

The Notion of Exceptionalism as an Underlying Factor for the Construction of the American Identity

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Abstract

This article aims at demonstrating that the power and the success of the United States of America in the contemporary world stem from the notion of “American Exceptionalism”, a value devised by the American pioneers to create typical American identity. In fact, American founding fathers and early political leaders had conceived a national narrative which stipulated that American people were chosen by God to rule the world, thus the creation of the term “American Exceptionalism”. Methodologically, the study was based on the qualitative approach. Theoretically, the postcolonial and the psychoanalytic approaches were also used in the discussions and interpretations of the study’s data. As for results, the study has shown that the current greatness of the United States of America as the world leader is the result of the conceived ideology, namely the concept of “American Exceptionalism”. It has proved that this concept has become part of the American identity and the driving force of all American citizens since the early periods of that nation. It means that all the actions and decisions of American people are influenced by this ideology, and it has been a source of motivation and courage for the American people. In the end, the exceptionalism notion has now become an integral part of the American identity and culture.

Keywords: America, exceptionalism, greatness, post-colonialism, psychoanalysis

Résumé

Cet article vise à démontrer que la puissance et le succès des États-Unis d'Amérique dans le monde contemporain découlent de la notion d'« exceptionnalisme américain », une valeur conçue par les pionniers américains pour créer une identité typiquement américaine. En fait, les pères fondateurs américains et les premiers dirigeants politiques avaient conçu un narratif national qui stipulait que le peuple américain était choisi par Dieu pour gouverner le monde, d'où la création du terme « exceptionnalisme américain ». Méthodologiquement, l'étude est basée sur l'approche qualitative. Théoriquement, les approches postcoloniales et psychanalytiques ont également été utilisées dans les discussions et les interprétations des données de l'étude. Quant aux résultats, l'étude a montré que la grandeur actuelle des États-Unis d'Amérique en tant que leader mondial est le résultat de l'idéologie ancrée dans le concept de « l'exceptionnalisme américain ». Il a été prouvé que ce concept fait désormais partie de l'identité américaine et est la force motrice de tous les citoyens américains depuis les premières périodes de la nation Américaine. C'est-à-dire, toutes les décisions et actions des Américains sont influencées par cette idéologie. Elle a été et est une source de motivation et de courage pour le peuple américain. En fin de compte, la notion d'exceptionnalisme est désormais devenue une partie intégrante de l'identité et de la culture américaines.

Mots-clés : Amérique, exceptionnalisme, grandeur, post-colonialisme, psychanalyse

Introduction

The America mainland had been the center of the intention of the whole world following its discovery by Christopher Columbus in 1492. People from all over the world were interested in exploring that newly discovered world. Among all the adventurers undertaking the American journey, the British nationals were the most important mainly in the northern parts of that continent. After several hardships encountered in those parts of the world, those European who managed to settle on that new land were able to consolidate their grasp on the land which paved the way for the foundation of the American nation.

During the settlement of the early American colonists, they had faced a lot of challenges and difficulties, resulting in many deaths and sicknesses; however, these situations had not deterred them from giving up. They had persevered and overcome various obstacles until the achievement of their independence from the reign of the Great Britain. Then, the young American nation had moved up gradually to become the leader of the world. Thus, the objective of this study is to demonstrate that the triumph of the United States of America over the other nations of the world in the contemporary period is rooted in the philosophical conception of “American Exceptionalism.” The qualitative research method is used in the data collection of the current study because of the adoption of the content analysis design.

Theoretically, some post-colonial and psychoanalytic tools are used to guide and ease the analyses and interpretations of the study’s data. This paper is therefore divided into three main sections. The first section deals with the origin of the concept of “American exceptionalism”. Secondly, it accounts for the purposes behind of the conception of that historical narrative. Finally, the study examines the different impacts of the concept of “American exceptionalism” on American citizens and nation.

1. The Birth and Ideological Dimensions of “American Exceptionalism”

The exceptionalism ideology is traceable back to the period of the early inhabitants of the North America, the pilgrims. In fact, the pilgrims were a group called puritans who were against the way the Catholic Church was led in Europe, chiefly the Great Britain. Accordingly, they wanted to bring a change, that is, to purify the church. That rebellious situation cost them a severe persecution by the English crown. As a result, many of them left England, and by extension Europe, for the newly discovered world. With this regard, Tindall and Shi (2007) uphold as follows:

In 1620, 102 men, women, and children, led by William Bradford, crammed aboard the three-masted Mayflower. Their ranks included both “saints” (...) and “strangers” (...). The stormy voyage had led them to Cape Cod. “Being thus arrived at safe harbor, and brought safe to land,” William Bradford wrote, “they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean (p.62).”

