

American Exceptionalism: An Idea That Will Not Die

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The end of American exceptionalism has long been anticipated or proclaimed. As early as 1949, for example, Harold Laski was writing in *The American Democracy* that 'no one now takes seriously the legend of a special American destiny.' Yet like one of its more enduring fellow travelers, American liberalism, the concept of American exceptionalism has proven a great survivor. No sooner proclaimed dead and buried in one place, it reappears, alive and kicking, in the next: apparently prepared, as the twentieth century comes to an end, to continue its odyssey across the nation's material and imaginary landscapes well into the twenty-first.' In recent years, the scholarly landscape in particular has witnessed a renewal of interest in this most enduring of ideas. In 1991, Byron Shafer edited a selection of papers by distinguished social scientists from a Nuffield College conference under the title *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*. Three years later, David Adams and Cornelius van Minnen co-edited *Reflections on American Exceptionalism*, the proceedings of the inaugural European Historians of the United States conference held in 1993 at the Roosevelt Study Center, Middleburg, Holland. In 1996, Seymour Martin Lipset added to his Nuffield College keynote address a full-length study, *American Exceptionalism: A*

¹ Laski quoted in William R. Brock, 'Americanism,' in Dennis Welland (ed), *The United States: A Companion to American Studies*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1987), 88. For a recent historical account of American liberalism's persistence, see James Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism* (New York: Westview Press, 1996).

Double-Edged Sword.² Academic journals have of late also carried a number of significant essays on the topic, ranging from Joyce Appleby's 1992 presidential address before the Organization of American Historians to Michael Kammen's 1993 *American Quarterly* reassessment of the debate in the light of the previous twenty years' scholarly enquiry. Informing and complementing these prominent conferences and publications have been numerous other meetings, articles and reviews. Earlier versions of most of the new series of papers on the topic gathered together here were presented at a two day seminar on 'Aspects of American Exceptionalism' held at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, in October 1995.³

Those engaged in re-evaluating the origins, nature, meaning, scope, strengths and limitations of exceptionalism in recent years have reached little agreement on the issues. As Michael Kammen writes in his review of the literature, a 'striking feature of the latest contributions [to the debate] is that they differ so radically among themselves' – even when assessing identical evidence or arguments. Where Kammen claims that Byron Shafer's *Is America Different?* collection 'reaffirms the notion' of American exceptionalism, for example, the editor himself argues that the conference proceedings offer 'tremendously varied responses' to the question of exceptionalism's fate: 'it never was; it once was, but is no more; new versions have substituted for old; it continues on, unchanged in its essence.'⁴ None of this should come as a surprise, perhaps. Given the nature of the concept itself, the diverse disciplinary roots of those scholars attracted to it, the variety of analytical tools and theoretical assumptions brought to bear upon it, and the range of data drawn on in

2 Byron Shafer (ed), *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); David K. Adams and Cornelius A. van Minnen (eds), *Reflections on American Exceptionalism* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994); Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996).

3 Joyce Appleby, 'Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism,' *Journal of American History*, 79 (1992), 419-431; Michael Kaminen, 'The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,' *American Quarterly*, 45 (1993), 1-43. Other recent notable contributions to the debate have included Ian Tyrell, 'American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,' *American Historical Review*, 96 (1991), 1031-72. The 1995 French Association for American Studies annual conference also addressed the question of American exceptionalism. For a full review of the literature, see Kaminen.

4 Kaminen, 1; Byron Shafer, 'What is the American Way? From Themes in Search of Their Incarnation,' in Shafer (ed), 223.

the process, such disagreements are to be expected. What may be more surprising, at least at first glance, is that the concept of American exceptionalism has continued to be of scholarly concern at all. For the fifteen to twenty year period over which Michael Kammen cast his attention in 1993 has been one in which developments within and beyond the academic world appear to have brought into question, revealed the shortcomings of, and perhaps even thoroughly undermined, exceptionalism in all its diverse forms.

