EXCEPTIONALISM AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

The paper treats the concept of American "exceptionalism" in its different historical and cultural aspects and manifestations as an integrant part of American identity. Exemplifications of a historical order are approached, but also contemporary manifestations of this cultural and political concept.

Any debate on the exceptional character of the idea of America should undoubtedly start from the premises of the definition of the term. I will use the term "exceptional" with the meaning of "*constituting, or having the nature of an exception; unusual, extraordinary*"[1]. "Exceptionalism" would therefore mean "*the fact or state of being an exception to some rule or general principle"*[1]. Therefore, when one uses the term "American exceptionalism" one refers to America, or the Americans, or both, as being different from other countries in the world in a unique and unpredictable way. However, "exceptionalism" should not, by any means, be taken for a difference, a trend or characteristic that sets the country or the people apart from, say, Poles, or French. Of course, each country has certain specificities, which are identification marks for their society, national character, lifestyle. This is not what "exceptionalism" means, although America certainly has enough differentiating features, which should distinguish it from other states. Exceptionalism implies distinctiveness, a deviation from a set of common standard, from an established norm and tendency.

Therefore, the term suggests more than a claim to a distinct cultural specificity in America. The idea suggested is that America has ventured along new paths which other countries will only later follow; that it is a model to look up to and to try to emulate.

Some authors argue that the idea of America being "exceptional" does not imply a superiority of any kind over other nations of the world, meaning that it is simply qualitatively different from other nations. The idea of exceptionalism would refer to the unique conditions of the creation of the American nation and to its political and democratic experience. For example, Seymour Martin Lipset says that:

"*When Tocqueville or other "foreign traveler writers or social scientists have used the term "exceptional" to describe the United States they have not meant that America is better than other countries, or has a superior culture. Rather, they have simply been suggesting that it is qualitatively different, that it is an outlier. Exceptionalism is a double-edged concept. We are the worst as well as the best, depending on which quality is being addressed*"[1].

Without any intention of denying these assumptions of exceptionalism seen as uniqueness in a neutral perspective, this paper aims at interpreting the concept of exceptionalism as a distinctive component in the American identity which is perceived with its connotation of superiority, of special destiny in comparison with other nations and states. Realizing uniqueness implies a process of comparison, of analysis, of

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deconstruction one's inner structure in relation with a significant "other". Comparison cannot escape a sense of judgment, of competition between the "I" and the "other" which is nothing but human. One cannot define oneself as "exceptional" without approaching those elements which make one so in comparison with others. In a historical approach, but also with constant reference to contemporary manifestations, I will try to analyze the manifestations of this spirit of uniqueness of the American identity.

As part of the national character of the Americans, this sense of special destiny has accompanied the American nation ever since its foundations and the instances in which it can be found are multiple. Sometimes, however, there is a significant gap between the exceptional destiny as it is perceived from the inside and the factual reality. In other words, considering oneself "exceptional" and acting upon this conviction is a delusion. A delusion which pays off, apparently, since the exceptionalist rhetoric has been a most efficient means of persuasion and manipulation throughout history from the part of American presidents whenever they wanted to obtain popular support for their enterprises.

This assumption of exceptionalism goes hand in hand with the idea of patriotism, whose intensity in the United States is ubiquitous, especially under its personal form, and especially in the contemporary circumstances, when the events of September 11 and the current state of international affairs seems to have awoken a sense of national pride and of patriotic manifestations long forgotten.

The history of this term goes back in time. Alexis de Tocqueville in his "Democracy in America" (1835) is thought to have coined this term, although there is no reference of it in the book. Still, he constantly refers to the uniqueness of the newly formed American society and closely examines its way of functioning by comparing it with the European one. He also mentions America's unique character to account for the success of democracy in the new world, while it had failed in other corners of the world. This is how Tocqueville expressed the singularity of the American experience:

"*Of all the novel things which attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me more forcibly than the equality of social conditions. I had no difficulty in discovering the extraordinary influence this fundamental fact exerts upon the progress of society; it sets up a particular direction to public attitudes, a certain style to the laws, fresh guidelines to governing authorities, and individual habits to those governed. Soon I came to recognize that this very fact extends its influence well beyond political customs and laws; it exercises no less power over civil society than it does over the government. It forms opinions, creates feelings, proposes ways of acting, and transforms everything it does not directly instigate itself.*"[1]

Tocqueville may well be considered the initiator of a long series of writings on the idea of exceptionalism. But more importantly, he was the one who first rooted the idea of a special destiny reserved for America, due to its exceptional character. However, he most certainly was not the first person who considered the New World to be unique, and its inhabitants to be blessed with the sweet burden of a special destiny.

