In most of the essays in this book, reflections by German authors on American modernity reflect back on German understandings — tacit and explicit — of modernity overall, its character, its contradictions, and its analytical and ethical dilemmas. The book, then, amounts to another chapter in the long story of German and European efforts to come to terms with the world’s overall direction through the lens of America. For over a century, German intellectuals have used analysis of the United States as a modern nation-state and society as a sounding board for ideas about the prospects and dreads of the contemporary world. As scholars of the United States, the writers in this volume engage American modernity for its own sake but also for the sake of more sweeping intellectual agendas. Readers or even an editor can only guess at the inner psyche of an author, but probably writers in this volume are also looking at their chosen themes about America for the sake of the personal reflection that thoughtful people engage in when solids melt into air. Or rather, when brittle solids fracture, as this book has suggested.

The solid breaking into pieces in retrospect is the notion that modernity anywhere was ever cohesive or even definable. Most models of modernity assumed, as the introduction explains, a definable set of characteristics. These qualities could apply to all places transformed by modernity, as in most standard versions of modernization theory, or they could vary from place to place, as in Shmuel Eisenstadt’s multiple modernities model. But the social, economic, and political forces that sparked the process labelled modernization left behind a system or systems that social scientists could, in theory, classify and analyze. The concept of post-modernity — with its flood of contradictory signs and its gaggle of voices and imagines — hinged on the imputation of coherence to modernity. If modernity fractures, is post-modernity necessary anymore?

As hinted at this book’s start, one can discern contemporary moods and perceptions behind the mindset of fractured modernity and this attitude’s application to the United States. Even given the energy described in my own essay that some American scholars have put into transnationalizing U.S. history, I would suggest

that on average, European intellectuals exhibit deeper awareness, if not greater acceptance of trends likely to make western societies more provincial during the twenty-first century than in the twentieth, nineteenth, or eighteenth. The prospect of a future in which western countries less often occupy the center of political economy or of human attention invites a re-imagination of the recent past. Americans have often projected the United States as a model in the structural as well as moral sense; the didactic, formulaic Cold War-era version of modernization theory amounted to the most activist and pervasive episode in this long-standing inclination. While usually dubious about the United States as exemplary in the moral sense, Germans have been inclined to perceive the American republic as an archetype in the analytical sense. If the United States is no longer to be an archetype, then was it ever?

Minerva’s owl, therefore, may – as is her tendency – have reappeared at the dusk of the American Century. It would rash to write off the United States as a great power, but numerous observers, along with at least some American leaders (including both defense secretaries between 2009 and 2012), have admonished that the conditions that made the world’s economy and politics long revolve around the country have proved more ephemeral than most Americans would probably prefer. In sketching the confluence of factors that catalyzed the country’s rise to wealth, power, and influence, historian Eric Rauchway explains that the modern United States resulted in large measure from fortuitous, fleeting geopolitics. But Americans have usually attributed their country’s rise to their own wisdom, character, or good standing with the almighty. Such explanations warm the heart when one’s country is on the upswing but have depressing implications on the other side of the cycle of civilizations. For their psychic health, Americans may wish to learn how to credit or blame exogenous forces.

Nineteenth-century Europeans already had their own ways of ridiculing the American pretence that the United States represented divine will imprinted upon geography. Sadly for this book, Otto von Bismarck, a relentless observer of nation-states within geopolitical systems, probably did not utter a brilliant epigram often attributed to him: “There is a special providence that protects idiots, drunkards, children, and the United States of America.” The earliest printed version of the remark dates to 1849, when it was plausibly attributed to José Correia da Serra, the acerbic Portuguese envoy to the United States in the 1810s. This Enlightenment-style Catholic abbot, a renowned botanist and friend of the deist Thomas Jefferson, also contrived a familiar epithet for then-ramshackle Washington: City of Magnificent Distances. Wikiquotes even has an analysis of the misattribution to Bismarck that demonstrates that the adage was familiar throughout the late 1800s. American writers, skeptical of their compatriots’ pretences to being the deserved beneficiaries of the divine plans, repeated in diverse forms and with
varying levels of amusement the observation that God indeed watches over children, fools, drunkards, and the United States.

Despite this ridicule, millions of Americans persisted throughout the twentieth century in the belief that providence had assigned power, wealth, and a mission to the United States. As this book was being prepared for press, a notably nervous version of the interminable American exceptionalism debate broke out in the media. The anxiety of course stems from the gradual rising to consciousness of some unpleasant realities of which authors in this book are certainly aware: If the divine plan for the United States in the future is less exalted than in the past, the country’s vast lower middle class and working class face economic struggles unto several generations. Political opportunism made this latest episode in the career of Manifest Destiny particularly distressing. Political operators of questionable scruples drummed up this new round of exceptionalist imagery as an unsubtle device for insinuating that the current president – the first from an immigrant background other than European – does not have the spiritual foundation needed to comprehend what is so special about the United States. Also, the drummers intended to pander to that segment of the American electorate inclined to believe that mortals can discern God’s plan for nations.

