Key Concepts of Puritanism and the Shaping of the American Cultural Identity[1]

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One may rightfully claim that the Puritans' power of vision built America and its mythology. As Perry Miller states, "without some understanding of Puritanism, it may safely be said, there is no understanding of America" (Miller, Johnson 2001: 2). In mythology, one can find the roots of cultural practice, and, through its epistemological aspects, understand why and how he/she is situated in society and which is the specificity of the community he/ she lives in. The Puritan imagination sustained thus one of the strongest pillars of the American cultural identity.

The aim here is mainly that of giving an overview of the Puritan way of approaching existence, as it is relevant for the shaping up of the main directions in the American culture and before proceeding, some details concerning the historical context would be helpful for a better view on the birth and growth of New England Puritanism. There were two main events that led to the establishment of the theocratic Puritan community: the discovery of America and the growth of Protestantism. This historical mix, if we may say so, the encounter of the two coordinates of geography and religion, gave way to a society in which some of the basic elements of the American dream were born. Around 1564 a new term was used in order to insult the so-called nonconformist clergy within the newly reformed Elizabethan church – *puritan.* The end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th mark, in fact, the starting point of what we may call the Puritan era. After Luther's Reformation, new names appeared in the English religious life: Lutherans, Calvinists, Protestants, Precisians, Unspotted Brethern and Puritans. These new names, this milliformity situated against the language of binary opposition was viewed as proof of schismatical heresy (Collinson 2008: 20). The term *puritan* was used as one of several pejorative nicknames applied to the hotter sort of Protestants, strict followers of the Lutheran principles: *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia*. In a sermon preached at Paul's Cross in February 1588, the future Archbishop Richard Bancroft calls them schismatics, those of the new humour, the factious of our age, our new reformers, our new men (Bancroft *apud* Collinson

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2008: 22). Even if with a strong disapproval note, the Archbishop's words highlight the essence of the new religious movement: newness and reformation. These two essential characteristics are present at the New England Puritans. Their entrance in the 17th century New England has been viewed as the shaping force that moulded the very core of the American cultural identity. As Sacvan Bercovitch observes, in 1630, the year of the journey on Arbella towards the godly promised New Canaan, there were roughly three groups of puritans. The largest one believed in the establishment of a commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. The second group, of the so-called *separatists*, was smaller and did not accept any authority, not even that of the Protestant or Anglican Church in their attempt to reach the most pure form of belief and religious life. Affirming their trust in the universal invisible church, they were organised according to the model of the first Christian communities. From these ones some remained in England and some left for Amsterdam or the New World (the Plymouth Pilgrims). The third group, that of the Massachusetts Bay immigrants, combined the two ways in the effort of perfecting both (Bercovitch 1988: 36). Their community of *visible saints* or the godly people was congregationalist in a federal covenant.

The Puritans were visionary people and the endurance of their community was due to the power of the vision the expression of which was intimately linked with a great reliance on texts; the Puritan cultural identity was one of the words. As the already mentioned Sacvan Bercovitch explains, the rise of the so-called Gutenberg galaxy changed not only Europe but also the New England Puritans, the people of the Book, the believers of the *sola scriptura* doctrine. He also labels the Puritan vision as "the first-begotten corporate offspring of the printing press" (Bercovitch 1988: 34) and underlines the fact that the seventeenth century was a time of expanding, modifying, and revising of the Puritan identity by the way of the word in rhetorical constructs as sermons, declarations, covenants, and thus transforming geography into Christiano-graphy.

The fact that the Puritans were less and less favoured during Queen Elizabeth's reign and at the beginning of the Stuarts', had led, from their perspective, to a desecration of England. The country, seen as a land of corruption and abuse, was going to be deserted with the purpose of building a new, sacred historical context in which present and past would be endowed with meaning only in relation to the eschatological future. This desecration served, in fact, the justification of the migration to the New World and led to establishing an eschatological and apocalyptical dimension for it. The Church of England becomes a mirror image of that of Laodicea mentioned in the Book of Revelation. The Puritan migration is, in this context, a flight of the saint ones from corruption and evil; it is an apocalyptical migration epitomized in the image of the Woman-in-the-Wilderness who appears in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation. The Apocalypse is thus a guide through history, which becomes a revelatory event and the reform is situated at the end of time. The religious migration represents, within the sacred history, the end of alienation from and the reconciliation with God, a prophetic, salvational moment that links sacred time with sacred space.

The above-mentioned third group of Puritans set off in 1630 for the great journey towards what was going to be their Canaan and a model of Christian charity

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for the entire world as John Winthrop, their spiritual leader, called the new establishment[2]. They had a mission to fulfil and thus, as Cotton Mather would later say, God was going „To them first and then By them, give a specimen of many Good Things"(Mather apud Bercovitch 1997: 276). Even before reaching the shore, Winthrop pinpoints the principles, which were going to govern the life of the Puritan community. As the-soon-to-be-governor puts it in his speech held in front of the people on Arbella, the Puritan community of visible saints was to build a "city upon a hill" (Winthrop apud Bercovitch 1997: 194), a model society upon which the eyes of all people were going to be set, or rather those of England, Holland, Germany and other Protestant countries. Interestingly enough, Winthrop establishes a kind of social stratification, which would help maintaining social harmony; consequently, there is not a question of equality, but of knowing where one's place is. The religious support for this delimitation lies in the claim that God's grace gives different gifts: love, mercy, gentleness, temperance to the great ones and faith, patience, and obedience to the poor and inferior (Winthrop apud Bercovitch 1997: 194). Newness, freshness, and exceptionalism, but still not the same standards were applied to the various social statuses.