In the passage, it can be inferred that the journey undertaken by these people, from Europe to America, entailed a lot of difficulties. Being faithful servants of God, they were so grateful to God, when they reached their destination safely. The same extract demonstrates that they strongly believed that God had personally conducted them through the “furious ocean” to Cape Cod. It means that the survival in the journey was a portent of God’s blessing and acceptance of their adventure. That is why when they arrived in America, they believed to be in the mission of God. To corroborate the foregoing idea, the same authors write the following:

The Puritans who arrived in America believed themselves to be on a divine mission to create a model society committed to the proper worship of God. In their efforts to separate themselves from a sinful England and its authoritarian Anglican bishops, New England’s zealous Puritans sought to create “holy commonwealths” that would help inspire a spiritual transformation in their homeland (p.62).

In the excerpt, it is clearly shown that the conflict between English authorities and puritans is the main reason of the pilgrimage of the latter. As they considered England as the land of sins, the New World was like a holy land or a godly land. Hence, separating from the sinners of England and creating their own homeland in the New World were predicted by God. That is why it is blatantly stated in the above passage that the puritans were conducting God’s mission. In the same passage, we can understand that at the very beginning of their presence in America, the puritans were trying to create a typical American culture and identity. By analyzing the foregoing, the passage deeper, it can be deduced that the idea of exceptionalism was born during the first voyage of the pilgrims, the puritans. They considered themselves special and different from the rest of the English people for religious reasons. So when they decided to move away from the sinful people of Europe, they were blessed by God who protected them all along the journey to their destination. The idea of believing that God is constantly by their side made them believe that they were exceptional.

Moreover, another situation that reconsolidated the exceptionalism feeling of the early settlers of America was the ordeals they went through at their arrival in the New World. As a matter of fact, the early settlers had gone through numerous difficult situations: famine, the hostility of Native Americans or Indians, epidemics, weather hardships and deaths. In a word, the colonists had suffered several losses as a result of famine, the repetitive attacks by Indians and so on. However, with their determination and courage, they had been able overcome all the stated challenges and even expanded their territory. Triumphant over the different challenges had further fortified their beliefs in their exceptionalism, and their being under the protection of God who had guided them to the New World so that they could lead the world. In relation to this idea, Lamoreaux (2014) writes as follows:

The idea of American exceptionalism, particularly the notion that American institutions should be held up as a model to the rest of the world, has fallen out of favor among historians in recent decades. The idea had its roots in the Puritans’ vision of their settlement in the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a “city on the hill” and in early-nineteenth-century Americans’ belief in their “manifest destiny” (p.1).”

In the passage, the author corroborates that the origins of the exceptionalism concept dates back to puritans, a rebellious religious group of people who escaped England to seek

refuge in the America where they could practice their religion perfectly and freely. These religious people were the embodiment of resistance; they left the hostility of England to settle on an uncertain colony. An environment which encompassed several challenges. In order to galvanize his people to overcome the stated challenges of the new world, the leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony John Winthrop described “his colony as “a city on a hill,” and prophesied, “the eyes of all people are upon us (Connor, 2022, p.28).” He is believed to be the first person to uphold the uniqueness of the people of his colony. The foregoing excerpt entails that the colony was located in an upper position where the colonists can be seen by the other nations. This phrase connotes that the colonists are unique and superior to the rest of the world, so they had to prove their worth to the other nations. This is actually an implicit motivational appeal towards his people who are protected and chosen by God. Winthrop preached these words because of the difficult experience that the colonists had undergone, from England to the new world. Although he did not pronounce the term exceptionalism, the meaning of his words is a clear description of the term. As the colonists contrived to survive the hardships, death, the hostility of the native people, the colonists believed that God had empowered them to reign over the other peoples. This is where the idea of exceptionalism was conceived. It then became the essential element on the basis of which the American identity was constructed.