This idea goes back to the Puritan experience, and to John Winthrop's famous speech in which he expressed the idea of the country's special destiny in a phrase that was to make history:

"*For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken ... we shall be made a story*

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and a by-word throughout the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God ... We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us til we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going." [1]

The idea of having established a covenant with God, as His chosen people to fulfill the mission of faith and morality in the world has been long lasting and with far-reaching effects. One of the most obvious and characteristic effect is the overwhelming presence of religious aspects in all sectors of public life in America. For the sake of comparison, let us take a statement of President George Bush Jr. during the 2000 election campaign:

"Our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world" [1]
(President George Bush, jnr - statement during the 2000 election campaign)

Another important event in the history of the term "exceptional" is the Amerian War of Independence. This was the occasion to prove to the world the strength of the newly formed nation, its cohesion and sense of belonging to sum of principles now known as the American Creed. It was also the opportunity to manifest distinctiveness from the old world, from Europe, to prove that America was not only a new land, a colony, but that the skeleton of a new culture was already there. Moreover, this skeleton of the American identity was an exception, a unique experience. This idea was supported by many of the intellectuals of those times, among which was Thomas Paine:

"We have it in our power to begin the world anew...America shall make a stand, not for herself alone, but for the world" [1]

If the first assumption of exceptionalism was intricately connected with religion, seeing America as the promised land and the inhabitants of the country as brave heroes chosen by God to be a model of moral conduct, this time, the new facet of the American exceptionalism was closely tied to more mundane issues, inpired from the philosophic ideologies of the age, the belief that sovereignty belonged to the people, not to a hereditary ruling class. Moreover, several assumptions of the term refer to political stability itself. In a world dominated by various historical changes, with nations and countries undergoing modifications in their political form of organization, America appears to be the only superpower which has maintained the same form of government, republicanism, and the same Constitution. In some conceptions, the exceptionalism of the United States is given by the stability of its political principles, in the line of liberalism, republicanism, democracy and free enterprise. In this respect America is, indeed, at least unique, due to its lack of experience of other forms of government.

A particular aspect which strengthened the idea of the American exceptionalism is the experience of the immigrants. It is an essential aspect in the formation of the nation as we know it today. And even if, as Samuel Huntington noticed, "*America was not a nation of immigrants*", but it was "*a society, or societies, of settlers who came to the new world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*"[1], it was the immigrant experience that deeply changed the face of the United States and allowed it to gain the status of world super power it enjoys today. Only an "exceptional", with the definite meaning of "better" society could attract with such a magnetic force people from all over the world, coming from so different social strata, and with so diverse cultural backgrounds. What united all of them was the desire to

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accomplish the American Dream, in a society which was qualitatively superior to their home countries. Again, it is human nature to pursue a better life, and the force which attracted those people was not the uniqueness of the American experience as compared to other countries, but what made it better: equality of chances, lack of an opressive system, no class structure. In those people's mind, America was, indeed, exceptional, though their idea about it and the reality as such were two different concepts.

Another meaning that the term came to embrace was an opposition to communist ideologies. The American way of life, reflecting people's lifestyle, embodied such traits as the rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as the supreme values in life, a behavioural conduct which was supposedly in formal opposition with the communist theories. During the Cold War, exceptionalism translated in the media as a lifestyle which highlighted the differences in living standards of the population of America and Russia. This trait of national identity needed a significant "other" to be compared to, process which would enhance its value. Again, it seems undeniable that "exceptional" cannot mean simply "different"; it also implies a qualitative connotation: the American lifestyle was different and significantly better than the one in the communist world. This period witnessed the idea that anyone, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, could increase their living standards by hard work, determination and natural ability. From a political perspective, this form of exceptionalism took the form of a belief in the superiority of a free democracy, founded on a productive economy.

