

“A NAME AFFIXED TO A PLOT OF THE GLOBE”.  
FRANCIS LIEBER, AMERICAN IDENTITY,  
AND RELATIONAL NATION-BUILDING, 1827-1833

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ABSTRACT

It is by now admitted that nationalism develops through transnational interaction. However, it is rarely explored how this happens – how exactly these influences happen, when, or where. After distinguishing national identity from nationalism, this paper aims at following Francis Lieber’s early contribution to the nation-building process in the United States. From 1827 until 1835, through his literary works, he imported several institutions or theoretical bias from Prussia and Europe, with different patterns and different outcomes: the first attempt (Prussian gymnastics) did not survive long, while the reformation of educational institutions heavily relied on the European models; lastly, the *Encyclopedia Americana* edited by Lieber displays all the tensions within the concept of national identity, since it is imbued with different orders of local, European and cosmopolitan biases. Taken together, these processes shows, first, that the transnational interaction is not only competitive, and that cooperation and imitation are also crucial to the building of the American national identity; second, they underscore that the exceptionalist perspective – but in fact any national identity – is torn between a substantial difference’ narrative and a necessarily relational nature.

**Keywords:** National Identity, Transnational History, Political Philosophy, History of Ideas, American History.

INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Almost thirty-five years have elapsed since Carl Degler’s accusation of himself and his colleagues: “If we historians fail to provide a nationally de-

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financed history, others less critical and less informed will take over the job for us".<sup>1</sup> His book is a manifesto in which he urges us to recover national history in order to counter and expose nationalist ideologies. However, in the last decade multiple approaches have developed which can accomplish the same task by providing external, comparative, and connective approaches, showing the complex nature of nation.<sup>2</sup> Among these, transnational history argues that human relations: influence, exchange, interaction, interference, importation, etc. bring about the national frame, rather than the opposite.<sup>3</sup> For example, Ian Tyrrell states that

the "national" must not be assumed; other influences on people than the nation must be recognized, because the [...] interaction of people, ideas and institutions across and within nation-state changes over time. The nation is not the only historical "actor".<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to the United States, exceptionalism occupies a prominent place in the inquiries about the concept of nation and nationalism; as perhaps the only case of state-nation, the U.S. is thus a privileged object of the transnational approach.<sup>5</sup> Yet this pattern seems to appertain to any national identity, as Anne-Marie Thiesse argues:

Nothing is more international than the creation of national identities. It is an enormous paradox, since the unshakeable peculiarity of each national identity has been the justification of bloody wars, and yet the model is the same, developed in the frame of intense international exchanges.<sup>6</sup>

This paradox is nowadays undisputed among political scientists and historians, which analyze national histories from this relational perspective. These studies have progressively expanded the Andersonian hypothesis that national identity is modular, or "capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations".<sup>7</sup> For example, Sean Wilentz underscores

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by LEPORE 2019: 1.

<sup>2</sup> The opposition of contextual and connective approaches is developed by PERL-ROSENTHAL 2017.

<sup>3</sup> AHR conversation 2006: 1449.

<sup>4</sup> TYRRELL 2007: 3. Yet Tyrrell aims at 'globalizing' U.S. history, which is not the purpose of transnational history. See AHR conversation 2006: 1446.

<sup>5</sup> Interchange 2011: 478.

<sup>6</sup> THIESSE 2001: 5.

<sup>7</sup> ANDERSON 2018.

the "technique of comparison in search for identity" typical of the Jacksonian era when the United States was marked by a "reactive nationalism" against Europe. Lloyd Kramer, after quoting Stuart Hall – "cultural identity is not an essence, but a positioning" – sees *hybridity* as the core of any national narrative. Catherine Hall also concludes that "identity depends on the outside, on the marking both of its positive presence and content and its negative and excluded parts".<sup>8</sup>

Among these many anti-essentialist approaches, however, few dive into the basic dynamics of the process of hybridization. For example, Axel Körner explored how history books in Italy determined transatlantic perceptions of the U.S.; Sam Haynes thoroughly analyzed the process of the American emancipation from the British cultural yoke through literature and theatre.<sup>9</sup> Still, several questions stand unanswered: How does national positioning take place tangibly? How is this hybridity managed in nation-building? This is what this paper aims to explore through Francis Lieber's written works and exchanges.

## DEFINITIONS

By national identity, or *nation*, we mean the collective psychological phenomenon identified by Anderson in his classic work.<sup>10</sup> This is mainly a negative definition. On one side, the nation is not nationalism by which we mean the conscious exploitation of the national identity for a political project. On the other side, nation is not any institutional element of a sovereign state, such as a written constitution or its institutions; those are elements of the state. Moreover, it excludes cultural expressions which are not related to the idea of a common identity among a people. Not every book, not every opera, not every citizen's association takes an interest in building or maintaining that common identity. Accordingly, the processes of nation-building (meaning the creation of national identity) and state-building are likewise distinct. Writing a constitution is part of state-building, while teaching the constitution and its history all over the country is part of nation-building.

It is easy to imagine different national identities in competition, for example when they claim an exclusive jurisdiction over a specific cultural phenomenon; yet this is not the only possible relationship. A nation can

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<sup>8</sup> WILENTZ 1990: 17. KRAMER 2011: 16. Italics mine. HALL 2002, in TYRRELL 2007: 4.

<sup>9</sup> KÖRNER 2017. HAYNES 2010.

<sup>10</sup> I'm borrowing here Trautsch's definition, TRAUTSCH 2016: 291.

claim to be a model for other nations, as in the *City Upon a Hill* narrative; nations can be in opposition, for example when the German national identity was seen by its champions as the purification from French customs and language, a simple negative narrative about France without positive connotations.<sup>11</sup> Two national identities can imitate each other, as when Lieber tried to import to the United States, *as is*, the Prussian institution of the *Turnverein*.<sup>12</sup> This is the first occurrence we will consider. Following the gymnastics fever in New England (1827-1828), we will focus on the foundation of New York University (1830) and the literary enterprise of the *Encyclopedia Americana* (1828-33). Despite their proximity in time and context, each of these cases highlights a specific aspect of the hybridity of nation-building.