Many of the developments associated with the social, political, cultural and intellectual transformations of the 1960s and beyond have been registered within and informed American historical, literary and cultural scholarship.⁵ Both Lawrence Veysey writing in *American Quarterly* and *Reviews in American History* in 1979, and Joyce Appleby in her 1992 AHA address, for example, refer to the ways in which new departures in American historical studies have challenged beliefs in the nation's distinctiveness. To Veysey, the rise of social history brought with it a growing emphasis upon comparative, and particularly cross-national, research, and a corresponding 'questioning of previously unexamined assumptions about American uniqueness.' Appleby, meanwhile, pointed to the ways in which a new generation of social historians had since the late 1960s challenged the individualist, ahistorical and universalist biases she saw underpinning American exceptionalism's 'grand narrative.' Closely associated with the rise of social history, the adoption of multicultural perspectives within and beyond the academic world has also challenged exceptionalist paradigms. Appleby told AHA members of how the new 'multicultural history of the United States' had begun to salvage the nation's original diversity by recovering and expanding the public memory – a memory belonging, not least, to those immigrants, African-Americans, Native Americans and women whose identities had since the early nineteenth century been overshadowed by an exceptionalism that was less a manifestation of nature's laws than a racial-, ethnic- and gender-specific cultural construct.⁶ Writing in *American Quarterly* in

⁵ For a good overview, see 'A Round Table: What Has Changed and Not Changed in American Historical Practice?' *Journal of American History*, 76, 2 (September, 1989), 393ff.

⁶ Lawrence Veysey, 'The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered,' *American Quarterly*, 31 (1979), 455-77; Lawrence Veysey, 'The 'New' Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing,' *Reviews in American History*, 7 (March, 1979), 9; Appleby, 427-31.

1990, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese sounded similar themes when evaluating the contribution of feminist and African-American scholarship to the reconstruction of American literary and cultural history. Given the ways in which American culture had successfully 'promote[d] the ideal of American exceptionalism' only by 'exclud[ing] those who do not fit' its circumscribed notions of national identity, Fox-Genovese asked of herself and her readers 'whether we can appropriately speak of a unified culture at all.' The following year, the publishers of Philip Fisher's collection of essays *The New American Studies* answered confidently that its contents 'deal[t] a fatal blow to the idea of a unified American culture.'⁷

Less frequently acknowledged, but of particular significance in preparing the ground for some of the challenges to exceptionalism cited above, has been the impact of New Left historiography. The approach of the New Left towards American exceptionalism has been a complicated one, as Michael Kammen points out. Even as it lamented or denied common features of the exceptionalist creed, notably the latter's faith in a fundamental American benevolence, so as a political and social movement the New Left embodied qualities often associated with exceptionalism, such as a preference for self-reliance and personal insight over state control or class consciousness, and a belief in the quasi-mystical recuperative powers of the American landscape. To a fraction of the New Left, at least, all of the nation's self-evident shortcomings simply made it uniquely evil.⁸ Within the narrower confines of the academic world, too, the New Left's concern for certain familiar exceptionalist staples was evident. To the influential diplomatic historian William Appleman Williams, for example, the influence of the frontier was as crucial and pervasive in ideological terms as it was to Frederick Jackson Turner

⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'Between Individualism and Fragmentation: American Culture and the New Literary Studies of Race and Gender,' *American Quarterly*, 42 (1990), 7-34; Philip Fisher (ed), *The New American Studies: Essays from Representations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), back cover.

⁸ Kammen, 16. On the New Left and the American pastoral, see Leo Marx, 'Pastoralism in America,' in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (eds), *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 61-66. The broader literature on the New Left is now extensive. For reviews, see Maurice Isserman, 'The Not-so-Dark and Bloody Ground: New Worles on the 1960s,' *American Historical Review*, (October 1989), 990-1010; Winifred Breines, 'Whose New Left?' *Journal of American History* (September, 1988), 528-545.

during the Progressive era and those he influenced thereafter. Yet a preoccupation with some of the touchstones of exceptionalism scarcely constituted a subscription to the faith itself. Following in the footsteps of his revisionist predecessor, Charles Beard, Williams analysed the significance of the frontier in American history in order to explain why in his view it had to be transcended. Americans could not begin, he quoted Walter Lippmann approvingly, until they had learned to abandon the belief 'that utopia is in the old American frontier.' Along with that belief would go, he implied, the debilitating conviction at the heart of all exceptionalist creeds: that the United States was not like other lands. To this extent, Williams was not only recovering a marginalized past, like Appleby's social historians; he was encouraging and enabling Americans to acknowledge that they *had* a past, as opposed to an historical mythology.⁹