Defining their national character in opposition with the ideology preached by communist regimes is part of a larger frame of American foreign policy. The idea of the American exceptionalism has always been the main argument to justify American foreign policy. American presidents used and abused this specifically American feature of national identity in order to justify the US involvement in different conflicts taking part in various corners of the world. Being exceptional would mean not only enjoying the benefits of a great, privileged destiny, but also the responsibility of sharing these benefits with less fortunate people living their semi-barbarous lives abroad. These underprivileged of fate should not despair, as the Americans will share with them their great destiny, their principles of life and their beliefs. This attitude is typical for many presidential decisions of foreign interventionism, motivated by the necessity of spreading the values of the American creed in the world. Here are just two examples of this kind of presidential rhetoric:

The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker. This honor now beckons America--the chance to help lead the world at last out of the valley of turmoil, and onto that high ground of peace that man has dreamed of since the dawn of civilization.[1] (Richard Nixon, inaugural address)

We are Americans, we have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom. And when we do, freedom works. [1](George Bush Senior, 29 January 1991)

According to Jill Lapore, the moment which defined the American identity as we know it was after King Philip's War in 1675 – 1676. This war between the English colonies and the Indian tribes was proportionately the bloodiest war in the American history, having far-reaching effects in time. At the end of the war, a whole civilization was destroyed, the Indian tribes were decimated, and large numbers of members were enslaved and shipped to the West Indies. One of the main consequences of the war, apart from the destruction of the native American culture, was that the Puritans created "sharp

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new boundaries on the land and in their minds" between the Indians and themselves", and this marked the moment when "the English colonists became Americans"[1].

This moment was highly symbolic and the war against the Indians became paradigmatic for all the other wars that the Americans led. From the status of the rightful inhabitants of the American continent, the Indians became simply "the other people", in strong opposition with the mental image that the colonizers had about themselves; moreover, this "other" was savage, backward, uncivilized.

Consequently, this "other people" had to be colonized and taught the elementary principles of civilization by a God-sent civilizer. The frontier, which initially challenged the first colonizers to advance deeply into the new continent, in search of new territories and of new adventures, which was a task of courage, manliness and endurance in taming the wilderness, now became a paradigm of mental representations. It stopped defining physical space and moved to the realms of spirit. The frontiers separated the colonizers, the Robinsons of the civilized world, with all its implications, from the barbarous Fridays who, out of some presumably humanitarian and missionarist impulses, had to be delivered from the miseries of their lives and to be modeled by the appearance of their saviors. When the physical frontier - in the interpretation of Frederick Jackson Turner - could not be pushed any further, the "island" of the colonizer had to be expanded somehow. This led, in turn, to the Mexican war, to the Korean war, to the Vietnam war, to the Iraqi war.

Of course, the arguments brought as a justification for American interventionism have been complex and well-defined. But there has been not one single case of military intervention of the United States which should not be explained by America's duty to all the world to keep peace, to ensure the observance of liberty and of human rights, to deliver people from the tyranny of some despotic, merciless leaders. If this is so, or if there is an ulterior motive based on more pragmatic purposes in not the issue here. This constitutes one of the most topical issues of the modern world. What interests in this case is the constancy of this missionarism in the course of history and the mechanisms by which people assumed it as part of their identity.

An interesting interpretation of this type of missionarism is given by Joseph Lepgold and Timothy McKeown. In their article: "*Is American foreign policy exceptional? An empirical analysis"* (Political Science Quarterly, 1995) they argue that there is little basis to the claim that American foreign policy is "exceptional", in the sense that it is in any way different from the foreign policy of other great powers in the period between 1871 – 1914. Their approach is that American exceptionalism is not to be looked for abroad, but inside the country, namely in the official speeches meant to popularize foreign interventions and to obtain popular support for their military overseas actions.

This seems to be a valid remark if we note how a series of elements are encountered in all major speeches trying to give a justification for the wars that the United States has embarked on. In those speeches, presidents try to find a moral justification for the war (which always has a higher purpose, which I mentioned earlier, among which protecting human rights is one of the favorite), they speak of the moral significance of the crisis and they all define the enemy very thoroughly. In the light of the interpretation of "the other" perceived as an enemy, as an essential component for the definition of one's own identity, it makes sense to assert that one of the functions of this type of rhetoric speech is not so much to define the other, but to reinforce the sense of American identity.

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Finding unity and order in times of crisis is achieved by strengthening the representation of an exceptional destiny.

Closely related to American exceptionalism reflected into foreign policy stands the concept of Manifest Destiny (meaning obvious, undeniable fate), term coined by the journalist John O'Sullivan. In his article "*Annexation*" (July 1845), which called on the United States to admit the republic of Texas into the Union, he appealed to "*our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions*"[1].

Some time later, in December 1845, he mentions again that "*that claim is 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*"[1], this time in relation with the boundary dispute with Great Britain over Oregon.