The aggressively mindless tone of the ensuing discussion illustrates an unfortunate reality about the supposed reflective qualities of societies past their apogee: At dusk, when the owl of Minerva presumably flies about, the crows of belligerent ignorance take to the sky to mob her. The spectacle was too much for journalist Christopher Hitchens. A gloriously unrepentant infidel even though he was by then mortally ill, Hitchens mustered the strength to review evidence that an agency “more than ordinary realpolitik” might explain the country’s remarkable transformation from a string of rickety colonial outposts to superpower. “So yes, I suppose you could say that the United States had some kind of luck, or force, or destiny, on its side”, Hitchens conceded, but “I know of no European state that doesn’t have some kind of national myth to the same effect”\(^4\). Thus did Hitchens arrive at the same acid dismissal of the providential version of American exceptionalism as Abbé Correia da Serra two centuries earlier.

God’s probable reasons for embracing and abandoning nations are beyond the scope of a book of Wissenschaft. More relevant are those secular, social-scientific theories that posit an exceptional role for the United States in modern history. Of the standard versions of American exceptionalism that rely upon worldly and not divine causation, two of the best-known have only indirect relevance to the questions raised in this book. These are the geographic exceptionalism commonly identified with Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis; and the ideological ex-

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ceptionalism summarized in Louis Hartz’s *Liberal Tradition in America*, among other places. As Dorothy Ross observes, Hartz’s ideological formulation, despite being rooted more in intellectual history than sociology or economics, dovetailed with the “First New Nation” exceptionalism identified with Hartz’s contemporaries such as Seymour Martin Lipset or W.W. Rostow. Throughout much of the twentieth century, American social scientists perceived the country as representing an “ideal, generic modernity”, in Ross’s words, because the American republic never needed to wrestle with the varied legacies of feudalism or Early Modern absolutism. This in turn implied that a powerful, internationalist, and suitably wise United States could spread “modernization-as-Americanization” around the world to everyone else’s benefit. America would become less exceptional, because the world would catch up with America.

As explained in the introduction, Eisenstadt’s multiple modernities model began as one avenue of attack upon this ethnocentric vision. But Eisenstadt’s approach has proved unsatisfactory, for reasons discussed in several places in this book. The multiple modernities model seems inadequate on the intellectual ground that it posits modernized societies to be more self-contained and coherent than they were. And, it must be said, it dissatisfies a number of writers in this book on the political ground that like classic modernization theory, the multiple modernities model assumes that some segments within a society – in the American case the white business and professional classes – represent the mainstream, while minorities and dissenters embody peripheral or even retrograde elements. The surest way to escape the problem is to fracture modernity altogether. With modernity shattered into pieces, modernization-as-Americanization would have been a fantasy from the start, ever more chimerical as globalization leaves the American Century further behind.

This volume, then, provides a flavor of not just how Germans, but western intellectuals in general might deal with modernity’s past career in an age when the West is no longer so inclined to proclaim itself an archetype for the future. Under the strong light of such contemporary moods and agendas, has this volume over-

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reached in its reassessment of the American past? Essays such as those by Silvan Niedermeier, Manfred Berg, and Michael Hochgeschwender do effectively refute the stereotyped schemes of modernity identified with Rostow-style development theory. In a different way, such essays contradict Eisenstadt’s version of multiple modernities. If over time, different groups competed to shape the direction of a society by appropriating to themselves the label of modern and progressive, then a social scientist cannot in retrospect legitimately label some characteristics of a society as more inherent expressions of its modernity than those qualities that became tagged as peripheral or backward through a process of political competition. If not quite fractured, historical modernities were certainly more fluid and tentative than they have often been portrayed. Definitions of modernity ought in the future to be less schematic than the before-and-after charts one used to find in textbooks.

But still, even if Eisenstadt or Rostow cannot have the last word, the chastened iteration of Francis Fukuyama – and through him, the ghost perhaps of Seymour Martin Lipset and surely of Max Weber – might. As Brazil, India, China, Turkey, and South Africa emerge as new centers of modernized society, with Europe and even North America moving partially or wholly to the periphery, it is hard to envision that the technological, environmental, economic, and institutional manifestations of their modernity will vary as much from the western experience as their cultural, social, and political arrangements. In the volume, the writers who draw the most upon standard modernization approaches are those whose concerns include the environment, resources, institutions, cities, media and communications, and political economy. Such factors may in the end form the stahlhartes Gehäuse of modernity, within which only so much flow, fracture, competition, and inter-change are possible. Fully modernized professional, industrial, and communications processes, after all, produced this book and distributed it to readers in whatever enclosure – steel, concrete, or wooden – they happen to find themselves now.