#### FRANCIS LIEBER, TRANSATLANTIC MEDIATOR

The “American by choice” Francis Lieber, as he often described himself, is a perfect incarnation of the paradox pointed out by Thiesse.<sup>13</sup> Being a publicist and professor, he often discussed the concept of nation, which makes the analysis of his work particularly interesting. Indeed, his reputation as an expert on “the nation” pushed his colleagues to recommend him to President Grant for the role of international arbitrator in 1869: “[His] luminous and instructive essays [...] constantly held up to the country and the world the ‘nationality’ of our continental republic, as the only sure palladium of its safety dignity and peace”. Lieber, they wrote, was especially fit for the diplomatic task because of “his well-established reputation both at home and abroad, his deep philosophical knowledge of the history of nations and their public law”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The use of “Germany” is frequent in Jahn and Lieber’s writings, although nothing suggests what is included in this *antelitteram* definition. However, this misuse of the word suggests that the idea of nation was already clearly distinct from that of state.

<sup>12</sup> Here we will only consider the mediation from Europe to the United States, but the process is not unidirectional.

<sup>13</sup> On the biographical approach in transnational history, see LEERSSEN 2011.

<sup>14</sup> To Lieber (copy), 04/16/1869. Letter. Item CS0078, Francis Lieber Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C (from now on: *LoC*). Other collections used for this research are: Francis Lieber Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (from now on: *SCL*). Francis Lieber Papers 1815-1888, mssLI 1-5222, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (from now on *HL*); Francis Lieber Papers Ms. 71, Special Collections, Milton S. Eisenhower Library, Johns Hopkins University (from now on *JHU*). Francis Lieber papers, Columbia College papers, 1703-1964, bulk 1754-1920, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries (from now on *CUNY*).

Born in Berlin in 1798, Lieber watched his brothers take up arms against Napoleon in 1813. In 1815, old enough to volunteer in the army, he fought at Namur and was severely injured. Back home he joined both *Burschenschaften* and Friedrich Jahn's nationalist groups of gymnastics, the *Turnverein*. The young veteran quickly became one of Jahn's most loyal disciples, and he joined him in his tour throughout Germany to promote cultural emancipation from France. Jahn, who had published *Deutsche Volkstum* in 1810, was a radical nationalist. However, by 1819 this nationalism became a threat to the restoration reactionary regime, and Lieber and many other former patriots found themselves to be public enemies. He illegally joined Ypsilanti's rebellion in Greece, but the short adventure was bitterly disappointing. In the summer of 1822 he went to Rome and asked for refuge from the Prussian historian Barthold Niebuhr, then ambassador to the Papal State. In contrast to Jahn's virulent nationalism, the ambassador's critical attitude and moderation provided Lieber with a new perspective. Niebuhr's mentorship did not mitigate his German patriotism, but balanced it with a sound international awareness. As a result, Lieber grew up with a double *forma mentis*: nationalist and internationalist, soldier and writer, social reformer with a keen eye for history.

When he crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1827, the United States offered a variety of applications for such a peculiar mindset. Lieber multiplied his literary accomplishments hoping to find a stable occupation, which he secured only in 1835. As a professor first in South Carolina, from 1835 until 1857, then in New York, Lieber would carry on to reflect upon cultural and political theories in his countless works, thus becoming a "conveyer and synthesizer, if not [an] originator" of political concepts.<sup>15</sup> Thanks to his dense conversation with intellectuals across the Atlantic Ocean, he was in a privileged position to shape the process of hybridization of the U.S. national identity. Secession encouraged Lieber's reflection on international law, which he had started in the late '30s with regard to literary copyright. By the end of the war, he was a reputed publicist involved both in Reconstruction and in the movement to promote international law. He died in New York in October, 1872, while dreaming of a last visit to the German nation recently united by Bismarck.

Lieber was fully aware of his "cultural mediator" role.<sup>16</sup> In 1840, speaking about his *Manual of Political Ethics* later adopted by many colleges nationwide, he underscored that "No German I know could have analyzed public life as I have done, having had the advantage of a practical citizen's

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<sup>15</sup> FREIDEL 1949: 417.

<sup>16</sup> FRANK and MUELLER-VOLLMER 2000: 2.

life, for many years, in a vast republic; no American probably could have written other parts without first entering deeply and laboring into continental knowledge".<sup>17</sup> This remark reflects a deeper theoretical frame which is already developed in 1835:

Whenever colonists settle among a different nation [...] without intermixture with the original inhabitants, a variety of inconveniences will necessarily arise. Living in an isolated state, the current degree of civilization of the country in which they live does not reach them; and they are equally cut off from that of their mother country: mental stagnation is the consequence. They remain a foreign element [...]. Those, therefore, who lately proposed to form a whole German state in our west, ought to weigh well their project before they set about it [...]. "Ossification", as the Germans call it, would be the unavoidable consequence. These colonists would be unable, though they might come by thousands and tens of thousands, to develop for themselves German literature, German language, German law, German science, German art; everything would remain stationary at the point where it was when they brought it over from the mother country, and within less than fifty years our colony would degenerate into an antiquated, ill-adapted element of our great national system, with which, sooner or later, it must assimilate. What a voluntary closing of the eyes to light, would it be, for a colony among people of the Anglican race, – which, in point of politics, has left every other race far behind –, to strive to insolate [sic] itself.<sup>18</sup>

To Lieber the idea of national consciousness was strictly related to the idea of international, or rather, transnational interaction which in turn leads to mutual improvement and therefore to shared progress. This same pattern is clear in another letter to his friend Samuel Ruggles in Boston, in 1847, where Lieber commented on a German enclave in the United States:

When they talk of Germanizing America I spurn the idea. [...] Germany has no institutions, has no popular common law, no tradition of liberty. What, Germanizing America and draw out of our country the Anglican institutions, as the bones out of a turkey, and leave a lump, fit only to be despatched? [...] A nationality in a nationality, like a minnet in a pike! And what nationality. *Transplanted* nationality can consist in institutions only, and where are the German institutions?

