

OVIDIUS University of Constanta, Romania

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PhD Dissertation
Abstract

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PhD student:
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Constanta, 2014

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American Exceptionalism and the 21th century

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ABSTRACT:

This dissertation investigates the modalities in which American Exceptionalism is reflected in discourse in the 21st century, that is what are the patterns used to mirror Exceptionalism in specific contexts, what is the logic of their combination and what is the detectable purpose thereof.

The research started from the assumption that, in the 21st century, American Exceptionalism is still an ideology that argues for America's unique place in the world despite new challenges both domestically and abroad. The question "Is America in decline?" does not imply that America is no longer exceptional, argue the latest proponents of American Exceptionalism because, even if America may be in a slight decline in economy, and its influence may no longer be equally strong as it was ten years or twenty years ago, America remains exceptional.

Although Stephen Brooks claims that "the roots of the idea that America is exceptional, that its character and contribution to world history place it in [...] the defining chapters in the narrative of mankind, is about five hundred years old" (Brooks, 3), Exceptionalism is a recent concept. America has been seen as unique because of characteristics that may be grouped in many ways but they are usually seen under labels such as: geographic setting; ideology; traits of American people; and the operation of the American political system (Murray, 8). Foreigners, starting with Alexis de Tocqueville, described the Americans often "with the tone of a zoologist writing about a hitherto unknown species" and they all agreed that America was exceptional (Murray, 4).

The research for this PhD dissertation was focused on the 21st century because many authors suggest that the post - 9/11 age is a key moment when Exceptionalist discourse was reshaped in special ways, and because America is re-appraising its position in a new geopolitical environment the Fall of Communism, and the emergence of new

powers that may result into a multipolar world and it is interesting to see America's new role.

This research, like any endeavor, is placed under the sign of subjectivity. There may have been selected certain moments, figures, institutions and audiences to the detriment of others. This research is fully aware of the illusion of complete detachment and objectivity in such endeavors, and it may have taken into account some modalities of expressing Exceptionalist ideas and materializations of Exceptionalist philosophy in speeches and writings, while inevitably neglecting others.

The Introduction describes what is the meaning of the phrase American Exceptionalism (a concept, a doctrine, a philosophy, or an ideology that creates, explains and promotes America's identity), what is the methodological framework, what are the theoretical approaches and the theoretical concepts useful in the analysis of the Exceptionalist discourse. American Exceptionalism is basically shaped up through discourse, as a combination of discursive practices that create images and cause behaviors, it is the result of language used in skillful structures, that is, in ever-changing patterns that combine and create discursive realities with specific goals.

Exceptionalism appears in public speeches in America or abroad, in public policies and strategies, in journalism, in opinions from think-tanks, books about America's institutions and its status, and in academic writings.

The phrase American Exceptionalism refers to characteristics that have been described as defining America as *unique* in the world, due to its exceptional strength in some fields, but also as exception. In the course of time, the phrase has been an umbrella for combinations of ideas to express images of America as unique, as against the rest of the world, and these ideas have not remained the same, as American realities have changed.

The concept of American Exceptionalism has two distinct, yet related meanings: America seen as unique, very special in certain aspects that are perceived to be best represented in America, and America seen as exception from requirements and rules it imposes on other countries, an outlier applying double standards, one for itself, and a different one for the others.

These two meanings of American Exceptionalism are not mutually excluding each other and they are not opposite; sometimes the two meanings complement each other. The way in which the term is used reflects its double meaning and the two complementary connotations. The context and the perspective make the difference. For instance, the term *exceptionalism* was used by Joseph Stalin as negative exception and taken over by Jay Lovestone to mean a positive differentiation in the same context but seen from a different perspective.

Historically, American Exceptionalism has meant positive features that have been associated with America seen as different from the rest of the countries, in the two senses: *exceptional* qualities that America has and make it unique, but also *exception*, in comparison with other countries.

Currently, it refers also to America's *unique* qualities, to America's behaving as *exception* as against the rest of the world, but also to new manifestations that deviate from the traditional values the US has had for centuries, deviations that observers have become visible during the last three decades of the 20th century.

There are two views upon American Exceptionalism, a praising one and a critical one. They do not necessarily exclude each other and sometimes they work in complementarity. This research has tried to cover as many manifestations as possible and to summarize them for the sake of a better understanding of American Exceptionalism. The findings do not represent a final list of Exceptionalist tenets and manifestations; there are many ways in which American personality is definable and recognizable.

The basic assumption has been that the concept of American Exceptionalism has no fixed formula but it is made up of combinatory ideas that are used according to the context, it is ever-changing, and it results from discursive structures with meanings and interpretations that suit specific circumstances and purposes.

