The United States: Exceptional Nation? Different Nation?

Rede uitgesproken door

Prof. dr. Alonzo L. Hamby

bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar
in ‘history and culture of the United States’,
Raymond and Beverly Sackler leerstoel
aan de Universiteit Leiden
op 7 december 2004
Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,

The obligation of an inaugural lecture imposes a duty to speak to large issues, not to submit you to a detailed exposition of my latest footnote. The chair for which you selected me all but compels me to be a spokesperson for the significance of American history in the larger world of which we all are citizens.

I have spent the past thirty years teaching a course on American historical thought. Recently, I revised the U.S. Department of State’s *Outline of American History*, a short text distributed to schools and teachers outside the United States. I also have published a history of the American Great Depression with comparative reference to the two great European powers of the period, Great Britain and Germany. All of these endeavors have forced me to confront one of the most basic questions of American history—the problem of “American exceptionalism.”

The idea of America as an exceptional place emerged almost concurrently with Columbus’s voyages and remains alive today. European discoverers envisioned America as an Edenic new world, filled with riches and opportunity, a place in which the virtuous could make a fresh start and build a society free from all the failings of the Old World. This America was, in the phrase of Thomas Paine, a place to “begin the world anew.”

By the nineteenth century, however, Europeans—at least much of the intelligentsia—would be more prone to see America (specifically the United States) as a land of blundering, innocent *naïfs* out of touch with the realities of the human condition. A half-accepting American folklore in turn cultivated a wariness of anything European as corrupt and devious.

I want to discuss a perennial concern of those who write U.S. history—the problem of American character and the issue of whether the United States is an exceptional nation in sharp contrast to all others, especially the European nations. I will focus on scholars who have written about this issue at two turning points in American history when it demanded thought. The first of these was during the initial onslaught of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, the second the decade after the end of World War II. I also will suggest that the concept of American exceptionalism is two-sided. It involves not only a big generalization about the United States, but also one about “Europe”—a generalization that requires far more thought than it usually receives on my side of the Atlantic.

I

Nineteenth-century American historians, whether gifted literary amateurs or Ph.D.-holding professionals, assumed a continuity between seminal “Anglo-Saxon” (or “Teutonic”) institutions or ideas and American ones. They were usually nationalist enough to believe that the American way might amount to a higher development, but also patrician enough to worry that the United States might be too democratic. Many important younger historians of the early twentieth century, were more sangu-
ne about democracy, but often impacted directly or otherwise by Marxian thought. Positing an economic basis to politics, they tacitly assumed that all industrial societies were alike and moving in similar directions.

The initial significant dissent from all these assumptions came from Frederick Jackson Turner, the first major American historian to have been born and raised west of the Appalachian Mountains. In 1893, at a meeting of the American Historical Association, Turner delivered a paper that became the most famous article ever written by an American historian—“The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” The presentation came at a dramatic moment. The country was slipping rapidly into the first truly great depression of its industrial era; labor-management strife was intense and often violent; desperate farmers demanded a wildly inflated currency to liquidate their catastrophic debt burdens. The nation was in crisis.

Turner began by noting a report from the Superintendent of the Census—for the first time in the history of the nation’s decennial population count, a clearly defined “frontier of settlement” no longer existed in the western United States. “This brief official statement,” Turner declared, “marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” Thus he shifted the entire focus of American history. Denying the centrality of the educated patrician preserving and transmitting a European past, he substituted a distinctly American type, the restless democratic pioneer.

From the beginning, Turner’s argument captured imaginations. It was all the more powerful for being only half-developed. Turner made no firm distinction between “the West” (an ill-defined geographical region) and “the frontier” (a line of settlement). He eloquently laid out several phases of what might be called a frontier process: “Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by.” He crafted romantic prose that James Fennimore Cooper would have envied: “The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long, he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox fashion.”

Eventually, Turner admitted, civilization would arrive, “but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs . . . . here is a new product that is American.”

The frontier promoted nationalism, Turner claimed, because its inhabitants looked to the national government for protection and identity, not to specific states. It also was
a melting pot that created a composite American nationality. It offered opportunity for the venturesome and hard-working in the form of “free land,” the availability of which fostered democracy and provided a “safety valve” for the unsuccessful in Eastern cities. It fed a national mood of optimism. It promoted individualism. It gave the American intellect its “striking characteristics” of “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness,” practicality and inventiveness.