One part of the nation's past Williams attempted to confront his fellow citizens with was, of course, what he saw as its imperial past, not least for the light it might throw on its imperial present, from the shores of Castro's Cuba to the battlefields of South Vietnam. And any account of the discrediting of exceptionalism would obviously be incomplete without reference to the effects of the South East Asian conflict on American self-confidence and perhaps even self-definition. It is certainly possible to interpret US involvement in Vietnam as revealing – or even deriving from – certain distinctive American cultural traits, and thereby to find in the conflict further evidence of exceptionalism's enduring influence.¹⁰ A more common reading, however, has identified in the war an erosion or loss of public belief in once-distinctive national traits, from military invincibility to moral innocence. Moreover, whatever the nature and extent of Vietnam's impact on exceptionalism, the war has been only one of a number of events, processes and developments whose combined

⁹ William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (1966; New York: New Viewpoints, 1973), 479. Along with *Contours*, originally published in 1961, Williams' most influential studies included *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959). On the work of Williams and New Left historiography more broadly; see Marcel van der Linden, *A Revolt Against Liberalism* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1996); Lloyd Gardner (ed), *Redefining the Past* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press; 1986), Part 1.

¹⁰ The subtitle of Loren Baritz' *Backfire: A History of how American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: William Morrow, 1985) gives a sense of the possibilities. Chapter 1 of Baritz' book adds further detail.

effects over the past thirty years have challenged exceptionalism's appeal. The fact that journalists and other commentators have felt driven (and been able) to proclaim the nation's loss of innocence on so many occasions in recent years – whether in connection with the assassination of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, Jr. or with the Watergate and Irangate scandals – might suggest that a belief in this particular feature of American exceptionalism has proven difficult to eradicate. Yet whatever effects may be attributed to individual events, broader long-term economic, social, political and technological transformations have increasingly called into question beliefs in the fundamentally distinctive nature of the United States. As Giles Gunn remarks in *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (1987): 'To take but one example of modern restructuring, the multinational corporation has so fundamentally revised the meaning of national boundaries, not to say social differences, that it has become essentially pointless to talk any longer about cultural purity or ... cultural uniqueness.'¹¹ In his contribution to this issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia*, Tom Byers speculates along similar lines about 'exceptionalist ideology in an age of ... economic globalization.' One of the points of departure of Eric Guthey's contribution, meanwhile, is that the 'the globalizing and decentralizing tendencies' associated with the recent development of new technologies now 'threaten to dissolve the usefulness of the nation state and further confuse and fragment the already-problematic notion of an American national identity itself.'

By calling into question the significance of both the nation-state and associated concepts of national identity, Gunn, Byers and Guthey could easily be interpreted as challenging not only the *raison d'être* of American exceptionalism but also one of the assumptions upon which American Studies as a scholarly movement developed from the 1930s onwards. Not surprisingly, perhaps, many critics in recent years have spoken of the close connections between exceptionalist beliefs and the American Studies agenda, at least during the latter's earlier phases. That agenda, it has been argued, can only be understood if related to the

¹¹ Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 150.

growth of American political, economic, social and cultural power from the 1930s – and particularly World War Two – onwards. In tandem with the growth of American influence and the deepening of the Cold War during the late 1940s and 1950s, critics claim, there developed a 'consensus history' which helped make of American Studies something of a handmaiden of power by prompting it to ask not whether but *why* the United States was so different. Such associations may have been exaggerated and simplified, but they were by no means groundless. Even if the connections were more tenuous than some critics suggested, moreover, the existence of such a relationship suggests that signs of decline or diffusion in one realm may have implications for the other. A common way of reading the history of American Studies has been to identify a chronological arc, reaching up from the pioneering works of Perry Miller and F.O. Matthiessen in the 1930s to the climactic expressions of the so-called 'myth and symbol school' in the 1950s and 1960s – after which a mixture of disciplinary fragmentation, intellectual disillusion and institutional attrition left American Studies, in Giles Gunn's words, 'in considerable trouble.' If the fate of American Studies and of American exceptionalism are at all related, the implications for the latter are self-evident.¹²

Whatever the nature of the relationship (and in his contribution to this issue James Mendelsohn suggests that American Studies now adopts a predominantly critical stance), exceptionalism – or at least belief in it, which may be one and the same thing – endures.¹³ Many of those historic, social, cultural, political and other features often cited as embodiments of distinctiveness – from the impact of the frontier and slavery to the influence of immigration and ethnicity; from the supposed lack of a

¹² Gunn, 147. One frequently-cited survey of the development of American Studies is Gene Wise, 'Paradigm Dramas' in *American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement*, *American Quarterly*, 31 (1979), 293-337. It should be added, though, that Wise's portrait of the discipline since the 1960s speaks more in terms of diffusion than decline. A useful corrective to some of the common assumptions about American Studies' historical contours is provided by Linda Kerber, 'Diversity and the Transformation of American Studies,' *American Quarterly*, 41 (1989), 415-431.

