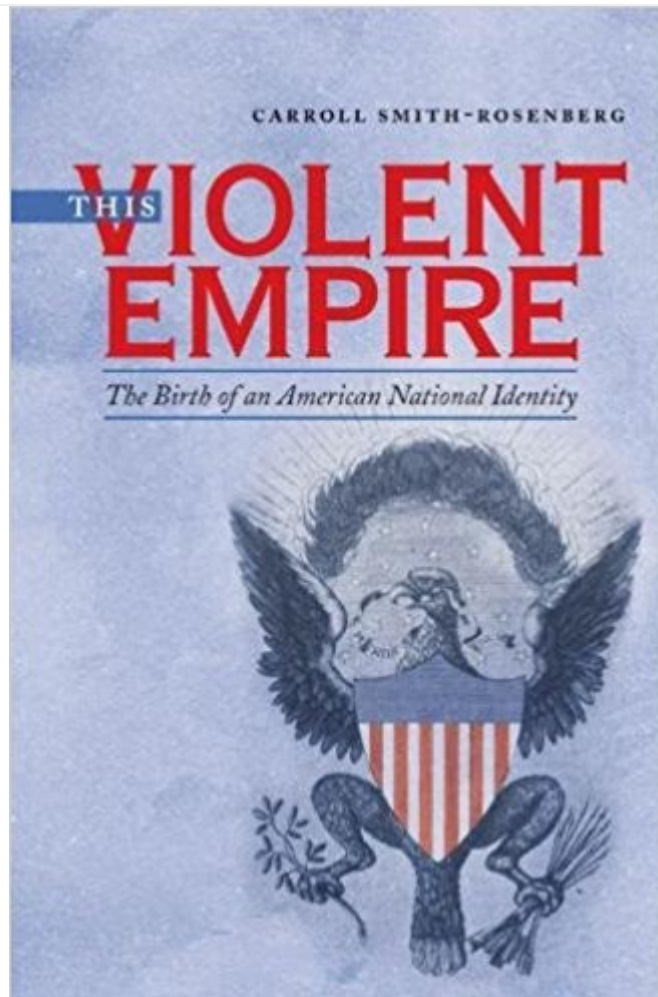


# {essays in history}

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## This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity



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### Reviewed Work(s)

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Pp. 512. Cloth, \$45.00.

The need to violently exclude “Others” seen as dangerous or corrupting forces has formed a primary component of national identity in the United States from the Alien and Sedition Acts of the 1790s through Joseph McCarthy’s war on Communists and on to the present day. For Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, difference defined by exclusion lay at the heart of European Americans’ sense of themselves, indeed, of their very claims to the name “American” (242). “To fear and dehumanize Others,” she declares, “to ruthlessly hunt them down, is truly American” (x). In *This Violent Empire*, Smith-Rosenberg explores the processes by which a national identity first emerged on the pages of the new nation’s public print culture and the “complex interaction of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that lies at the heart of that story” (xi). This process of Otherization—the defining and interpreting of oneself or one’s in-group in terms of the perceived or imagined deficiencies of members of an out-group—has been, for Smith-Rosenberg, a mainstay of American identity and cultural development. As Otherization became the primary means of unification, she argues, any sense of national identity was rendered unstable and ambiguous, necessitating the further construction of an identifiable means of differentiation—the creation of more constituting Others. Thus, the root of the history of racism, sexism, and violence in the United States stems from the instability inherent in Americans’ national sense of self.

Her central argument is that post-revolutionary attempts to construct a unified “American” identity based on principles of equality, republicanism, and bourgeois commercial capitalism manifested—in the face of deeply entrenched cultural and economic divisions as well as bitter racial and gender discrimination—as a series of constituting Others that both displayed and repackaged American guilt, fear, and paranoia. The process of remaking women, Native Americans, rural

farmers, and slaves into constituting Others, Smith-Rosenberg contends, was facilitated by the political press and worked to give European Americans a sense of national coherence that the reality of their lives did not support (x). In emphasizing the production and dissemination of media—magazines, newspapers, literature—as the central mechanism around which a discourse of national identity developed, Smith-Rosenberg traces the origin of the fear, paranoia, and violence that characterized the historical development of American political ideology and cultural identity. For example, in the political press's fear that Federalism and the new bourgeois elite would cause the feminization of the republic, Smith-Rosenberg finds the origin of a deepening desire to control female behavior, displacing national political anxieties onto the perceived behavior of women. Similarly, anxieties over the displacement of Native Americans and the moral legitimacy of Euro-American claims to North America compelled the performance of festive masquerades in which colonists, in the guise of Native Americans, expressed a desire for validation in the symbolic performance of treaty negotiations. For Smith-Rosenberg, such acts of surrogacy provide considerable insight into Americans' developing sense of national identity and its inextricable links to constituting Others. Such "fantasized creations" of the "abject, deformed, and dangerous" Other, she argues, represent the discursive and psychological projections of our most feared and hated qualities (xi).

