



Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism (Critical American Studies)

David W. Noble

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In the 1940s, American thought experienced a cataclysmic paradigm shift. Before then, national ideology was shaped by American exceptionalism and bourgeois nationalism: elites saw themselves as the children of a homogeneous nation standing outside the history and culture of the Old World. This view repressed the cultures of those who did not fit the elite vision: people of color, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. David W. Noble, a preeminent figure in American studies, inherited this ideology. However, like many who entered the field in the 1940s, he rejected the ideals of his intellectual predecessors and sought a new, multicultural, postnational scholarship. Throughout his career, Noble has examined this rupture in American intellectual life. In *Death of a Nation*, he presents the culmination of decades of thought in a sweeping treatise on the shaping of contemporary American studies and an eloquent summation of his distinguished career.

Exploring the roots of American exceptionalism, Noble demonstrates that it was a doomed ideology. Capitalists who believed in a bounded nationalism also depended on a boundless, international marketplace. This contradiction was inherently unstable, and the belief in a unified national landscape exploded in World War II. The rupture provided an opening for alternative narratives as class, ethnicity, race, and region were reclaimed as part of the nation's history. Noble traces the effects of this shift among scholars and artists, and shows how even today they struggle to imagine an alternative postnational narrative and seek the meaning of local and national cultures in an increasingly transnational world. While Noble illustrates the challenges that the paradigm shift created, he also suggests solutions that will help scholars avoid romanticized and reductive approaches toward the study of American culture in the future.

David W. Noble is professor of American studies at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of numerous books, including *The End of American History* (1985) and *The Free and the Unfree: A Progressive History of the United States* (with Peter N. Carroll, 2001).

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