On the contrary, Lieber argued that hybridity was the only means to ensure the progress of the country and, in fact, of all the countries: "Indeed, I would like to found an Anglico-German college, but that would be only for the twofold object of promoting *assimilation* and helping to bring over

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<sup>17</sup> Lieber to Boyd, 1840. Letter, *LoC*.

<sup>18</sup> LIEBER 1835: IV.

German knowledge and education”.<sup>19</sup> This hybridity, as we will see, is built upon modular interaction.

## 1. THE FAILURE OF GYMNASTICS

In 1827 Lieber was summoned to the United States by a Bostonian committee to replace another Prussian émigré, Charles Follen, at the head of the Boston Gymnasium and public pool.<sup>20</sup> Lieber came precisely to “bring over German knowledge and education”, in the form of gymnastics.

Following the war against Great Britain, military heroes were celebrated and national myths were crafted. The Treaty of Ghent paved the way for territorial expansion and the subsequent birth of the Manifest Destiny narrative within the broader exceptionalist ideology; it also laid the foundation for American imperialism, starting with the violent displacement of native tribes.<sup>21</sup> This, in turn, was possible thanks to the growing power of the federal government in the frame of a structural evolution. The “American system” promoted infrastructural improvements over the nation while the Monroe isolation would ward off foreign interference. Overall, during the first decades of the XIX century, “a cultural politics, of print culture, of sensibilities, of religion, of reform [...] had to define American nationalism”.<sup>22</sup> This effort was meant to answer Crèvecoeur’s old-age question “What then is the American, this new man?” which had haunted the republic since its foundation.<sup>23</sup> However, the original ‘political’ nationalism was based on the experiment of a popular government and implied that anyone could embrace the republican project, thus becoming an American citizen. At the beginning of the XIX century this cosmopolitan and target-oriented frame was being progressively replaced by a past-oriented, ethnic, and cultural nationalism of European – and more particularly German – imprint.<sup>24</sup> This thoroughly essentialist project aimed at discovering, rather than inventing, the core of the American identity.

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<sup>19</sup> Lieber to Ruggles, 04/23/1847. Letter, *LoC*.

<sup>20</sup> Warren to Lieber, 02/20/1827. Letter, *SCL*: 1.

<sup>21</sup> About U.S. imperialism before the Civil War, see FRYMER 2017.

<sup>22</sup> BROOKE 2009: 11, 16.

<sup>23</sup> CREVECOEUR 1782.

<sup>24</sup> LEERSSEN 2011: 260, 266. Parkinson 2016 clearly showed the deep racial background of this framing as soon as the Revolutionary War. On the opposition of civic and ethno-cultural nationalism, and the paradox of civic nationalism, see TRAUTSCH 2016: 296, 299. Also FRANK and MUELLER-VOLLMER 2000: 52 deals with this evolution.

This new nationalist wave was particularly virulent in Massachusetts. Here a young émigré was eager to show his patriotism towards the country which had welcomed him as a refugee. In 1828 Charles Beck, also a Prussian refugee, published the *Treatise on gymnasticks, taken chiefly from the German of F.L. Jahn*. In the preface we read that “The same causes which occasioned the publication of the original in Germany [...] render a translation desirable in this country”.<sup>25</sup> This cause was precisely the need for a national culture. “A state without folk is nothing, a soulless artifice” wrote Jahn. Boston intellectuals were aware that “Physical education itself was not the goal; it was a preparation for a national end”.<sup>26</sup> This handful of intellectuals found robust political support in Daniel Webster and President Adams, who in September 1827 visited Boston’s pool, a brand new structure established by Lieber. Gymnastics soon spread into the federation. After Round Hill and Boston, several gymnasiums opened in Massachusetts, then Rhode Island and New York; West Point and the University of Virginia soon followed.<sup>27</sup> Lieber was a crucial actor of this semi-official project of nation-building;<sup>28</sup> if the generation of young Germans could not enjoy the benefits of this “powerful engine of political freedom” because of blind restoration politics, then let the young American nation make full use of it.<sup>29</sup>

However, Lieber’s gymnastics’ enterprise was short-lived. Students’ attendance plummeted to 4 in 1828. The pool enjoyed a wider popularity but did not become a model for similar institutions across the federation.<sup>30</sup> Almost all gymnasiums in the New World closed in the early 1830s. Why is this institution, which serves the same purposes in the United States as in Germany, a failure in the former? The drills were admittedly boring, yet in most of the German provinces the discipline became widely popular.<sup>31</sup> The causes are to be sought in the context, which indeed provides at least four explanations.

### *A Negative Term of Comparison*

In 1815 Jahn wrote that Germany “needs a war against Frankdom to form herself in the fullness of her own folkdom”.<sup>32</sup> In 1828, Lieber ob-

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<sup>25</sup> BECK 1828: III.

<sup>26</sup> KOHN 1949: 427, 423.

<sup>27</sup> *American Quarterly Review*, 1828, III: 140.

<sup>28</sup> PERRY 1882: 95.

<sup>29</sup> BECK 1828: IV.

<sup>30</sup> LEONARD 1922: 80.

<sup>31</sup> GELDBACH 1976: 272.