Moreover, after the period of the American Revolutionary War, the same concept of exceptionalism was revived, and paved the way for the conception of another similar belief, namely “Manifest Destiny.” This term was also used for the first in the 19th century to mean that the American people were preprogrammed or predestined by God to conquer more territories or to expand the American territories. It means that God has approved of the expansion of the American territories as the American people were blessed and authorized to capture as many lands as they wished. In the light of the preceding, Connor (2022) corroborates in the following lines: “Manifest Destiny, a 19th-century doctrine stating that westward expansion was both justified and inevitable, soon led to America stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific (...). This expansion was justified (...) (p.31)”. Through the extract, it is perceptible that the ideology relating to Manifest Destiny has been uttered at a moment when American leaders wanted to annex new territories. The American policymakers of the 19th century found it necessary to revive the former concept related to exceptionalism into the Manifest Destiny doctrine. The closeness of the two concepts is blatant. By analyzing them side by side, we notice that both are related to God, and both seek to construct an American identity. They reveal that American people are unique in the world because God has privileged them to be special. Likewise, in the two concepts, there is an expression of American superiority over the rest of the world. That is, these concepts in a way devalue the people of other nations.

2. Objective and Application of American Exceptionalism Concept

The ideological dimension of American exceptionalism is large. This section accounts for the main objectives the exceptionalism concept sought to achieve. The origin of the concept is attributed to John Winthrop, one of the puritan leaders of New England when he labeled his colony as a city on a hill and that all the world was watching them. Taking into account the historical context of the concept, its primary purpose was clearly motivational. At the given period, the people of the American colonies were living in harsh conditions and doubt. Thus

leaders like Winthrop, being religious zealots, used sermons to their people in order to galvanize them. Whenever the American colonists might feel crestfallen, the role of the leaders like Winthrop was to remind them of their duty which was to lead the world. It was also a way to tell them not to give up because they had to fulfill God's mission. The conceptualization of the ideology of American exceptionalism was done in the hope of making it a landmark for all Americans.

Most of the time, the sermons about the uniqueness of American colonists were given in the hope of stimulating the inhabitants to follow specific goals and accept the leadership of their leaders. That is, to be able to manage peacefully and smoothly the different colonies, the pioneers and their successors had consistently resorted to the American exceptionalism concept. The latter would help institute a set of conducts for suggested for the population. John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay, is a perfect illustration of the case. To better and deeper substantiate the foregoing, Andrew Hurrell (2002) postulates the following: "All human societies rely on historical stories about themselves to legitimize notions of where they are and where they might be going (p. xiii)." The excerpt implies that all societies need to refer to their respective pasts in order to project the future. That is, a better comprehension of the past is the basis on which a nation can rely its foundation for the future.

In light of the foregoing idea, the American pioneers had conceptualized the notion of American exceptionalism as a landmark for the American people and their offspring. Based on the following extract, Erelí (2018) supports that the presence of national narratives would engender "the sense of self in the first place (p.2)". Another articulation of such national narratives in the form of historical stories is that they could be spread by: "policymakers and by ordinary men in any given nation to maintain the sense of collective self and of nationhood in the past. In fact, this might display the effectiveness of national narratives either in forming the sense of nationhood or in reflecting a spirited sense of collective self (Erelí, 2018, p.2)." This assertion gives an insight into the real objective that revival of national narratives, like American exceptionalism concept, in a nation. By analyzing Erelí's extract, it can be understood that the maintenance of such narrative in a nation as concept is intended to create "a sense of self and a spirit of collective self."

It is this context that at any political event and any national decision-making situation, the American policymakers always resort to the concept of American exceptionalism overtly or covertly in order to arouse the spirit of Americanism in the mindsets of citizens. That is, the discourse on the concept has been commonplace in all American political fora starting from the early periods of the American independence up to the contemporary period. To support the previous idea about the recurrent recourse to the exceptionalism concept by American politicians throughout the American history, Erelí (2018) writes the following lines: "Representations of the ideas constructing American exceptionalism in the discourse of high-profile policymakers such as presidents, vice presidents, secretary of states, can be observed throughout American history from the author of the Declaration of Independence –Thomas Jefferson– to the 21st-century presidents (p.4)." The excerpt corroborates that the ideas constructing American exceptionalism have been perpetuated on American political sphere for several years. The prevalence of American exceptionalism idea by American policymakers is

intended to construct an American self. That is, the concept is purposefully prevalent on all political arenas just to create an American identity with which all the American citizens can identify themselves.