Some scholars, often men of patrician descent at Eastern universities, rejected Turner whole cloth and reasserted the primacy of a Northern European heritage. But, for the most part, the first two or three generations of Turner’s critics took him seriously. Some sought to refute important details, such as “free land” and the “safety valve” idea. Others observed that frontiers elsewhere—nineteenth-century Siberia, for example—had hardly led to democracy. By the late twentieth-century, however, a group styling themselves “New Western historians,” products of the radicalism of the 1960s, sought to demolish less the specifics of the Turner argument than its atmospherics. Turner, they thought, had created the illusion of a triumphal national advance across the continent. The reality was misery, oppression, despoliation of the environment, and genocidal extermination of American Indians. The title of Richard White’s history of the American West, taken from an old cowboy ballad, said it all: *It’s Your Misfortune, and None of My Own.*

A former teacher of mine—a historian of England—often declared: “Turner was not a historian. Turner was a poet.” The frontier essay possessed its obligatory quota of footnotes, but it was not an empirical investigation. It demonstrated instead that well-expressed speculative essays are the stuff of historical thought. The looseness of Turner’s prose allowed for the assimilation of many of the criticisms of detail into an expanded synthesis. It was one thing to amplify a large general idea, quite another to refute it altogether. To their chagrin, the New Western historians discovered that they had simply called Turner to the attention of a new generation of educated readers, many of whom were seduced by his prose—and by the intuitive credibility of his argument.

The “frontier” after all began at Jamestown and Plymouth Rock, then progressed for nearly 300 years across a vast continent. During this time, a “West” always existed behind that frontier line. This was a movement that involved the migrations and experiences of tens of millions of Americans; it captured the imaginations of more tens of millions who stayed behind. How could it have failed to have a defining impact on the American character?

Turner also predicted the future. “The frontier has gone,” he declared, “and with its going has closed the first period of American history.” The second period, he said in subsequent writings, would display less social mobility and dynamism, more stratification, and more class conflict. Having defined the source of American exceptionalism, he forecast its end, predicting an America that would be more like Europe. Turner was a visionary historian; he was not much of a prophet. Perhaps it is not surprising that a European scholar was the first to reveal the fallacy of his prediction—and to show just how exceptional America was.
A small volume by the German social scientist Werner Sombart, would become the point of entry for many seeking to deal with a post-frontier America: “Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?” At the time Sombart wrote in 1906, socialist parties in France and Germany were powerful; the Labour party was beginning to emerge in Britain. Marxists and those influenced by Marx (Sombart among them) envisioned an increasingly immiserated proletariat, rising class consciousness, and an imminent socialist revolution. The scenario seemed plausible for Europe. But the United States, already the world’s greatest industrial power and presumably the one that should be farthest along the road to that revolution, had the least significant socialist movement in the world.

Sombart’s most quoted conclusion was a materialist one: Socialism in America had foundered on “shoals of roast beef and apple pie.” He might also have cited better housing. In 1917, Leon Trotsky briefly lived in New York City with his family. Their apartment, he wrote, was in a “workers district” and was “equipped with all sorts of conveniences that we Europeans were quite unused to: electric lights, gas cooking range, bath, telephone, automatic service elevator, and even a chute for the garbage.” Luxury could not deter Trotsky from his historic destiny. But did a high cholesterol diet and good apartments block American socialism?

Selig Perlman, an economist and historian of the labor movement in the early part of the twentieth century, clarified the picture when he asserted that American workers (like Americans in general) were “property-conscious.” In America, the home-owning worker was common. In Europe, he was far harder to find. The propertied worker was even less likely than the tenant of an apartment with a garbage chute to be a revolutionary.

The workers could vote, too. So could most common people. By and large, from the founding of the American republic in 1776 workers, small farmers, and other less than middle-class types were full citizens. Restrictive property qualifications for voting or holding office differed from locality to locality, but they were generally modest and disappeared in America well before they did in Europe. In general, American workers did not have to struggle for full citizenship as did their counterparts in every significant European nation.