According to this phrase, America has a God-given right to expand its territory over the continent, thus spreading republican democracy to North America. Manifest Destiny would therefore be an inherent attribute of the Americans, due to their exceptional nature, a moral ideal which superseded other considerations, including international laws and agreements. Briefly, Manifest Destiny includes constitutive concepts of the American identity such as **virtue**, which derives from the Anglo-Protestant religion and from the Puritan experience which envisaged the settlers as the chosen people of God, endowed with remarkable virtuos qualities; the **mission** to spread the institutions of democracy thus reduplicating the image of America in the remotest parts of the world, in a so-called humanitarian attempt to deliver them from savagery; and the **destiny** under God to accomplish all these, which goes hand in glove with the idea of virtue.

We find a good representation of the metaphor of Manifest Destiny in the painting (circa 1872) by John Gast called *American Progress*. This an allegorical representation of the benefits that the exceptional American character may bring into the world. In the scene, an angelic woman carries the light of "civilization" westward with American settlers. The dichotomy between good and evil is obvious.

The allegorical America is stringing telegraph wire as she travels, behind her one can notice the western model of human settlement replacing the Indian wigwam, settlers working the land, factories, ships floating on rivers and the whole scenery is set against the bright light of civilization. In comparison, the native Americans flee into the darkness before them, into the wilderness where they seemingly belong, together with wild animals. For modern times, this may appear as a cruel interpretation of historical past, but it is mereley and exemplification of the potential gap between the exceptional seen as ideal and reality. Actually, this painting may well be considered paradigmatic for what is currently labelled as American cultural expansionism, manifested in the acculturalizing replacement of an initial paradigm of traditional cultural elements by new ones, considered to be "exceptional" from some perspectives, "better" from others, and potentially dangerous by yet other ones. We might, in a simple exercise of imagination, replace the telegraph wires by the internet, the factory by an iconic American company and the human settlement by a McDonald's, and we have a relatively accurate image of the current state of facts in the world. Though cultural globalization is not the issue here, it appears to be a product of this exceptionalist way of thinking which has a deep resonance to the receptor of this subliminal message. While America is seen as

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exceptional from the inside, it definitely appears to be equally exceptional from the outside, at least for a specific type of receptor.

Defining exceptionalism as the distinctive and constant feature characterizing American culture implies an approach to the idea of American identity, as a cultural concept.

This is how the term "identity" has been explained by a group of scholars: "*Identity refers to the images of individuality and distinctiveness ("selfhood") held and projected by an actor (and modified over time) through relations with significant "others"*[1].

The "actor" is, in the case of the American identity, not an individual, but the whole group of people who feel they belong to the American society. Very importantly, these images of "selfhood" are not constant, though they share a set of features identifiable at different times in history. But the notion of identity is perpetually challenged by new groups of individuals assuming the American identity, with their own distinct cultural heritage and by historical challenges. Equally important, "identity" implies the existence of the "other", against whom I build my distinctive features and who helps me project the specificities of my belonging to the designated group. The existence of the "other" is essential: I cannot define my individuality as a group, or as a person, for that matter, unless I know what I am not.

In the specific case of the American identity, the idea of the "other" has often taken on a negative connotation, defining a lesser, inferior group or individual compared to whom exceptional destiny, superior moral values and high ethics are emphasized.

"The other" has been, in turn, the Indian, the black slave, the communist. This "otherness" helped Americans to define their own identity by continuously opposing it to this structure. The very idea of identity comes from a basic difference between a member of a certain category as compared to members belonging to other categories. What the American identity seems to have acquired in the course of history, due to the specific historic conditions, is an additional aspect of superiority with regard to "the other", whoever this "other" may be, embodied in an exceptionalist vision on life and national and personal destiny.

As a general rule, people need an "other" in order to define themselves. This opposition "I – other" is perceived in the American mind not as an egalitarian type of relation, but as one of a competitive type. By "egalitarian", I mean a type of relation which implies that elements are situated on equal positions and the difference between them comes from the intrinsic difference of their components. A relation of this type ideally exists among the peoples of this planet: for example, the difference between the Romanians and the Portuguese consists of a separate matrix of historical, cultural, artistic, linguistic heritage. There is no judgment of value in the notional difference between the two peoples: being "Portuguese" implies being neither "better" nor "worse" than being "Romanian"; the value aspect is no matter of comparison. This approach is in accordance with the latest cultural theories of tolerance and acceptance. The interaction between people is meant to highlight the similarities or differences in their structure, and not to pass judgment over which culture is more advanced, and which culture has higher moral standards.