The methodological framework has been expanded, starting from the CDA, so that to include as many methodological concepts as possible, to enable the interpretation of this versatile discourse, which is unique like the ideology it reflects. Major concepts from Cultural Studies, especially the post-structuralist approach, have been used to study Exceptionalist discourse, as they contribute to a better understanding of the ideas of power, authority, ideology and hegemony that apply to the analysis of this kind of

discourse because it underlies the idea of *different* and *unique* in relation to the others and this is how it creates America's identity. The poststructuralist discourse analysis is equally useful because it promotes an analysis of the relations between statements and events, be they technical, economic, social, or political (Foucault 1972, 29).

The definition of discourse that applies to Exceptionalist discourse is the language used by an institution to reflect its ideology. The main focus while performing the research has been on the persuasive and the performative functions of discourse in order to identify how "language contributes to the domination of some people by others" (Faiclough 1989, 1) and how language is a means to exercise power in modern society through ideology, due to the "ideological workings of language" (Faiclough 1989, 2).

The research material for chapter 1 has included relevant literature in the field, in order to ensure a theoretical background for the research field, covering from the 17th century to some of the latest books written in this field, and samples of American public discourse, to show what Exceptionalist ideas are expressed in the 21st century and how they mix in patterns for specific purposes in particular contexts.

The literature in this field includes authors that have investigated Exceptionalist representations of America and if these representations matched or not American realities. These representations may broadly be classified as appreciative or critical and they have been examined in their historical and temporal context.

Due to the wide range of ideas and significances surrounding the Exceptionalist philosophy, and to the fact that Exceptionalism can be also implicit, not only explicit, an invaluable tool to decipher Exceptionalist ideas and their significances is the Critical Discourse Analysis.

The object of discourse analysis in chapter 2 has been particular public speeches that were delivered between 2001 and 2014 by various actors, representing a wide range of fields of interests: politics, academia, journalism, and various moments in time such as: presidential address on the State of the Union, the aftermath of 9/11, the economic crisis which started in 2007, the 2008 Presidential elections opposing Barack Obama and John McCain, the 2012 Presidential elections opposing Barack Obama and Mitt Romney,

events that are relevant for the defense and military sector such as West Point graduation and NASA anniversary, events that are relevant for the US foreign and security policy such as the North Korean nuclear test in 2013, the US standpoint regarding military intervention in Syria in September 2013 and the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 .

The investigation of these discourses has revealed how language contributes to the shaping of ideas and mindsets and how language is a means to exercise power and authority, due to the representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing these relations of power (Fairclough 2003, 9).

The investigation performed on samples of public discourse of American leaders and writings of the 21st century has revealed how Exceptionalist ideas bind to each other in significant language patterns, how they serve specific purposes in contexts that contribute to the meaning, how Exceptionalism is reflected in verbal and written discourse, and how American culture, institutions and society relate to Exceptionalism.

Events, situations and texts have been selected in order to reveal specific linguistic patterns that underlie configurations out of which the concept acquires special significance in its historical environments. Starting from the assumption that discourse is a way of acting or interacting, the analysis focuses on the semantic representations of values and ideologies and on the way identities and relations are created through discourse. Linguistic forms have effects. Various features of a text, namely the vocabulary, the figures of speech, the use of action verbs, the repetitions of key words, the use of synonymies and antinomies, collocation patterns that create strong visual images and stir emotions, the use of lexical families, the use of intensifying adjectives, comparisons and contrasts, have major importance in Exceptionalist discourse because they shape mindsets and moods. The cognitive equivalence of many Exceptionalist tenets has changed in time. As mentioned above, a lexical structure may represent two different Exceptionalist ideas according to the historical moments.

The investigative endeavor has been done in a comparative manner, in order to trace similarities and differences in representations of Exceptionalism at various moments in time, between various actors and representatives of American institutions, covering a range as wide as possible, because, as mentioned earlier, the reviewing of the literature

on Exceptionalism has revealed that Exceptionalist discourse has changed in time and has been adjusted to the historical moment.

The revival of the Exceptionalist discourse has to be understood in the specific global context of the 21st century. After a 20th century dominated by America, when the reason of depicting America in exceptionalist terms was primarily to oppose it to Communism, after the Fall of the Communism in 1989, and the end of the *bi-polar world* at the beginning of the 21st century, the US needed a new justification in order to preserve America's leadership and its right to define the world order.

The research performed has managed to reveal the versatile nature of American Exceptionalism by analyzing a variety of speeches and writings that reflect a wide range of ideas all of which express American Exceptionalism, and whose originators cover an entire array of proponents or critics of American Exceptionalism, to reveal a wide spectrum of modalities by which American Exceptionalism is used for specific goals, and by doing this, to follow an evolution of Exceptionalist discourse in the 21st century from Bush's declaring America to be the policeman of the world in the aftermath of 9/11 to Obama's confusing statement regarding his belief in American Exceptionalism during NATO summit in Strasbourg in 2009 and more recent public speeches delivered in 2013 and 2014 and related to recent geopolitical issues such as Syria and Ukraine.