Sombart, Perlman, and other pioneers in the “Why is there no socialism?” inquiry asked their questions at a time when the American working class was distinct from the middle class and when there was some rough resemblance between European and American social hierarchies. By the mid-twentieth century, that resemblance had disappeared. In the 1950s, an impoverished Western Europe was still recovering from the devastation of the Second World War. There, socialism still seemed a mighty political force. But Americans, working-class and otherwise, were prospering as never before, moving to split-level three-bedroom homes in suburbs, and driving to work...
in monstrous automobiles. A new and obvious contrast between the United States and Europe was emerging. (In 1949, per capita income in the United States was $1453, in the United Kingdom, $723, in the Netherlands, $502.) It was by no means clear that these truly glaring contrasts were temporary.

By then, American history was at another critical turning point—the ten year “crucial decade” after the end of the war in which the United States completed its transition from inward-looking isolationist nation to hegemonic great power with worldwide interests. For the American intelligentsia it seemed once again imperative to relate the American experience to that of the rest of the world.

David Potter’s *People of Plenty* (1954) would argue that material abundance long had set America apart from the rest of the world. In a sense, Potter restated the discoverers’ myth of America as a land of opportunity based on vast natural resources and huge tracts of fertile soil. He systematically related the fact of abundance to American social mobility, political democracy, and the nation’s sense of a larger mission in the world. Moreover, he shrewdly argued that it was an underlying assumption of Turner’s frontier thesis. A brilliant and earnest scholar, Potter was also a mid-twentieth century social scientist who made no effort to conceal his sense that the task of defining national character was problematic. His hedging left one longing for Turner’s blithe certainties! *People of Plenty* was justly admired when it was published; today one wonders how much it actually is read.

IV

For three other important historians of the crucial decade, the struggle with the Soviet Union—a struggle that seemed driven by ideological issues—provided a more obvious starting point than their nation’s prosperity. Their work explored the relationship between ideas and politics, rejected revolutionary ideology, and discovered an American nation remarkably united in its core values.

Richard Hofstadter, surely the most important American historian of the last half of the twentieth century, struck first in his classic book, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948). American political leaders from the Founding Fathers through Franklin Roosevelt, he argued in a vigorous introductory essay, had shared the values of individualistic capitalism and conducted their conflicts within that large consensus. The battles of American history, so large and divisive in the minds of most scholars, needed to be understood as noisy spats between big capitalists and small capitalists. A former Marxist who still thought of himself as a radical, Hofstadter wrote the introduction as an afterthought at the behest of his editor. It reflected his disenchantment with the limited possibilities for change in American life, but its insights were never fully and consistently developed.

Daniel J. Boorstin’s *The Genius of American Politics* (1953) attacked the problem in head-on fashion. Another recovering Marxist, Boorstin had come away from his encounter with Communism harboring a generalized revulsion against all-encompassing ideologies. Far more sharply than other scholars of American exceptionalism, he
attacked “Europe” in scathing terms as the birthplace of Nazism, fascism, and communism. Telling Europe that America had nothing to learn from it, he then declared that America had nothing to teach it: “To understand the uniqueness of American history is to begin to understand why no adequate theory of our political life can be written. It will also help us to see why our institutions cannot be transplanted to other parts of the world.”

An explicit American political theory, Boorstin explained, was unnecessary because the nation had a satisfactory equivalent. He coined a new term, “givenness”—“the belief that values in America are in some way or other automatically defined: given by certain facts of geography or history peculiar to us.” (9) These in turn provided a continuity of historical experience in sharp contrast to that of a Europe that had endured two millennia of violent upheavals.

Thus, the great glory of American political thought was that none existed—at least not at the level of first principles. America was successful because it had no ideology.

One’s first task in dealing with The Genius of American Politics is to get past the concept of “givenness,” at once hopelessly mystical, empirically mushy, and crassly anti-intellectual. That, however, would require wandering through various twisting alleys of epistemology and ontology, a process far more dangerous to my health and reputation than an after-midnight walk through New York’s Central Park. So I am simply going to dismiss it as an unnecessary diversion.

