

Opponent's Report on M.A. Thesis by

Adéla Zeimmanová

“What It Means to Be American?: Creating American National Identity”

Ms. Adéla Zeimmanová's thesis work investigates the problematic of individual American identity and to how that helps to shape and to institute forms of the national-cultural American identity. This conceptual intersection is the fulcrum around which her diploma thesis turns.

The thesis contains 81 pp. across some preliminary matter, an Introduction, four main chapters on “2 Nation, National Identity and Nationalism; “3 Historical Context”; “4 National Identity and Nation-building in the U.S.”; and “5 American National Character and Its Implications for the Future of the U.S.”. There is also a Conclusion and a rich six-page plus Bibliography.

As for the prose style, it reads well, and all in all, the thesis is not only very ably conceived and crafted, but also well executed. The substantial body of the work in the first three main component chapters all show good and solid historical research, and a fine grasp of the major coordinates that inform the historical-ideological and textual space that informs the evolutionary development of the candidate's large subject area of American and individual identity formation.

Notably, in Chapter 5 we read that, “The notion of freedom and democracy as the core American values comes from the ideology of American exceptionalism. This part of the national identity can be traced back to the first settlers' emerging ideas concerning the New World they set out to occupy” (64); and to prove her point she adduces John Winthrop's “city upon a hill” discourse. In the candidate's argument Ralph Waldo Emerson and Alexis de Tocqueville too play a huge part in this whole individual and collective endeavor. Interestingly, the candidate quotes Claude S. Fischer's text on “Paradoxes of American Individualism” wherein she argues that

American individualism, or rather voluntarism, asserts the beliefs of American exceptionalism, suggesting that the society is formed by “unique, a priori persons” [C.S. Fischer] who freely choose their communities and commit themselves to collective rules. These ideas are key features of American culture and have been since the Revolution. (67)

Here I ask the candidate what she thinks herself of this idea of American voluntarism and if it is so unique and exceptional as against any single other national-cultural tradition with which she is familiar? The second question is a big one, but how does the candidate herself see the contemporary preoccupation with identity politics, and to the role that plays in the current construction of the US republic's national identity?

All in all, this is a fine piece of very thorough research that covers a lot of ground with regard to its object of focus, and in so doing lights up its field of attention.

In light of the foregoing mentions, I hereby recommend the pre thesis defense mark of a 1 (výborně) for the thesis work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Erik S. Roraback". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "E" and a long, sweeping underline.

doc. Erik S. Roraback, D.Phil. (Oxon.)

31 August 2021