The endeavor has been to investigate the discursive patterns expressing American Exceptionalism for specific goals: at the domestic level, it defines America's identity in relation to the rest of the world, it is galvanizing and restorative of national pride because it induces the idea of its being *unique* and *exceptional* and it serves as a "political narrative around which support for or opposition to policies, values and visions coalesce" (Brooks, 132); at the global level, it asserts America's unique qualities in order to imply domination in relation with other countries, to exercise power and to promote hegemony, and it is supported by empirical reality for the foreseeable future.

The chapter on Conclusions is an attempt of a corollary following the investigation of a concept that can be summarized, as interpretation, to the idea of unique, and its form is ever-changing, so that only some guiding lines can be given to

provide orientation in understanding the concept and its 21st century corresponding evolutionary stage.

Exceptionalist discourse is the result of ever-changing combinations of aspects that single out America as unique, according to the circumstances, and can hardly be grouped into categories but they all relate to America's identity and institutions. For the sake of scientific order, there are some broad umbrella labels that have been used by authors since writings started being produced about America, such as: geography, American personality, American institutions, American values and others. We establish meanings for Exceptionalist tenets by considering the combination of recognizable elements in a particular context. Language in Exceptionalist discourse ranges from the level of a more direct meaning to metaphors and a more figurative language, so interpretation requires increased attention to the context.

For instance, John Winthrop's "city upon the hill" in the 17th century and Ronald Reagan's "shining city upon the hill" in the 20th century are 2 totally different ideas that acquire meaning in their contexts. Winthrop was speaking at the moment when America did not exist and did not have a national spirit and consciousness and he meant moral values and religious faith. Reagan was speaking at a moment when the national spirit was at its height in the 1980s (during Cold War confrontation with the "Evil Empire") and Exceptionalist discourse, based on the belief that America is the best nation due to its past achievements, was meant to boost the trust in American leaders and institutions.

The rhetoric of American public speeches, or public diplomacy, is extremely useful to analyze because rhetoric is a tool in understanding US foreign policy, it is a tool in shaping opinions, and a means for other countries to evaluate the US and its intentions. It is so powerful that it can have "unintended consequences" and "create or undermine international stability" (McEnvoy Levy, 2).

Everyone can appeal to American Exceptionalism, whether democrat or republican, conservative or liberal, public figure or journalist or writer, who give it significance according to circumstances and goals. They all exploit the idea of America's *uniqueness*, but their strategies do not follow one *unique* path, they develop a wide range of discursive constructions, appreciative or critical, that is, meant to be more detached

and to engage critically with this kind of discourse. Despite Exceptionalism being treated differently by different actors, the research performed for this dissertation has revealed that all politicians believe in American Exceptionalism except that they define it differently, according to their goals. “From George Washington to Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, every American president has invoked our American specialness in speeches” (Hirsh, 73) and “it is a rare American politician who has not at some point declared the US to be the world’s greatest democracy. [...] the sentiment crosses party lines – they believe implicitly [...] in the superiority of American variety” (Brooks, 98).

The research performed for this dissertation has found that it is difficult but not impossible to streamline a particular evolution of the values reflected by the Exceptionalist discourse, chronologically, although it looks rather like a patchwork. For instance, in presidential speeches, there are similarities and many symbols have been recurrent since the 19th century, and we can notice a transition from a traditional discourse based on traditional values, more focused on America’s prosperity and individual fulfillment, more intellectual, and promoting isolationism, towards a simpler and more politicized one in the 21st century, stressing America’s global interests, and promoting interventionism.

There is a permanent need to define America as unique and even criticism to American values is counterbalanced by Exceptionalist ideas that support this ideology and promote an Exceptional America. The speeches and the writings investigated reveal that many Americans believe that America exists as long as they believe in Exceptionalism.

The research has summed up some dimensions along which American Exceptionalism is detectable. American Exceptionalism can be seen as a concept (Pease) or as a fact (Brooks) with clear evidence. In any case, it has the same versatile nature that is dependent on the historical moment and on the perspective adopted to investigate it: while some explain American Exceptionalism as the consequence of economic and military dominance, others claim that it is Exceptionalism, namely its exceptional values, beliefs and institutions, that caused dominance (Brooks, 3). Some Exceptionalist tenets are real, while others are misinterpreted, misperceived and misrepresented (Hogdson).