<sup>32</sup> KOHN 1949: 432.

served that “when the French had subjugated Germany, there arose [...] a new and better spirit, which increased in proportion as the oppression of the French became more galling and insolent”.<sup>33</sup> The *Turner* phenomenon grew up first as a military reaction against French domination, and secondarily as a cultural reaction. Gymnastics was in fact a military training, psychologically justified by the proximity and clearness of the enemy. In the United States, conversely, “at the happy day in which we live there is little reason to apprehend any invasion of our national liberties from without; and the political harmony prevailing throughout this country leaves nothing to fear from within”.<sup>34</sup> The British enemy had been twice defeated, and no other entity threatened the Continent in such a clear way. In other words, the lack of any clear and present danger meant that the national identity could not be fostered through a negative point of reference. In this respect, the Era of Good Feelings, although perceived rather than real, hindered such negative mirroring.

#### *Regeneration without a Past*

The second reason is related to the exceptional context of the United States, which perceived itself as a new beginning in history. This essential otherness was a crucial element of the exceptionalist narrative, but at the same time it prevented the intellectual community from exploiting the rhetoric of the recuperation of a past golden age, a powerful tool to promote national identity in Europe.<sup>35</sup> As Lepore synthesizes, “nation-states, when they form, imagine a past”.<sup>36</sup> Ypsilanti’s rebellion in Greece was perhaps the first occurrence of this mechanism in the XIX century. Jahn saw a perfect continuity from Athens to Berlin. Modern historiography developed along the same thread, going from Niebuhr and Von Ranke to Prescott and Bancroft. Nonetheless, despite Boston’s claim of being the modern Athens, exceptionalism prevented them from relying on this strategy; besides, historiography in the United States was too feeble to promote such an artificial perspective. To conclude, the uniqueness of the American history prevented anyone from mirroring it on a chronological basis.

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<sup>33</sup> *American Quarterly Review*, 1828, III: 1828: 137.

<sup>34</sup> *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATION* 1827 (2): 471.

<sup>35</sup> About the contemporary perception of exceptionalism, see CEASER 2012.

<sup>36</sup> LEPORE 2019: I.

### *Purification of Customs and Language*

In Jahn's view, the development of the German identity implied first of all the purification from French customs; the young *Turner* wore traditional coats adorned with red, black and gold insignia.<sup>37</sup> They sang patriotic songs and spoke manly and grossly to counter French politeness and meanness. This self-determination process went as far as banning French teachers from the country, considering them foreign spies. In his epitaph, written in 1834, *Vater* Jahn choose to reiterate once more his radical stance: "German, you who pass by, and have not yet forgotten your mother tongue for French and Polish, hear my motto: shame, misery, curses, destruction and death on you if you expect our saviour [sic] from abroad".<sup>38</sup>

And in Lieber the United States found its savior. Far from being considered a spy, Lieber was formally invited to the celebrations for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July upon his arrival. He was not asked to assimilate, nor to swear allegiance to the United States (which he did as soon as he could, in 1832). Lieber was precisely asked to bring his European experience to the New World. Thus, it would have been absurd to purify the American customs through a German émigré and a typically German institution. Neither Boston, perhaps the most European-oriented city of the federation and self-styled Athens of the New World, would have been a credible location for such a process.

Moreover, and on a broader basis, linguistic homogeneity (let alone exclusivity) was inconceivable in the United States. First, because of the wide range of languages spoken at that time; even before the migrations of the late 40s', several newspapers existed in foreign languages. Second, because English was shared with Great Britain. Noah Webster's project of radical Americanization of language failed at the beginning of the century, and the *Dictionary* of 1828 displayed a much milder approach. In the American context a statement like Grimm's "any nation that abandons the language of its ancestors is degenerate and anchorless" would have been paradoxical.<sup>39</sup>

### *Democracy as a Matter of Fact*

The fourth and last cause is strictly political. Jahn founded the *Turner* in order to "bring together in the gymnasia youths of all classes", because the previous academic societies, the *Korps* or *Nations*, perpetuated aristocracy by preserving chivalric elements and most often involved clandestine

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<sup>37</sup> Jahn was not alone. For a wider lens on this cultural purification, see "Gneisenau" and "Arndt" in LEERSSEN 2018.

<sup>38</sup> KOHN 1949: 432.

<sup>39</sup> LEERSSEN 2011: 263.

participation; all these elements undermined the growth of the German *Volkstum* and had to be replaced by democratic habits.<sup>40</sup> The *Turnen* and the subsequent *Burschenschaften* were open to all classes and origins, and systematically shied away from secrecy; "The soul of the gymnastic association is the life of the people, and this thrives only in the open, in light. One destroys this life of the people by all kinds of hiding, vices and airs, secret associations and secret police".<sup>41</sup> In this respect Jahn's radicalism was coupled with a progressive understanding of the political community. National education was crucial to shape the citizen of the sovereign nation, which implied equality among citizens and a free legislative body.<sup>42</sup>

### *Conclusion – A Failed Transplant*

The two inherent causes – the contradictory purification of American customs and the existence of a sound democratic society – and the two accidental causes – the absence of a clear opponent and of a point of reference in the past – explain why Lieber's first attempt to help his adoptive country was a failure. Gymnastics *as is* could not be transplanted despite the consonance of purpose. In Germany, both the *Turner* and the *Burschenschaften* spread all over the confederation from Halle and Berlin, and many of their members would be involved in the uprisings of 1848.<sup>43</sup> In the United States, Round Hill shut down in 1834; Pittsfield's gymnasium in 1836 and the others followed closely, while no legacy whatsoever seemed to persist beyond these years. Nonetheless this failure allowed Lieber to reflect on his mediation role. Since transferring *en bloc* was doomed, an active conveyer was required to *modulate* and adapt the elements while importing them. Lieber learned on the field that, as Körner writes, institutions and "ideas are not passively received but translated in a new context".<sup>44</sup>

## 2. THE TRANSPLANT OF A UNIVERSITY

The process of translation and hybridization is evident when it comes to the foundation of New York University in 1830. Like gymnastics, education was an important brick in broader nation-building: "the general diffu-

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<sup>40</sup> LIEBER 1829-1833 VI: "Gymnastick"; BECK 1828: IV.