Furthermore, in their search of consolidating an American cultural identity, American politicians and thinkers have conceived the notion of “Manifest Destiny” based on the concept of American exceptionalism. In fact, Manifest Destiny is another articulation of the American exceptionalism. It was coined for the first time by John L. O'Sullivan, a Democratic politician and publicist, in relation to the expansion of America in 1840s, mainly the annexation of Texas. Reginald Horsman (1981), in *Race and manifest destiny*, discloses:

The initial use of the phrase Manifest Destiny in the summer of 1845 attracted no particular attention, but in December of that year O'Sullivan used it again, this time in his newspaper, the New York Morning News. (...) He maintained that although America's legal title to Oregon was perfect, its better claim was by "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us." A week later Representative Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts referred to the phrase in Congress. It immediately became the subject of debate and inspired both praise and censure. In the following years it was referred to frequently both by advocates and opponents of expansion (p.220).

The above passage shows a close link between this concept (Manifest Destiny) and the preceding one (American exceptionalism). Indeed, if we compare Winthrop's vision of Americans who “considered themselves “Chosen People” destined for “Promised Land (Ereli, 2018, p.44)” with O'Sullivan's vision on the expansionism as a Manifest Destiny, we can see clearly that O'Sullivan was influenced by the former. The exceptionalism concept was made an ideological and a national narrative in order to encourage and heighten the pride of American people in times of big challenges in the 17th century. Likewise, the Manifest destiny was coined and revived by O'Sullivan to convince Americans to support the annexation of neighboring territories of the United States in the 1840s. Hence, the Manifest Destiny is just another interpretation of the ideology of American exceptionalism, and both have been present throughout the American history as national narratives and enshrined into American culture.

3. Impact of the American Exceptionalism on the American Citizens and Nation

The conception and the perpetuation of the American exceptionalism doctrine has had a tremendous impact on the American citizens on the one hand, the American nation on the other hand. The benefits that has resulted and is still resulting from this national narrative are incommensurable. Since the operationalization of the concept as a national landmark, Americanism has been sanctified in the eyes of the American citizens. In fact, they strongly believed in their ‘chosenness’¹⁰⁸ as the world leaders. This fact is manifest in the everyday attitude and action of American citizens. Because of that ideology American citizens are

¹⁰⁸ The term “chosenness” is used in this research work to refer to American pioneers' belief about the uniqueness of Americans and the fact that the latter are chosen by God.

differentiable from the nationals of other nations around the world. Starting from the period American revolutionary war which opposed Americans to the British army, the success of the American people is largely reputable to the ideology of American exceptionalism.

The revolution took form and gained the support of all the American dwellers as a result of the revival the American exceptionalism belief by both leaders and intellectuals. In fact, the latter, in search of boosting their force and bringing all Americans together resorted the exceptionalism narrative. They instructed the population to revolt for the sake of their exceptional status or their 'chosenness' by God. With this regard, Roberto Sirvent and Danny Haiphong (2019), in their book entitled *American Exceptionalism and American Innocence*, write:

The U.S. is supported by an origins myth which is perhaps the most valuable narrative for the architects of American exceptionalism. It rests on the premise that the "American Revolution" was a positive step forward in the history of humanity. Free-market zealots and left-wing political thinkers alike have heralded the break from the British Empire as an "anti-colonial" rebellion (p.2).

In the excerpt, the authors argue that the American exceptionalism narrative had played a tremendous role in the American revolutionary war. It claims that American radicals and political thinkers relied on the belief to mobilize as many Americans as possible for the common cause which was the fight against the British soldiers. In that, Americans were reminded of their uniqueness and their mission to lead the world. That mission could not be accomplished as long as Americans were under the authority of Great Britain. Therefore, the ideology had brought together all the colonies to defeat British. In a word, the victory of the Americans during revolutionary period is largely linked the American exceptionalism narrative.