In order to achieve their spiritual peak, they had to be ready to fight and eliminate any sign of evil by any means. In New England the ultimate evil, the devil, was the Indian; the savage and the wilderness beyond the frontier were Satan's territory because they were unknown, untamed and represented dark, harmful temptation. In fact, their mission was to struggle against the Antichrist in a land that was the site of the Second Coming of Christ. Moreover, according to the Puritan typological thinking, they were the antitypes of the Old Testament Israel and Winthrop becomes thus a new Moses leading the chosen people to its rightful place. America was the New Canaan where God's New people was called upon to found their commonwealth (Freese 1987: 11).

Forefathers of what has become a famous concept, *the American dream*, the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay colony developed a doctrine of exceptionalism, a term that originates in their exodus from the Old World to the New one and the distinction that was made between a civilized world that had become old, decadent, sterile, tyrannical, immobile and another one that was new, creative, manly, vigorous, productive, free. Again, the analogy with the Israelites comes into discussion. God had told them: „The Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto Himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth"(De. 14:2). The Puritans, a society of the elect, a community of godly people was to finally achieve their dream in the Promised Land found in New England, a land that was rightfully theirs. The perspective marked by the concept of exceptionalism is, in fact, chronologically simultaneous with the birth of the idea of America and the American national identity (Spanos 2007: 36).

The chief principles according to which the social mechanism functioned stemmed from Calvinism and imposed a life perpetually marked by self-scrutiny and the endless search for signs of being elect. However, all the attempts were

[2] The expression was launched in John Winthrop's famous thesis *A Model of Christian Charity* written on board the Arbella in 1630.

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under the shadow of paradox and ambiguity: the ultimate sign of being elect was that of achieving material prosperity; it was only natural that the authentic Puritan wished for salvation and tried to find the good sign by working hard for financial success. Hence the contradiction: if worldly matters are so insignificant for spiritual evolution then why is the struggle for material good the condition for reaching it? Furthermore, one of the two main Protestant principles – *sola fide* – emphasizes the sufficiency of personal faith without supporting facts. That is how later *the American Dream* was understood as a so-called *from-rags-to-riches* story, the story of reaching material prosperity as the ultimate value.

A most significant characteristic of human beings, of human nature, one that touched any life aspect was, from Puritan perspective, that of *innate depravity*. As a consequence of Adam and Eve's fall, everyone was essentially marked by corruption and perversity. It followed that no one was able to find salvation on his/her own; only God decided who was going to stay by His side. Related to this, the concept of *unconditional election* stressed upon the fact that God saved those he wished and this was directly connected to the idea of *predestination***.** No one knew whether or not election was his/ her part; the only thing man could do was looking for signs and the most important of these was, as mentioned before, material success. To this paradox of the materialistic way to heaven another one adds – that of *preparatonism*; although a person could not earn grace and receive salvation, the individual had to prepare for it by leading a righteous life. Still, the ones who received the signs of being predestined to salvation were under the danger of *backsliding* – they could at anytime fall into the previous sinful state. In order to prevent this, the Puritans were expected to pray constantly and watch over their souls day and night. Self-scrutiny obsessively appears in Puritan writings, especially diaries where one may read about the utter fear of letting oneself prey to temptation even unwillingly[3]. Self questioning recurrently and almost obsessively appears suggesting the pressure and the fear of being abandoned by God, the fear of failing and being cast out of the model community which did not afford the least sign of evil to interfere with its soteriological hopes. This is why it has been said that Puritan diaries writers are the forerunners of the psychological novels; what they mainly deal with is not an external threat, but an internal one. As Perry Miller states, the Puritans "liberated men from the treadmill of indulgences and penances, but cast them on the iron couch of introspection"(Miller 1953: 207).

At the centre of what the New England way meant laid the pastorally inspired covenant theology that, as Paul E. Czuchlewski observed in his article, *A Covenanted Nation,* operated a shift from the rigid Calvinist system "by positing that God had entered into a direct covenant with His elect who were in consequence bound to special responsibilities" (Czuchlewski 1976: 454). The society was tuned according to three *covenants*. The *covenant of works* was the first one that God made with Adam in the Garden of Eden, it was a moral law; in return to perfect obedience man was to be rewarded with eternal life and happiness. Jesus Christ, as the representative of mankind, had fulfilled this covenant; still the Puritan concept of *limited atonement* claimed that He died only for the chosen ones, not for

[3] The *Diary* of Samuel Sewell is one of the most famous examples in this respect.