<sup>41</sup> Jahn, quoted by KOHN 1949: 424.

<sup>42</sup> LUTZ 1976: 7.

<sup>43</sup> LUTZ 1976: 20-23.

<sup>44</sup> KÖRNER 2017: 24.

sion of knowledge is the only true security for well-regulated liberty” the *Encyclopedia* reads, echoing the widespread assumption that any popular government is founded upon the citizens’ education.<sup>45</sup> “The more extensive the means of education, the more confidently may we rely upon the preservation of our public liberties” declared President Monroe during his tour.<sup>46</sup>

*Prelude: American System, Prussian Education*

In his “American System” speech of 1824, Senator Henry Clay mentioned the importance of “naturalizing the arts”, underscoring the priority of fostering national art and literature. In 1825 President Adams added that the Constitution should actively promote the fine arts, and he proposed building a national observatory as well as a national university.<sup>47</sup>

Education both embodied and intercepted two main tendencies of the Antebellum Era; on one hand, the self-improvement culture promoted by politics and literature alike;<sup>48</sup> on the other hand, the effort to build a shared national culture. Located where the individual becomes a citizen, the intersection between the private and public spheres, education was a privileged tool of nation-building.

For New England observers, the German education system was the undisputed model. Following Adams’ bridgehead in Gottingen, several bright students went to Germany to complete their studies after the war of 1812-1814. Among them were Joseph Cogswell, Edward Everett, George Ticknor, and George Bancroft.<sup>49</sup>

These *Neue Amerikaner* came back imbued with German notions about the role of historiography and of education, and with a clearer understanding of the United States’ needs as a young nation. Given this sensitivity to German political culture, it is not surprising that the *Encyclopedia Americana*, another fruit of that specific Bostonian intellectual *milieu*, was not shy in praising German institutions. The entry “university”, for example, described across several pages each and every detail of a German university and its organization, while other nations appeared only in a comparative

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<sup>45</sup> LIEBER 1829-1833 XI: “Schools”.

<sup>46</sup> WALDO 1819: 170.

<sup>47</sup> The project of a national university is already promoted by Madison and Jefferson. See James Madison, VII annual message to the Congress, Madison Writings, Library of America, p. 717.

<sup>48</sup> *Self-improvement*, a speech by W.E. Channing, is published in 1830.

<sup>49</sup> FRANK and MUELLER-VOLLMER 2000: 164. Bancroft, perhaps the first American nationalist historian, wrote several articles on Herder.

chart. Clearly, as Berlin University had been a fundamental agent of the “moral regeneration” of Germany and of the “future deliverance from the French”, the American universities should drive the cultural emancipation from Europe.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the war against Great Britain triggered a genuine flourishing of cultural and educational institutions: public libraries, athenaeums, lyceums and sometimes simply “reading rooms” popped up in every town. This emancipation, however, was far from an autonomous process.

When the convention to found a new university was summoned in New York, in October 1830, Lieber – who in 1823 had already published a short essay *Ueber die lancasterische Lehrweise*<sup>51</sup> – was immediately invited to the executive committee. As John Delafield put it in his opening remarks of the meeting, the university was necessary for two reasons: first, to provide education “not only [to the] youth” but for “the fuller development of the minds of men”. This means, incidentally, that the university should maintain “an honorable competition with the universities of Europe”.<sup>52</sup> Second, the university would counter the lack of interaction between intellectuals, which greatly slowed the march of progress. “Our literary men, & literary institutions, have been too much insulated” and an increased interaction would greatly help the growth of the arts and sciences.<sup>53</sup>

At the beginning of the convention Lieber was consulted about the hypothesis of paying professors in proportion to their students’ attendance, as in Germany; an option he highly criticized. Then he questioned his native country’s institutions, which provided only a partial model. The academic excellence of the various German universities, he pointed out, was the “consequence of its entire want of a public political life, the destruction of its political existence as a nation for centuries [...]. In one word, it is a consequence of the fact that the German’s life is entirely within him”. Therefore, Lieber suggested, the German model was to be integrated with the French one, which better balanced the academic excellence and the nation-building responsibility of the institution.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> LIEBER 1829-1833: “University”, “Gymnastics”, “Berlin”.

<sup>51</sup> The British Lancasterian system also had had a brief season in the United States between 1805 and 1830. UPTON 1996: 238-253.

<sup>52</sup> NEW YORK UNIVERSITY 1830: 14-15.

<sup>53</sup> NEW YORK UNIVERSITY 1830: 6.

<sup>54</sup> NEW YORK UNIVERSITY 1830: 65-67.

### *Nation-Building over Education*

Three observations stem from this: first, the task of any educational institution seemed to be primarily of nation-building, and only in a secondary way about academic excellence. When it came to copying the German model, Lieber did not hesitate to point out its flaws based on the specific political context. Of course, he “should consider it one of the fairest days of my life, if I could contribute [...] to raise the standard of science and education in this happy country, in the establishment of the projected university”.<sup>55</sup> But the fact is that the ultimate purpose was to build a national community; education was functional to that broader goal.