Through rhetorical analyses of political magazines, newspapers, and contemporary literature, Smith-Rosenberg reveals the ways in which the founding generation attempted to constitute an American national identity by turning "upon our Others with rhetorical and literal violence" (21). Going beyond traditional historical narrative structures and forms of evidence, she utilizes the methods of literary criticism in conjunction with poststructural and postcolonial theory in order to "penetrate the maze of contradictions and instabilities that enveloped the founding generation's efforts to create a national sense of self" (xiii). For Smith-Rosenberg, national identities, indeed identities in general, are not stable, organically coherent phenomenon but, rather, compilations of constructed, conflicting, and often contradictory discourses (xiii, 17). In this way, she challenges claims that tolerated heterodoxy characterized American society following the Revolution.[1] For her, no single, unquestioned system of values and beliefs helped to unify the founding generation. Rather, a host of conflicting political discourses, religious

beliefs, and social values continually “destabilized the new nation’s image of itself as a unified whole” (x). In response to this cacophony of discourses, colonial leaders and the urban media fostered unity through exclusion.

By exploring the ways that the founding generation invented such critical aspects of political modernity as the modern republic, the republican citizen, the political representative, and the capitalist state, Smith-Rosenberg navigates a “labyrinth of historical disputes” concerning the nature of the American Revolution, the ratification of the new constitution, and the impact of commercial and fiscal capitalism on the new nation’s economy and society (xiii). In doing so, she demonstrates that as the founding generation struggled to constitute a sense of national collectivity for the “motley array” of residents of the new republic, they had to create a mythic heritage of bravery and love of liberty for citizens of the new republic to embrace. The mythic heritage and notion of liberty, however, were cast against an expanding series of threatening Others whose femininity, dependency, and savagery both threatened and crystallized the identity of the capitalist, white, male American ethos. The defining of American freedom, independence, and masculinity in terms of the dependency, femininity, and enslavement of specific groups was, thus, a “critical component” of America’s new national identity (x).

One of Smith-Rosenberg’s primary contentions is that national identities, although appearing to offer points of commonality and collective belonging, are in fact grounded in systematic patterns of exclusion. Cohesion, she argues, is derived less from a celebration of sameness than from the construction of threatening Others whose fabricated differences overshadow the actual differences and contradictions dividing a heterogeneous population (466). In short, *This Violent Empire* examines the nature of national identity and the “difference, dissonance, and instability” created by the multiple, contradictory, and uncertain performances of it (20). It is only through the production of constituting Others, Smith-Rosenberg argues, that the contradictions produced by these “disparate discourses, positions, and relationships” can be papered over, allowing the national subjects that they produce to maintain the illusion and appearance of internal cohesion and stability (20-21). This process of Otherization engenders

the perceived unity of an imagined national identity by submerging the contradictions and incoherence of competing identities in the fear, suspicion, and paranoia of constructed difference (21). Subjects, she argues, “need constituting Others to give them the appearance of internal coherence” and the more unstable and uncertain the identity, the greater the need for constituting Others (363). This deep-seated interdependence of identity and exclusion, Smith-Rosenberg insists, fostered a “tortured ambivalence” at the heart of America’s self-image. Indeed, she suggests that racist violence emerges, at least in part, out of the “frustration with the repeated erosion of [constructed] difference” (435).

Fabricated Others are thus created and designed to render insignificant the differences and contradictions created by the internal inconsistencies derived from the performance of and participation in an imagined community. Given the overtly constructed and highly artificial nature of “Americanness,” Smith-Rosenberg suggests that American nationalism provides an ideal case study for examining the relationship between nationalism and violence (1). She claims that the need to artificially produce a sense of national cohesion for a people with no single common heritage, deeply divided along racial, regional, and religious lines, and beset by the ideological disjunction between the promise of universal equality and the realities of slavery (and later of racial and gender discrimination), has exacerbated the tendency to exclusion, violence, xenophobia, and paranoia that all national identities harbor within themselves (21-22). Nationalism, she contends, continues to pose one of the greatest threats to world peace and prosperity, and it behooves us to explore the ways nations and national identities take form and why they continue to constitute such an essential aspect of individual and collective identity.

Smith-Rosenberg has taken an audacious step by offering a deeper appreciation for the many profound and compelling questions concerning the “tie between nationalism and violence” (1). A thoughtful and exquisitely written cultural history of the early American republic, *This Violent Empire* exhibits an impressive mastery of an expansive and diverse field of study. The essential genius of this work is that it illuminates both the cultural causes for and outcomes of political and ideological discourse. In both highlighting and expanding the

“American paradox” interrogated by Edmund Morgan over thirty-five years ago, Smith-Rosenberg successfully and powerfully traces how the nation’s leaders obscured, disguised, and rationalized the profound contradictions at the heart of the nation’s founding as they struggled to establish both a national ethos and a cultural identity.<sup>[2]</sup> By casting freedom in the fires of exclusion, the founding generation fostered a cultural ethos that has reverberated through the social, political, and economic institutions of American culture to the present day (xiii).

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[1] Mark R. Patterson, *Authority, Autonomy, and Representation in American Literature, 1776-1865* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 17; Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 16; Timothy Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2-3.

[2] Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).



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