What made Boorstin’s argument worth confronting was his assertion of a broad historical consensus against ideology through the entire sweep of American history. Yet if the term “ideology” meant anything other than the most elaborately developed social theories, it surely encompassed values articulately expressed as ideas. Boorstin was increasingly unconvincing as he applied his thesis to the most unlikely of subjects—the Puritans, a group obsessed with applying Calvinist theological doctrine to all aspects of life; the American Revolution, motivated by an explicit, elaborately articulated theory of individual rights; and the American Civil War, which surely had something to do with issues of race and natural rights. On the last topic, it may be sufficient to recall Richard Hofstadter’s commentary: Imagining surviving Union and Confederate soldiers looking out over a battlefield populated with corpses and the terribly wounded as far as the eye could see, he has them saying to each other: “Thank God, we had no fundamental disagreements.”

In later books, Boorstin argued convincingly that Americans were a uniquely practical and problem-solving people, natural pragmatists in the popular sense of the word. Let us thank him for developing this insight and forgive him for inventing “givenness.” No one of note has attempted to further develop his argument about the lack of ideas in American life. Rather the arguments have been about just what sort of ideas.

That task was left to Louis Hartz, a political scientist with a primary interest in political thought and culture. His The Liberal Tradition in America (1955) was the last and
most influential statement of American exceptionalism during the crucial decade. Hartz argued that the history of the United States needed to be understood as occurring almost entirely within the tradition of modern liberalism—in the broad sense of an emphasis on the individual as the basic unit of history and naturally entitled to fundamental liberties. Liberalism thus understood, Hartz declared, had been most prominently represented in American history by the English philosopher John Locke. Locke’s name became Hartz’s semi-mystical shorthand for the determining force in American history. Hartz’s view of the conflicts in American history as being mainly between Whigs and democrats was congruent with Hofstadter’s sense of a continuing fuss among capitalists. Hartz agreed with Boorstin that America’s experience and political values were too distinctive to be readily exportable.

Hartz’s main reference point was, of course, Europe, seen in the grand tradition of American exceptionalism as a continent with a long and dark history of truly fundamental conflict. When Hartz wrote, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were recent memories; Eastern Europe was under Soviet control; Franco ruled in Spain; Greece, barely removed from its civil war, was bitterly divided; France and Italy had large, noisy Communist parties. Clearly, the range of ideologies was much larger than in the United States and the sentiments behind them more explosive.

Why had Americans been spared all this? Why was “Locke” dominant in the United States, but not in Europe? Hartz cited the preeminent foreign interpreter of American civilization, Alexis de Tocqueville, who observed that Americans had been “born free”; they had settled a wilderness in which it was possible to begin a new society without the impediments of an old one. American history had begun without an entrenched feudal system in place, no decaying ancien regime to overthrow in a bloody social upheaval, no reactionary remnants to struggle for a restoration, no centuries of rigid and immobile class distinctions.

Moving relentlessly through American history, one chronological era after another, Hartz found “Locke,” and liberalism. From time to time, he also threw in someone named “Alger”—a reference to the 19th century American writer Horatio Alger and his protagonists—ambitious, hard-working young men who seized chances offered to them and moved up in the world. “Alger” was a clear reference to the Calvinist presence in American thought. Perhaps because he preferred a more secular figure, Hartz said little about Calvinism. Yet from the days of the Pilgrim and Puritan settlers, Calvinist ideas had occupied a primary role in American culture. Calvinism’s tendency to connect virtue and salvation with worldly success encouraged the development of capitalism. Its skepticism about human nature led naturally to a suspicion of unlimited power. Its emphasis upon a contractual relationship between man and God led naturally to an assumption of contractual relationships in all aspects of human life, including the relationship between rulers and ruled. (Locke himself was attracted to Calvinism’s liberal elements while repelled by its frequently authoritarian practices. The point of convergence, was powerful and apparent—the centrality of the social contract.) Calvinism was clearly the dominant strain of
American religious thought during the three centuries after the earliest settlements. Writing in the tradition of Hartz, John Patrick Diggins has persuasively argued that the American liberal tradition has two icons—Calvin and Locke.

The major problem with the Hartz-Diggins paradigm is its implication that American history can be abstracted as political philosophy. It has great allegorical value but insufficient tangible connection to the wide range of experiences that go into the formation of a national character. It is here that we might return to Turner’s “frontier” and those consecutive waves of settlement that reenact the social contract through much of American history, creating opportunities for those ready to take risks in a new setting. Here also, we might note David Potter’s observation that American abundance was not just there for the taking. It was created by “the ventures and struggles of the pioneer, the exertions of the workman, the ingenuity of the inventor, the drive of the enterpriser, and the economic efficiency of all kinds of Americans, who shared a notorious addiction to hard work.” (89)

The different representations of American exceptionalism in fact all have considerable compatibility with each other. To a large extent, they are the work of sight-impaired scholars groping at the contours of an elephant.