### *Model or Competitor? The Role of Old World Institutions*

Second, the relationship of the new university to its Old World counterparts was ambiguous. At the end of the work Lieber was appointed to two private committees, the first of which had to “gather information about the teaching plans of public lecturers in European institutions, particularly in Paris” with the aim of transplanting this method in the new university. The second committee, on the contrary, had to “report [...] on the expediency and advantages of establishing professorships of history in our universities, with the particular desire of communicating instruction on the political and social progress of the nations in Europe, as tending to develop and illustrate the principles of our government and civil institutions”.<sup>56</sup> Here the pattern of reaction is evident, since the purpose was to point out the exceptionality of American institutions by projecting them against the European background. However, this transatlantic relation seems torn between interaction and cooperation on one hand – since the advancement of the arts was greatly improved by intellectual exchange – and rivalry or competition on the other hand.

### *A Widespread and Conscious Pattern*

Third and collaterally, there seemed to be no trace of shame or pride when it came to importing foreign institutions. This is somewhat surprising in the light of the avowed purpose of the university to compete with the most renowned universities of France and Great Britain. It seemed

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<sup>55</sup> NEW YORK UNIVERSITY 1830: 68.

<sup>56</sup> NEW YORK UNIVERSITY 1830. At the same time Cousin surveys the German public education system, and gymnastics strikes a chord in him: “Une des choses les plus utiles ... c’est la gymnastique. Il faut donc l’enseigner dans les écoles normales”. COUSIN 1841: 126.

completely natural to all the conveners to hybridize different models and build a better version of the Old World’s institutions.<sup>57</sup> Lieber would adopt this same strategy four years later, when he was asked to write a report and a constitution for newly established Girard College. In that situation he urged the board of directors to send “a well-prepared person to Europe, in order to inspect the most important polytechnical schools and other establishments in which a great number of orphans are educated”.<sup>58</sup> Not only; he also accumulated examples of recent missions of the same kind, where foreign observers were sent to inspect various kinds of institutions and report to their governments – not unlike the renowned mission of Mr. De Tocqueville and Mr. De Beaumont. Both committees testified to the preeminence of the Old World’s role as a point of reference; more precisely, the first indicated an attempt to plainly imitate European institutions; while the second betrayed the widespread awareness that the American national identity could grow mainly by reflecting Europe’s.

*Conclusion: An Acknowledged Hybridity*

Lieber’s involvement with the university ceased following the convention. This brief adventure, nonetheless, shows that he learned the lesson provided by the failure of the gymnastics transplant. He did not try to import the whole as such, but added and omitted ideas according to the specific context and purpose. The whole convention, in fact, worked to modularly shape the new university upon the European model, which further confirms that this hybridization was a concerted effort by a wide range of intellectuals, politicians, and publicists.

Moreover, Lieber’s sparse remarks about language show how this hybridization was rooted in a broad theoretical frame which developed over time. This frame related to a cosmopolitan understanding of the progress of civilization through the relationships among nations, which were the “basic units” of interaction. In later years Lieber would name this mechanism the “law of interdependence”; but the basic elements were already set in the early ’30s, when he adjusted Goethe’s adagio about language to his national reflections: “he who is ignorant of foreign nations is ignorant of his own”.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> LIEBER 1834: 146-147.

<sup>58</sup> LIEBER 1834: 146.

<sup>59</sup> LIEBER 1834. Copy with comments, LCS: 1. Lieber’s adaptation is in 1835: 214.

### 3. THE ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA

Goethe's original motto referred to languages instead of nations. Of course, national identity and language were closely tied; therefore it seemed obvious that from different idioms "arises a different division of ideas or [...] affinities with different nations".<sup>60</sup> Coherently Lieber underscored the importance of learning different languages in order to accelerate the exchanges and thus the general progress of civilization. Besides idioms, history also assumed a crucial role, since it is the "anatomy and physiology of the human society"; lastly, literature was also fundamental to create a common culture, since it is "the written expression of a national character".<sup>61</sup> Taken together, linguistics, literature, and history represented the core of the nation-building project in the United States of that era.

Consequently Lieber's project of the *Encyclopedia Americana*, proposed only a few months after his arrival, was greeted with enthusiasm by the intellectual community between Boston and Philadelphia.<sup>62</sup> Soon Lieber found a publisher (Carey of Philadelphia), hired a handful of assistants and translators, wrote to virtually every American scholar asking for specific contributions, and plunged into the gargantuan task. The *Americana* was an immense work of adaptation of the German *Conversation-Lexikon*: "by making such changes and additions as the circumstances of this country required", its purpose was "to render [the work] as useful and acceptable to the general reader here as the original is in Germany". Many entries about US topics were added *ex novo*, other entries were radically transformed, and some were omitted. The outcome was a 13-volume opera published between 1829 and 1833. Thanks to its reasonable price, the work was a commercial success. It somehow established the official standard of American knowledge throughout the federation: it was "probably the broadest and most elaborate of contemporary appraisals of America in the Jacksonian period".<sup>63</sup> "Who can now travel over this country without finding everywhere a copy of the *Americana*?" asked Lieber in 1845.<sup>64</sup> The work would be printed until 1858 by several publishers across the continent, and then renewed through several editions. Indeed, Lieber glimpsed a copy of the *Americana* in President Jackson's office; Senator Webster also regularly relied on the book, and President Lincoln mentioned it as one of the cor-

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<sup>60</sup> LIEBER 1834: 116-119.

<sup>61</sup> CHANNING 1830.

<sup>62</sup> Edward Everett, his first interlocutor, pledges to find a publisher.

<sup>63</sup> FREIDEL 1949: 77.

<sup>64</sup> Lieber to Vethake, 10/23/1845, LCS: 1.

nerstones of his education.<sup>65</sup> These politicians were particularly indebted to the entries about law, mainly provided by Joseph Story. Moreover, about half of the libraries and colleges in the United States owned a complete set of the *Americana* before the Civil War. Altogether, these data make clear that the first encyclopedia completed the triptych of nation-building literature together with Webster's Dictionary and Bancroft's *History of the United States*.<sup>66</sup>

However, the very success of the *Americana* made it a paradoxical tool to build a cultural national identity. As a national work, it was imbued with spurious influences – or better said, interferences.

