing and the degree of their nonsharing varied, to see either how they entered or how they confronted the marketplace and consumerism. Inevitably, part of this secondary investigation must

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again proceed by means of the politics associated with these groups. Yet once again, the actual approach just abandons that of the five opening chapters, the ones that established the model. In the process here, the very definition of which groups were included and excluded in the creation of that model undergoes a shift that appears built on some other theory or model, rather than on the one so forcefully contributed by the rest of the book:

> The very idea of exclusion was hard to assert in an age and continent that did not want to recognize group discrimination and implement mechanisms of redress. Yet the extensive success of pluralism eventually led to the embattled claims for group rights that divide Americans today. The people excluded from full participation in the many advantages to be gained from membership in the pluralistic polity fought back by proposing alternatives solutions. Industrial workers, African Americans, and women waged well-known struggles. Although not the only victims in American society, their effort to enlarge the polity is informative. These groups fought for justice and equality in the context of the larger shift from nineteenth-century voluntarism to twentieth-century pluralism. (Zunz, 138–39)

With the first five chapters of the book as template, the key distinction here is surely one of center versus periphery, in two senses. The first sense is conventionally geographic, between those areas where marketing and consumerism early transformed society versus those areas where it did not, areas that might thus have (though they did not have to) become centers of resistance. A secondary cut at this distinction would then be crosscutting, involving social groups within the geographic center that were nonetheless outside these new market dynamics, as well as social groups outside the geographic center that were nonetheless inside them. In both senses, what matters to the analysis is the institutional difference between being in the marketplace versus being outside it, along with the individual difference between having a consumerist identity or not.

Instead, one gets the very odd collection of industrial workers, African Americans, and women. The first of these, as the working class, has already been the subject of Chapter 5 and a key element of Chapter 4, and its reappearance here is thin and crude by comparison. In contrast, the second, African Americans, can probably meet any standard for the logic of exclusion, including, most especially, those that follow on from the core of this book. Yet the analysis that a dedicated reader of this particular text has been led to expect, an analysis of the place of African Americans in the marketplace and as embodiments of consumerism (or not), never occurs. Once

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more, this seems a double shame, since a picture of the partial marketization of the black community and of the differential role of African Americans as consumers—an analysis akin to that which the working class does receive in Chapters 4 and 5—seems likely to produce a hugely effective (and wonderfully neutral and indisputable) picture of African Americans today: still only partially and differentially integrated, this long after their isolation, into the dominant dynamics of their society.

Last, the third of these groups, women, had seemed all along a main vehicle for the opening chapters. Indeed, marketing to them, and getting them to define the consumerist character of the broad middle class—much more in most ways than their men—were critical building blocks of the story. Now, it is as if we are suddenly being told that the first five chapters have actually been miswritten, to make it clear that this is a masculine marketplace full of masculine techniques, producing masculine consumerism for masculine identities. By extension, if women were not both central as a group and hugely important in statistical terms to the dominant model that is the book's main contribution—if they too were instead excluded—then the notions about a broad middle class and an "average American," with their risks of conformity and the difficulties they created for evident minorities, just will not stand up. For this reader, they still do.

Finally, the part of the story that is most evidently just "missing"—though asking for too much of it might require another book—involves the fate of this model in the outside world, that is, the world outside the formal geographic boundaries of the United States. Chapter 8, "The American Experiment in Japan," begins with one of the most fascinating cases for the observation of this process, and for an explicit clash of dominant models. But its story quickly becomes instead one of the clash of two visions of the American reality, a nineteenth-century versus a twentieth-century vision, made explicit through an attempt to impose them as the route to democracy and prosperity for a postwar Japan:

> To understand what took place in Japan and, beyond that, to discern the norms Americans hoped to export abroad requires moving away from the attractive but all-too-abstract theory of American hegemony and settle for the messy facts and unexpected turns of the Pax Americana. As rulers in Japan, Americans faced the challenge of defining objectives rapidly as well as designing legal, economic, and social policies to follow in occupation and rebuilding. We need therefore to pay close attention to misunderstandings, contradictions in policy, changing circumstances, and unexpected outcomes. Only then will Ameri-

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> canization become a heuristic concept, not a foregone conclusion of global power or an exercise in wishful thinking. (Zunz, 161)

Such an approach is good at contrasting a nineteenth-century vision of the American virtues to be fostered, held most centrally by Douglas MacArthur, with a twentieth-century vision, held in contrast by Joseph Dodge, the Detroit banker whose "Dodge line" had more influence on the postwar Japanese economy than anything proposed or implemented by MacArthur. But the story of any actual "Americanization" in Japan necessarily occurs after the point when this initial contrast (and direct American administration) ended. By worrying nearly not at all about this grander part of even just the Japanese story, Zunz effectively skips the question of the international impact of marketization and consumerism as shaping societal phenomenon.

Which is a further shame, since that particular story has resonances everywhere. From below, this international story would comment powerfully on the comparative attractions of a consumer culture for societies organized more centrally around producer than consumer roles. From above, this story would reveal much about the comparative institutional reach of marketization as the dominant means of social organization. Moreover, by turning the analytic lens around—looking at the response of non-Americans to members of those putatively excluded American social groups when the latter ventured abroad as tourists—it would even be possible to judge the degree to which they embodied (or not) the standard American cultural characteristics, by virtue of those same marketized expectations and consumerist attitudes.

The Tasks Remaining

In the end, however, the main point is not to hold these final three chapters up to the template of the first five. For the first five chapters really do present a fresh argument, strong and coherent, for the American distinction. And this argument almost cannot help but go on and bid for the role of central explanation—even if Zunz himself had not asked "Why?"—for the appearance of an American century, ongoing as this is written. That is a large achievement. Since the book as a whole is a compilation of previous pieces, where the author himself began to see more and more of the implicit connections among them, that fact will serve, at least for this reader, as sufficient explanation for why not all these pieces are executed with equal density and force, much less with consistent dedication to the central idea.

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Let me say the same thing differently. This is synthetic history in the very best sense. It drives a large idea across an extended period, and it brings both to life with a broad array of disparate but specific developments. Provocatively, this idea is sufficient to underpin a historical centrality—a metaphorical American century—through what are essentially domestic developments. If the working out of their full domestic reach, much less of their international role, is completed neither in this book nor in the real world, these are only tasks, as they should be, for other volumes or other scholars. Which is to say: in the end, this book's central idea is big enough that the loose ends bid only to be research agendas for other interested scholars.

Oxford University

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