VI

Have we vindicated the idea of American exceptionalism?

Writing on the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States, Britain, and Germany, I did not find “American exceptionalism” to be a very useful concept. Some large, general differences between the US and Europe existed, but they were overshadowed by vital national differences. Most obviously, the contrasts between the core values of British and German political cultures were enormous. One was a liberal democracy that sought consensus in hard times, the other a bitterly divided authoritarian culture that embraced Nazi totalitarianism. Britain and the United States, on the other hand, possessed common bedrock commitments that made distinctions in institutions and styles of leadership seem trivial by comparison. Stanley Baldwin, Neville Chamberlain, and Franklin Roosevelt had far more in common with each other than Baldwin and Chamberlain had with Hitler. The electorates that went to the polls in 1935 to return Baldwin and Chamberlain and in 1936 to return Roosevelt did so in a political world of shared values far different than those of the Germans who voted for Hitler’s plebiscites.

This perhaps brings us to the other side of the coin—the difficulty of generalizing about “Europe.” Long ago, those people trying to make use of the Hartzian formula realized that there was a significant distinction in degrees of liberalism among the nations of Europe, running roughly in declining strength from the North and West to the South and East. But I wonder if we can get by simply by talking about differences in degree. Have there been exceptional nations in Europe?

Shortly before leaving the United States to take up this chair, I spent some time leafing through one of the great works of nineteenth-century American historical
writing, John Lothrop Motley’s *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*. However outdated Motley may seem to us today, his work is not without its insights. Motley’s grand narrative concludes with the relief of the Spanish siege of Leiden and the triumphal founding of this university. It takes a moment for an Anglocentric historian to realize that these events predated the English defeat of the Spanish armada by more than a dozen years and the founding of the Virginia colony in America by a generation. The initial Dutch defeat of Spanish despotism, Motley asserts, was the seminal event in a long historical process that led to parliamentary government in England, to the American Revolution, and to other triumphs of liberty in the Western world. The early Dutch nation clearly stood in sharp contrast to the rest of continental Europe as an incubator of liberalism in the early modern era. It extended a large degree of tolerance to the Catholicism it had defeated. It harbored the heretical Jewish pantheist Baruch Spinoza, who must have been even more repugnant to the Calvinist establishment. It provided refuge not only to John Robinson and his Pilgrims, but also to John Locke for five critical years. And when England had its liberal revolution, Holland provided it with a new king and queen. I will leave the issue of Dutch exceptionalism to colleagues who know far more than I, but I find Motley’s argument attractive.

There is some remaining validity to the idea of American exceptionalism. The range of ideological politics in America is still considerably narrower than in most European countries. The authority of the state, ruling elites, and bureaucracies is more constrained, the breadth of opportunities greater, the median standard of living still generally richer.

That said, the problem lacks contemporary immediacy. The nations of the Western world are now more alike than they ever have been in their unprecedented widespread affluence, social mobility, and embrace of liberal democracy. Yet huge gaps of perception remain, and we still find much to quarrel about. Today, perhaps it is many Europeans who are innocent, who seem prone to think that we have reached the end of history and the ultimate triumph of secular, rationalist liberalism. History goes on. Sooner or later, we learn that it happens to all of us. We all, I submit, need to realize the commonality of our core values and common perils in this still-treacherous world.

It is appropriate at this point to express my gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Sackler for their generosity in endowing this chair that I am privileged to hold; to thank the Board of Leiden University and the Professors of the Department of History for selecting me as the first occupant of this very special position; to thank my valued colleagues for their warm welcome and hospitality, and to give special thanks to my wife Joyce for sharing 37 years of my journey through life. Among my mentors I must give special recognition to three remarkable scholars and great friends: John A. Garraty, Richard S. Kirkendall, and William E. Leuchtenburg.

To those of you officially classified as students, I say that we are all students, whether we have been at it for one year or fifty. And I ask you always to remember that it is history that tells who we are and what we should try to be.

Ik heb gezegd!