In addition to that, the same situation happened in the period of Westward expansion¹⁰⁹ when the fanatics like John O'Sullivan had resorted to the belief of American exceptionalism to declare that it was the American manifest destiny to expand their territory. Following O'Sullivan's declaration relating to Manifest Destiny, many American citizens had supported the move toward the West. A result, the ideology of superiority gained grounds in America as most Americans started look down on the people of other nations. To corroborate the above idea, Reginald Horsman (1981) writes:

To sow the seeds of freedom and republicanism over an ever-widening area was not enough to secure world progress, because Americans now believed that these seeds were falling on barren ground. Most peoples, they believed, lacked the innate abilities to take advantage of free institutions. Some races were doomed to permanent inferiority, some to extinction (...) The Americans were destined to continue to increase rapidly in numbers and to spread far and wide. But if other peoples could not be instructed in the establishment of free republican states, what would happen to the population in the areas into which the American Anglo-Saxons were expanding? The Americans had two immediate racial models- the Indians and the blacks (pp.230-31).

¹⁰⁹ It is a period in the history of the United marked by the extension of the American territory towards the West.

The passage demonstrates that the belief according to which Americans were exceptional had made many Americans narcissistic. That is, they had developed the ideology of superiority. However, the American exceptionalism narrative has united the American people by making them proud and courageous. They don't scare of facing challenges because in their minds, they are empowered by the Divinity. Inferring from the foregoing passage, it can be argued that the success of the American people in annexing their neighboring territories is reputable to the image they had on themselves. That image is the superiority of the American people who are legitimate and destined to conquer whatever territories they wished because they were supposed to be special.

On top of that, the ideology American exceptionalism is also expressed in American movies in order to keep the domestic viewers awake and focused on their supremacy. Indeed, the concept has impacted the American film industry which always portrays Americans as perfect beings: "The meteoric rise of the United States as the world superpower is linked to several factors, among which the role of films in promoting American values around the world (Coulibaly, 2023, p.13)." Through this extract, it is upheld that the rise of the United States as a world power is partly linked to the film industry which makes the promotion of American values around the world. However, what is not explicitly denoted in the foregoing excerpt is that the American filmmakers rely on the American exceptionalism narrative to stage their movies. Coulibaly (2023) corroborates this idea in the following lines: "In producing their films, some film makers present American societies as exceptional with brave and the most talented citizens (15)." It means that American movies are staged in a stainless way that promotes Americans and their societies. This situation is clearly a boost for the perpetuation and immortalization of the American exceptionalism belief. The mentioned boost of the concept is manifest in the daily attitudes and actions of American citizens.

In the same context of the American exceptionalism, the ideology of American dream was born. In reality, this new concept encourages the hunt for success in the American society. American thinkers have enshrined in the mindsets of ordinary American citizens that they are living in a special country which has guaranteed prosperity for all Americans. Accordingly, they are appealed to stand up and chase after prosperity. It was clearly coined in order to push American citizens to surpass themselves and be beneficial to their nation. It has paved the way for the expansion of the individualism in the American society. The notion of Manifest Destiny and American dream are all stemmed from the concept of American exceptionalism, and each of them had tremendous impact on the American people and nation. American current status as the world super power would not have been possible if the American exceptionalism narrative had not been revived and immortalized year by year up to the contemporary period. Mark R. Rank, Thomas A, Hirschl, and Kirk A, (2014), in their book titled *Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes*, claim as follows:

(...) the concept of the American Dream. It has captured the imagination of people from all walks of life and represents the heart and soul of the country. The American Dream has served as a road map for the way we often envision the course of our lives. The rules of the game are well-known, as is the bargain that is struck. For those willing to work hard and take advantage of their opportunities, there is the expectation of a prosperous and fulfilling life (p.1).

The analysis of the passage, we can perceive that the idea of American exceptionalism has created a real American cultural identity. The fighting spirit which was initiated by Winthrop has become the driving force of the American people who do not hesitate to face any challenge because in their minds, they have the ability to achieve all they want. That is why, in the above extract, it is revealed that under the influence of the American dream belief, any ordinary American citizen is destined to a prosperous life. It implies that nothing is impossible for Americans.

Conclusion

The Notion of American exceptionalism dates back to the colonial period with the first wave of puritans. The ideology has become a national narrative on which all the American people lean in order to project themselves into the future. It has been demonstrated that the union of the American people as we know it today underlay the concept of American exceptionalism. It has also been evidenced that during the period of the Westward expansion, O'Sullivan had translated the exceptionalism narrative into the Manifest Destiny in the 1840s. The current greatness of the United States is also reputable to the exceptionalism doctrine as all the actions or measures taken by American people go toward the concept. It has been an essential element in the construction of the typical American cultural identity. Thus American exceptionalism narrative can be said to be an integral part of the American culture today.

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