### *Local Influence: National Literature as a Sectional Project*

The first problem is that the project of "national literature", although nationally shared, was sectionally managed. Many authors were involved in this effort of providing the young nation with a unique literary patrimony, yet its definition varied according to these authors. William Gilmore Simms of South Carolina, for example, applied a states-rights political creed to the cultural accomplishments, seeing in cultural pluralism the key to a national bond. It was itself a problematic stance, but Simms was correct in pointing out that "The Knickerbockers group and certain 'wise men of the East' [...] puffed their own books and praised magazines of their own production as national while lambasting what they called the sectional publications of other areas, especially of the South and the West".<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Lieber's *Encyclopedia* (and in fact also Lieber's gymnastics enterprise) was deeply tied to the peculiar context of the Boston intellectual community which in turn deeply relied on German theories.

In 1804 Fisher Ames wrote that of all the colonies Massachusetts remained "the largest, the most assimilated, and to use the modern jargon, nationalized, the most respectable and prosperous, the most truly interesting to America and to humanity, more unlike and more superior to other people, (the English excepted) than the old Roman race to their neighbours [sic] and competitors". As Park underscores, "the fact that Ames compared Massachusetts, and not America, to England is indicative of how nationalist language retained a local framework for many".<sup>68</sup> Massachu-

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<sup>65</sup> DE KAY 1968: 212-213.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of German influences on American literature and history, particularly on Bancroft, see MUELLER-VOLLMER 2000: ch. 9.

<sup>67</sup> SHILLINGSBURG 1980: 409.

<sup>68</sup> PARK 2018: 123.

setts preserved this situation and this pride through the war and afterwards, becoming a nation within the nation or, as Peterson effectively puts it, a city-state.<sup>69</sup> Hence it was a moral mission to make available this exceptional character to other regions of the federation, or to irradiate Boston's specific nationalism through literature. Moreover, Boston intellectuals were probably the only real literary community, the only 'critical mass' able to spread its message all over the nation. They had both a clear understanding of the national issue and the editorial power necessary to fulfill this purpose. In this respect, the *Encyclopedia* bore the clear stamp of Massachusetts culture and its Federalist bias.

#### *Local Influence: Federalism of a Boston Stamp*

This leads to the second interference. The sectional nationalism spread by the *Americana* was biased not only culturally but also politically. It was indeed a conservative project, since it stemmed from the various authors' political stance; Everett, Ticknor, Story, and secondarily Wigglesworth and Bradford, belonged to a specific political ideology.

The great majority of the contributors of the *Encyclopedia* were federalists, and Joseph Story was the most prominent example; since his entries on law are without any doubt the single most important and most-read contribution, his influence on the work was critical.<sup>70</sup> However, Story's main purpose at that time was to protect the United States' judicial apparatus from democratic and executive tyranny, preserving John Marshall's legacy at the Supreme Court. With this in mind a few years later he would promote the codification of the whole Civil Law, also based on the European model.<sup>71</sup> Therefore a marked federalism is apparent in the entries "sovereignty", "Constitution" – which express Hamiltonian views – but also in some less political entries such as "bank" and "canal", which reflect the enthusiasm for the policies of the American System and the contempt for any state-based perspective.

This political bias also translated into a specific perception of foreign powers. Lieber's hatred for France, the ancestral enemy of his native country (only slightly mitigated by his admiration for Joseph Bonaparte, whom he had met in 1829), perfectly fitted Boston's traditional anglophilia. This, in turn, was far from being a shared perspective in the Federation. Great Britain was in fact the primary target of the emancipation efforts of the

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<sup>69</sup> PETERSON 2019. See also WALDSTREICHER 1997: 250-252.

<sup>70</sup> For a complete list see HOROWITZ and COHEN 2006.

<sup>71</sup> NEUMEYER 1986.

United States, for example in the case of the so-called “paper war”.<sup>72</sup> Coming from a fragmented nation, it is little surprising to see Lieber enthusiastically embracing the federalist national project. Moreover, since the cultural project of the Boston intellectuals was transplanted from the ethno-cultural German tradition, Lieber was eager to apply this familiar approach to his adopted country. Due to the lack of terms of comparison in the United States, at that time he could not perceive its sectionalism. As a result, the *Americana* was not only a rich source of general knowledge in every field of studies; it was also the bullhorn for a highly conservative and anti-jacksonian political message.

### *European Interference – Continental Barycenter*

The nation-building purpose of the *Americana* was undermined by a linguistic contradiction which weakened the core of this nation-building project. The *Encyclopedia* regularly referred to Europe as the “continent” and European topics as “continental”, while both the United States and America at large were referred to as “descendants” of the Old World, thus underscoring its Eurocentric barycenter. On the other hand, one can read typical expressions of exceptionalism: “North America [...] had the knowledge and experience of Europe [...] without being fettered by the prejudices and sinister interests that check improvements in that quarter of the world”.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, beginning with the Preface, Lieber made clear that “being an American encyclopedia, not merely in name, but as constituting an extensive repository of information relating to America [...]”, he hoped that the work would have “a peculiar value with that great European nation, whose language and literature are the common property of themselves and their descendants in the United States”.<sup>74</sup> Clearly, if the problem was that “we stand in relation to British literature pretty much as we do in reference to their marine” as William Prescott wrote, the *Americana* does not provide any weapon to counter this tendency.<sup>75</sup> On the contrary, it seems that it reinforced the perception of the New World as a satellite of the Old, at least when it came to literary, political, and cultural achievement.

This last paradox is the logical outcome of the “interdependence” dynamics advocated by Lieber. “The national polity is the normal type

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<sup>72</sup> EATON 2012.

<sup>73</sup> LIEBER 1829-1833: XII, “United States (religion)”.

<sup>74</sup> LIEBER 1829-1833: 1, Preface.