Exceptionalism can be interpreted in a positive connotation, as *outstanding, unique*, and in a negative connotation, as *exception* and applying *double standards* (Koh, Ignatieff). Exceptionalism can be seen as Exceptionalism as *example* and Exceptionalism as *responsibilities and duties*. The first is the force of example by which America describes itself, the second is the savior duty to intervene to protect values of humanity wherever they are threatened (Edwards and Weiss). Exceptionalism can be interpreted as *confident* and *insecure* (McEnvoy-Levy) and, in most cases, the rhetoric of American Exceptionalism is meant to preserve self-esteem and national identity, and to look for acceptance of policies, which means rather its *insecure* dimension. Exceptionalism seems to be a *must* in public speeches and especially speeches of politicians and presidential candidates, in the sense that they must always focus on the *exceptional* side of America and never refer to the *exception* side, to less pleasant aspects.

Although there may be instances where some Exceptionalist aspects are hyperbolized or misrepresented or criticized, their contextual creation is complemented by past or other present unique manifestations in American history, society, institutions and culture which stand out as singular and exception. Criticism of some Exceptionalist aspects is always compensated by idolization of other Exceptionalist aspects that, in some cases, may be hyperbolized or misrepresented for the sake of preserving the ideology and, through it, America's identity.

The research has identified two types of authors:

- Donald E Pease and Godfrey Hodgson for instance consider Exceptionalism to be a *fantasy* or a *myth*, created and perpetuated for the sake of defining and preserving American identity. Hodgson considers Exceptionalist discourse to have a powerful impact on individuals because it shapes attitudes, for instance, "the American conviction that the US has a special duty and destiny worked in the past to make those who believe in them wiser and more virtuous" (Hodgson, xiii) and because "to believe in one's own Exceptionalism can be morale-building and invigorating" (Hodgson, 14). Pease explain American Exceptionalism as a discursive creation, the "dominant fantasy" during the Cold War, and he argues that this "fantasy" of Exceptionalism exists as a pre-condition in

the American collective consciousness in the 20th century and most probably in 21st century.

- more recent authors such as Stephen Brooks or Charles Murray claim that American Exceptionalism is based on empirical evidence, not a creation. Brooks explains that it is a historical concept that has existed over the last 500 years because America was believed to be exceptional by Western intellectuals long before it became the dominant power in the 20th century not only because of its wealth, military strength and its ability to influence but also because of its characteristics of the human condition that arose and developed in the New World (Brooks, 3). Charles Murray argue that “Europeans, from Alexis de Tocqueville [...] to lesser known visitors [described] Americans often with the tone of a zoologist writing about a hitherto unknown species [...] as exceptional” (Murray, 4).

One major idea reflected by the writings and speeches investigated is that the US will preserve its exceptional position and its leadership in the world due to its unique qualities and strenghts. American public figures reiterate their belief in America’s unique position and they share this belief with the world with every occasion. Similarly, proponents of Exceptionalism, such as the above-mentioned Brooks or Murray, or David Nordmark, also claim that despite appearances at the beginning of the 21st century, America remains an exceptional country and it should not see itself otherwise because it still can do things that no other country does (Nordmark, 10).

At the beginning of the 21st century, “the US had 5% of the world’s population, a quarter of the worlds’ economic output, nearly half of the global military expenditure and the most extensive cultural and educational soft-power resources” (Nye). Although many observers predicted an America decline, more nuanced analyses predict that “the US will remain the preeminent power because power is the ability to attain the outcome one wants, and the resources that produce it vary in different contexts” (Nye).

Exceptionalism will continue to exist in the foreseeable future. It is embedded slightly differently in domestic politics and foreign affairs. While domestic politics makes use of Exceptionalism for support of opposition and for coalescence of American values,

in foreign affairs there is an empirical reality of Exceptionalism: although America might have entered a “period of diminished expectations, the US remains exceptional – the indispensable nation – in world affairs and it is likely to remain so in the years to come” (Brooks, 132) and one simple explanation for this may be for instance that fact that “Neither China, Russia or India, or even less the EU has the capacity and the will to mount the sort of operations that led to the killing of Bin Laden” (Brooks, 81).

The 21st century will be a century with many economic and social challenges, conflicts and a real chance for the world to become multipolar, and the new world order depends on the way in which America uses its power and on the way in which the rest of the world reacts to America’s actions.

In practice, American Exceptionalism is translated by America’s commitment to the world, by the way in which America uses its power and influence to define the course of certain events, but also by the everyday operation of American institutions and systems, and the values underlying them, and also by the characteristics of the American national identity. As mentioned by several authors, evidence suggests that America stands out as *unique* country in many fields, with both connotations, either as *exceptional* or as *exception*.

In discourse, American Exceptionalism is a matter of context and connotation, and investigation of Exceptionalist stances requires knowledge of the literature in this field and familiarization with the techniques of discourse analysis that allow investigation of the discursive patterns and interpretation of the values reflected by exceptionalist discourse.

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