"Building" an identity is a life-long process in the case of individuals, and one which is continuously re-shaping in the case of nations. We are born with our ascriptive identity (the one which establishes our age, ancestry, gender, kin and race); the other layers which compose who we are come as a consequence of a building process in time.

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The outcome of this building process is extremely important, because our assumed identity influences our behavior. We as individuals act according to the manner in which we perceive ourselves.

In the case of a nation, its reaction to historic, cultural or economic events is dictated by the mental representation that the members of the nation have about themselves in opposition with members of other nations. The process by which this mental representations are made are explained by Freud by the coexistence of two opposing instincts in the human personality: "*those which seek to preserve and unite…and those which seek to destroy and kill*"[1].

The elements which preserve and unite the group, the sense of belonging to a national identity, also contain the destructive elements, the lust for hatred and violence which the human character has deeply rooted in his subconscious. According to Vamik Volkan, people need allies and enemies in order to shape their identity: they find common features with the former, which gives them the legitimacy of calling themselves a group, while people who are "different" tend to be considered as the "enemy": "the psyche is the creator of the concept of enemy. As long as the enemy group is kept at least at a psychological distance, it gives us aid and comfort, enhancing our cohesion and making comparisons with ourselves gratifying"[1].

In the particular case of the Americans, competition with "the other" is based not only on this psychological explanation of human instincts, but also on a perpetual need to assert and reconfirm an exceptionalist outlook on life. In the competition with "the other", the Americans are bound to succeed, to prove moral superiority and to teach lessons.

This compulsive desire to succeed, to better "the other", represents a constant in the American mentality. Though components of this mentality – as of any mentality for that matter – are subjected to change in time, due to historical conditions and to the constant modification of the social structure, there are nevertheless distinctive qualities that define the American character. There is a distinguishable common core, despite the melting pot of a multitude of traditions, motives and ideals.

Defined by many as political culture, the notion of the American identity has been the subject of numerous interpretations. Among these interpretations, the most common ones that people assume for themselves are those related to race, nationality, culture and ideology. In the specific case of the Unites States of America, all of these facets of identity have been challenged by history and none of them is comprehensive enough to embrace the whole American identity.

The racial and national aspect of the American identity was denied a long time ago, when, as a consequence of the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, on the one hand, and of the successive waves of immigrants on the other hand, one could not speak anymore of a compact, nationally and racially homogenous American society. The definition was probably accurate before the first immigrants came into the United States, when the overwhelming structure of the society was, indeed, WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant). But at the end of the 20th century, according to the Census Bureau, America was multiracial (with 69% white population, 12% black population, 12% Hispanic population, 4% Asian population and 3% of other races); multiethnic (with no majority ethnic group) and multireligious (with 63% of the population of Protestant religion, 23% Catholic, 8% other religion and 6% of no religion).[1]

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The cultural layer that could give the specific character of the American nation is also seriously threatened by the huge diversity of people composing them. The initial Anglo-Protestant cultural core is overwhelmed by the multitude of cultural attitudes as individual distinctiveness. The modern multiculturalist theories, while in total accordance with the principles of human rights and those of individual freedom that Americans cherish so much, further deepened the initial common cultural core.

As far as the ideology is concerned, synthesized in the celebrated American creed, namely those aspirational political values which Americans hold dear, liberty, equality, democracy, individualism, human rights, the rule of law, private property, they are not enough to hold a country's national character together, and not enough to define it, either. The risk of defining the American character solely by its adherence to the American creed (set of moral, democratic principles) is that of having as a result a confederation of states with different ethnic or religious structure, speaking different languages, united only by believing in the same style of conduct, by cherishing the same values. A lot of people throughout the world believe in liberty, the respect for property, hard work and the supremacy of the law, but this does not make all of them Americans.

According to Samuel Huntington, a more complex definition of the American identity would include a common cultural core (what originally was the Anglo-Protestant culture, which included the Christian religion, Protestant values, the work ethic, the British traditions of law and the legacy of the European art, literature, philosophy, music) with the ideology, that is the creed (including liberty, equality of chances, individualism)[1].

All these characteristics embody a complex national image in the center of which stands the idea of being a special nation among nations, idea which is currently a highly debated one. Our modern world witnesses all national identities in a process of self-definition, and the American nation is no exception to this rule. The identity crises that the world is going through challenges the American distinctiveness in its relation with the rest of the world, which is not so willing to accept being pejoratively labeled as "the other", as the element against which America defines itself as "exceptional".

NOTES

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