<sup>75</sup> Prescott to Lieber, 11/26/1839, *HL*: 59.

of government of the present period”,<sup>76</sup> and the deep interdependence among governments (and hopefully cooperation) made the general progress a collective enterprise, “many leading nations pulling abreast the Olympic chariot”.<sup>77</sup> From a “civilization” perspective, which thus meant a multinational one, the progress was ensured by transnational exchanges; in a draft of 1830, Lieber wrote that “our packet-boats – these flying bridges between two hemispheres, conductors & reconductors of civilization – bring us history in whole chapters”.<sup>78</sup> This Eurocentric bias is confirmed by other, non-linguistic evidences; as with the foundation of New York University, Lieber and his team were not shy about proposing European models for American institutions; all the entries about education, for example, betrayed the same pattern of hybridization of different organizations, especially Prussian.<sup>79</sup>

### *Conclusion: A Conflicted Tool of Nation-Building*

The first American encyclopedia was an effective instrument to build a national community through readership. At the same time, however, it spread a variety of elements which hindered the same purpose: a sectional stamp due to its main contributors, a deeply conservative political message, and a clearly Eurocentric barycenter. Of course it is impossible to measure the impact of those lexical choices on the wide readership; yet, in the light of the commercial success of the book, it is legitimate to suppose that they had some impact.

In the entry “Belgium since 1830” we read that “If the German governments want to “limit by degrees the use of the Polish language, and thus de-nationalize the people, [...] every open step towards the extirpation of the language would only tend to defeat the object”.<sup>80</sup> Language was the link between the natural, vernacular community and the artificial, technical community of the state. Hence, it could not be transformed at once, but it could be slowly nudged in the desired direction. Similarly, any “nationalization” attempt must be of a gradual nature and carefully adapted to the context.<sup>81</sup> Still in 1841, Lieber would notice that “after all, our nation is not yet even entirely formed and coherent [...], both as to the people (emi-

<sup>76</sup> Lieber to Sumner, 08/30/1867. *LoC*: 81.

<sup>77</sup> This frequent formula appears in 1867.

<sup>78</sup> Lieber, *Lecture*: Andrea Doria. *HL*: 18.

<sup>79</sup> See e.g. LIEBER 1829-1833, “University”, “School”, “Berlin”.

<sup>80</sup> LIEBER 1829-1833, “Belgium since 1830”.

<sup>81</sup> The word is first used by Lieber around 1842 in a hand note to his *Political Ethics*. *JHU*: 4.

grants pouring in all the time) and as to the territory (the states expanding all the time)”.<sup>82</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: THE PARADOX OF FOREIGN-BORN NATIONAL IDENTITY

The extended research for the *Encyclopedia* showed Lieber the need for valuable American textbooks. Hence among his early projects he would propose “a series of schoolbooks founded upon the most approved Prussian schoolbooks, together with Mrs. Austin” and, in 1842, a project of a political “good popular book to be used in higher common schools”, written by a club of illustrious American intellectuals. Most of them would remain drafts or ideas, but together they show that hybridization was a consolidated pattern.

The cultural nation-building project missed the target, and the Civil war would be its definitive tombstone. Living in South Carolina from 1835 until 1857 Lieber directly experienced the complex layers of sectionalism, nationalism and internationalism. After his return to the North, the reflections upon international law prevailed upon the exploration of the internal mechanism of the state and its relationship to the citizens. The law of interdependence grew clearer, pushing Lieber to conclude that “every settlement of a principle in the law of nations is a distinct, plain step in the progress of humanity.

The early years which we considered show the first elements of this reflection. In the first phase, Lieber tried to transplant a foreign institution – German gymnastics – for the same purpose (nation-building), and failed due to a lack of active adaptation. In a second attempt, this hybridization was consciously adopted by the founders of New York University, and Lieber’s transatlantic background made him a perfect agent of the process. On a third occasion, the complex project of the *Encyclopedia Americana* displayed all the contradictions of the nation-building project of the United States during this early Jacksonian era. More particularly, the *Encyclopedia*’s inconsistencies expose the contradictions and the openness of the American nation-building effort. First, because of its origins, its contributors and its editor, it was an intrinsically transnational enterprise. Second, it was a paradoxical enterprise; national identity, and all the more so exceptionalism, imply both the ideas of uniqueness and of relationship, albeit in a negative form. But the United States of 1830 was incapable to choose between American innocence and European filiation, or between transatlantic con-

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<sup>82</sup> Lieber to Sumner, 10/14/1841. HL: 40, LI3402.

tinuity and fracture. Sometimes unconsciously, sometimes reflecting upon it, Lieber testified to the connectedness between the two hemispheres, thus challenging exceptionalism at his roots and any concept of national identity as an exclusive, natural entity. Indeed, from a broader perspective, these transnational exchanges show primarily that national identity is an artifact: an arbitrary and accidental project, developed through conscious decisions and exclusions, and based on intricate influences of 'foreign' traditions. As a consequence, this confirms one of the fundamental hypotheses of transnational approaches: that not only American national identity but in fact all national identities are cultural constructions interrelated between them.<sup>83</sup> Thus the question is: what is the meaning of an American national identity built by foreign intellectuals using European categories, such as Hamilton and Lafayette, Schurz and Girard, and Lieber? In 1782, Crèvecoeur's answer to his rhetorical question was that "[The American] is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood".<sup>84</sup> Almost one century later, and despite all these nation-building efforts, nothing had really changed. The Prussian émigré would cope with this hybrid status: "we are European according to everything essential; we are American according to a name affixed to a plot of the surface of the globe, according to political geography".<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> TRAUTSCH 2016: 298. See also KRAMER 2011: 121-124, TYRRELL 2009.

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<sup>85</sup> Lieber to Gilman, 08/28/1863. HL: 26.

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