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everybody[4]. The second one, the *covenant of grace*, was based on God's promise to send His spirit to the elect, to bring salvation to those who had been justified by Christ's death. The third covenant, of *redemption*, which was pre-existent to that of grace, was a pact between God the Father and Christ in which the latter was to be accepted as the one paying for the sins of the true believers (Rutman 1977: 25). The concept of covenant was also applied to marriage from which all the other social covenants stemmed. It was viewed rather as a partnership between the two spouses and consequently, the woman was on an equal level with the man from this point of view. What's more, women were often viewed as being stronger in matters of religious belief and influence. They were the ones supporting their husbands' mission and maintaining a profound relationship between family/community and church[5]. Even if the Puritan society was a very strict one and ascribed clearly defined domestic roles to women, it gave some of the first women writers of whom Anne Bradstreet is a famous example. In addition, the birth of the first original American literary genre is due to women writers who recounted their experiences as captives in what is called *captivity narrative*[6]. One cannot speak about absolute interdiction or even repression of women in this respect no matter if the act of writing was supervised by men and they were the ones who mediated between the writer and the readers[7]. Due to these writings, the expression *Puritan Founding Fathers* has been faced with a question mark – the first generation Puritans were not only men, fathers, but also mothers, sisters, daughters many of whom left written accounts of their experience on the frontier and beyond it. Furthermore, the term *founding* supposes that the land was not at all inhabited. Related to this, another idea that also supported Puritan belief in assuming the right of taking land from the Indians was that of the *Manifest Destiny*. Even if present in people's minds since the 17th century, it was coined later, in 1845, by the journalist John O'Sullivan when talking about the westward movement. As editor of the Democratic Review, he referred in his magazine to America's "Manifest Destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (O'Sullivan 1845: 5)[8].

Even if their hope was strong and their determination absolute, the Puritans seemed to have been forgotten by Europe. They were left alone with their dream of

[4] That is why they believed that only a certain number of people were predestined to salvation.

[5] Nevertheless, certain borders had to be respected. Anne Hutchinson for example became a heretic in the eyes of the Puritan society after she had been previously received as an inspiration for the community. The ministerial attitude of the time showed that even if Anne was endowed with a charisma resembling that of a religious leader she was but a woman and as a woman it was too difficult to maintain a balance.

[6] As Derounian – Stodola claims, "the Indian captivity narrative is arguably the first American literary form dominated by women's experiences as captives, story-tellers, writers and readers" (Derounian Stodola 1998: II). The most well known captivity narrative and the first one to be published and become a best seller was that of Mary Rowlandson which was published in 1682.

[7] As the Puritans were very suspicious regarding works of fiction, a certain control was needed and only didactic texts with obvious religious communal function were accepted. Nevertheless, the texts maintain a subsidiary message that offers a glimpse on various aspects of the political, the cultural, and the social contexts at the time of their being written.

[8] The article was written in order to praise the annexation of Texas as sign of the American forwarding civilizing force.

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salvation. That is why the second and third generation of Puritans embarked on the mission of reviving the meaning of their society by uniting, in Bercovitch's words „geography, textuality and the spirit in what amounted to a new symbology, centred on the vision of America" (Bercovitch 1988: 38)[9]. At this point it is worth mentioning that one of the most important aspects regarding the issue of American identity is that while others fled/ went to the New World and established communities which tried to re-construct Europe (New France, Nova Scotia, New Spain) and invade the land of inferior peoples, the Puritans on Arbella felt entitled to the whole New World because it had been promised to them by God. They were the true people of this land and the ones who endowed it with a specific mythology. The *hill* on which the community of the New Israel, of the elect, was established and thus their *errand* fulfilled, was directly connected to the biblical images of Ararat, Sinai, Golgotha, and the Holy Mountain of the New Jerusalem (Bercovitch 1974: 7). This gives an eschatological dimension to the Puritan visionary perspective the offspring of which was America as metaphor and site for salvation. The other peoples had their roots, their mythologies and stories in the human history whereas the Puritans' history had been written in the Bible and transcended human history. That is why America was for them the ultimate way to salvation, the last corner of the world that God left undiscovered until His chosen people was ready to go and inhabit it and fulfil their destiny.

To sum up, we may say that the mark that Puritan thinking left on the American culture has concretized as follows: first, it created a specific mythology; secondly, it mixed up economical or/ and national ideals with the religious ones, and thirdly it maintained, due to the stubborn faithfulness to the initial dream, a gap between history and rhetoric, fact and idea, reality and dream. This gap was going to be a battlefield for writers like Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau.

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[9] Another literary genre, bearer of the rich Puritan rhetoric, flourishes in New England in this period – *the jeremiad* which presents the time of misfortune as a punishment for the evils done by the society; at the same time, it brings up the idea of hope in a better future by meditating on the spirit of the glorious past.

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The 17th Puritan thinking and way of approaching various layers of existence constitute the foundation for what was going to be the American world view. The key concepts that governed the life of the Puritan community pervaded the social, political as well as cultural life and this makes them essential for the analysis of what is now the American identity. Furthermore, in a time of *post isms*, if we may say so, the idea of the Puritan dream comes to reinforce the hope in the resources of the human being within a community.

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