¹³ Stephen Fender emphasizes that in order to 'describe the American difference ... we must begin by recognizing that what we are discussing is not an actual difference but the idea of one.' See Stephen Fender, 'The American Difference,' in Mick Gidley (ed), *Modern American Culture: An Introduction* (London: Longman, 1993), 7.

feudal past to high living standards – continue to exercise the thoughts of students of American life. As many of the contributors to Byron Shafer's *Is America Different?* point out, it is difficult to ignore the wide range of evidence documenting the many distinctions between the United States and, say, Europe, which have endured to this day – though whether such differences by themselves constitute a case for distinctiveness, let alone exceptionalism, is another matter. Significantly, perhaps, while interpretations and agendas have moved on a good deal since the days of Frederick Jackson Turner, Louis Hartz and David Potter, the sense of distinctiveness they shared has not entirely vanished, even among more recent generations of Americanists. In his introduction to *The New American Studies*, for example, Philip Fisher writes of 'a set of underlying ... national facts around which all identities are shaped and with which the many rhetorics of our culture are engaged.' The former, he goes on, include a 'troubled utopian core of enterprise, freedom, and democratic culture.'¹⁴ Just as definitions of evidence change and intellectual tools, concepts and agendas undergo transformation, in other words, so traditional *gestalts* survive. In an era during which concerns for borders, fragmentations and differences have grown in prominence, it should not be completely surprising that exceptionalism's own logic of differentiation endures.

Possible explanations for that endurance are numerous. One might have to do with the very protean nature of exceptionalism, definitions of which have been as difficult to agree upon as estimates of its sources or longevity. (In this regard, exceptionalism and liberalism have a good deal in common.) As Michael Kammen points out, historians and social scientists over the past half century have changed places in their understanding and assessment of exceptionalism rather than finding common ground about what it means.¹⁵

A second explanation, closely related to the first, might entail innovations in exceptionalism's scholarly treatment. As much as they have challenged it, changing intellectual trends, innovative research methods and new disciplines may also have played a part in modernizing

¹⁴ Philip Fisher, 'Introduction: the New American Studies,' in Fisher (ed), xiv.

¹⁵ Kammen, 2.

and reinvigorating exceptionalism. The so-called 'linguistic turn,' the diffusion of techniques first developed in literary criticism, and the study of social history and popular culture, for example, have not simply challenged facile claims concerning, say, 'the American mind.' They have also identified or articulated previously unrecognized features of what might be considered distinctively 'American.' Helle Porsdam's contribution to this issue of the journal emphasizes the ways in which, in the United States more so than anywhere else, a common faith in law continues to unite those on opposite sides of social, political and racial barriers. David Nye's essay on American culture and technology, meanwhile, concludes that 'Americans of different ethnic and racial backgrounds usually resemble each other more than they do people from their nations of origin.' Neither author subscribes to or restores an uncontested exceptionalist faith; both make clear, however, that the concept still retains at least heuristic uses. A third, though by no means final, explanation might involve less scholarly than popular concerns. One of the things almost all of the papers gathered here point out is that the American public continue for a variety of reasons to subscribe to a belief in the nation's distinctiveness, regardless of the shifting contours of academic debate. As Stephen Fender puts it: 'Americans are different because they think they are, or wish to be, and the wish has always been mother and father to the fact.'¹⁶

Whatever explanations are put forward – for its origins or endurance, for its nature and meaning, for the legitimacy or otherwise of the concept – reports of what Daniel Bell in 1975 described as 'the end of American exceptionalism' still appear to be exaggerated, even as the 'American Century' draws to a close. This issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* constitutes a further contribution to a lively and ongoing debate.¹⁷

¹⁶ Fender: 20.

¹⁷ Daniel Bell, 'The End of American Exceptionalism,' *The Public Interest*, 41 (Fall, 1975), 193-224, rpt. in Daniel Bell; *The Winding Passage* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 245-71.