American Exceptionalism Redux: Critical Genealogy and the Significance of Foundational Myths in US Foreign Policy/

OR:

In Defense of American Exceptionalism… As a Research Topic in International Relations

– Trevor McCrisken and Hilde Restad

‘American exceptionalism’ is central to the dominant national identity in the United States. The belief in American exceptionalism – while fluctuating in strength through various eras of US history -- is widely held by US citizens and helps define the parameters of the discursive framework within which US policy making, both domestic and foreign, takes place.¹ The ideas that make up ‘American exceptionalism’ are not objectively verifiable. They do not make the United States quantitatively or qualitatively superior to other states. They do not show US citizens to be greater or more accomplished than other peoples. If anything, there is much in the history of the founding of the American colonies and the subsequent development of the United States that suggest equally high, if not higher, levels of fallibility, intolerance, violence, and illiberalism compared with the histories of other nations and peoples. Yet during its relatively short history of settlement, expansion, socio-political development and global interaction, a strong foundational myth has been constructed that gives prominence to ideas about the meaning of ‘America’ which emphasise the nation’s supposed ‘exceptionalism’. Although exceptionalism is a myth – an idea about what ‘America’ is or could be – it nonetheless has strong discursive power and is produced and reproduced by elites, publics and observers both within and outside of the United States.

¹ Polls from Gallup and Pew here.
² A note on terminology: Any study of national identity in the United States has to deal with the issue of what to call the United States of America. In common parlance, not only in the United States but also elsewhere, the country is often referred to as America. Such a designation is problematic, not least to peoples in other parts of the North and South American continents who might see it as ethnocentric at best. For the purposes of work on American exceptionalism, however, use of the term ‘American’ to refer to something relating to the USA (such as a US citizen or, indeed, the idea of exceptionalism itself) as well as the use of the term ‘America’ actually has important significance. Those terms themselves are an expression of the national tendency to elevate the US above others. It is also the case that from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur to Anne-Marie Slaughter, observers of the United States have frequently asked what is the meaning of ‘America’ and by that they mean more than just a physical place – ‘America’ has come to signify the values, ideas, and identity of the United States and its peoples. We refer, therefore, to American rather than US exceptionalism, and consider the discursive meanings attributed to the term ‘America’ interchangeably with the United States.

Some scholars of international relations, particularly those who are committed to epistemic realism, dismiss the concept of American exceptionalism. They fail to see the importance of identity and discourse in international relations because they see the world as comprising of ‘objects whose existence is independent of ideas or beliefs about them’.\(^3\) In doing so, these kinds of realists commenting on US foreign policy often find themselves in the ironic position of lamenting the existence of a strong belief in American exceptionalism, and counseling that Americans should stop believing in this myth.\(^4\) At the other extreme, a few scholars blithely accept that the US is exceptional and even use this as a basis for uncritically advocating for deeper American engagement in world affairs, or conversely, to warn against military overstretch lest it loses its exceptional nature.\(^5\)

The authors of this article belong to the constructivist camp, viewing American exceptionalism as an ideational construct that must be analyzed in order to properly understand and contextualize US politics. We argue that understanding American exceptionalism is highly relevant for international relations scholars, because without an understanding of this ideational phenomenon, scholars miss the cultural, historical, and ideological context in which US foreign policy has been made since the inception of the Republic. Indeed, we agree with David Hughes, who, coming from the perspective of critical theory, has written in this journal that American exceptionalism is important because: ‘it provides a cultural mechanism for legitimating foreign policy decisions and practices that the United States would normally condemn in other countries.’\(^6\)

Hughes writes this in an article so critical of scholarship on American exceptionalism that he argues we must jettison ‘about 90% of the intellectual baggage that comes with it.’\(^7\) In fact, Hughes argues, only those approaching American exceptionalism from a critical theory perspective are able to clearly see what this concept is really about and what its purpose is: ‘a discourse that works to legitimate the United States’ exceptions to domestic and international law in the minds of its citizens and foreign observers.’\(^8\)

There is much to agree with in Hughes’ highly critical article, such as his argument


\(^7\) Ibid., p. 535.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 527.
that the idea of American exceptionalism operates at a discursive level; that it provides rhetorical symbols that inform the ways in which Americans think about themselves and their relationship to the world; and that: ‘It does not matter precisely how the United States is deemed to be “exceptional”; all that matters is that the majority of US citizens continue to believe that it is exceptional.’ In this respect, we are in complete agreement with Hughes. He goes on to contend however that analysis of American exceptionalism in international relations scholarship has been compromised first, by its failure to historicize the concept and second, by its reliance on myths that he argues have been cultivated in other disciplines. While these accusations are well founded to a certain degree - some existing scholarship on American exceptionalism is marred by poor definitions of the concept and a smaller proportion contains an uncritical acceptance of the idea that the United States is measurably exceptional - Hughes overreaches considerably when he claims that scholars of American exceptionalism are ‘complicit in some of the United States’ most dubious foreign policy decisions’ because they deliberately use the concept to ‘legitimate the United States’ exceptions to domestic and international law in the minds of its citizens and foreign observers.

WHAT THIS ARTICLE WILL DO

Hughes’ indictment against the majority of academics who have researched and written on the subject of American exceptionalism affords us an opportunity to explain why a proper understanding of American exceptionalism is vital to research on US foreign policy. While poor scholarship on American exceptionalism certainly abounds, there is also much to learn from previous research, including for Hughes, who misses the full significance of the belief in American exceptionalism as a foundational myth that underpins much of the basic thinking about foreign policy in the United States. Indeed, in dismissing this historical and cultural significance Hughes ironically also undermines his own argument about American exceptionalism being invented in 1945 for cynical political purposes.

In this article we will advance three arguments, inspired by the criticisms made by Hughes. The goal is not merely to defend against his critique, however, but to show the contribution constructivist research makes to the issues of American exceptionalism and US foreign policy. We want, in other words, to defend a constructivist research agenda on the concept ‘American exceptionalism’. We will address three main issues:

---

9 Ibid., p. 551.
10
First: What is American exceptionalism? Contra Hughes, we contend that American exceptionalism was not an invention of post-World War II policymakers for the purpose of selling controversial US foreign policy to the public. We argue American exceptionalism is a kind of national identity, made up of three ideas: the belief in the United States as superior to the rest of the world; as having a special role to play in world history; and as a republic that shall never fall (as previous republics in world history have). These ideas can, in fact, be traced through US history. While Hughes is correct to point to superficial scholarship that presents a “seamless narrative” of American exceptionalism from start to finish, this far from correctly describes our (and others’) research on American exceptionalism. We call this the identity critique, which leads to the second issue:

Second: Hughes argues that American exceptionalism was invented in 1945, and accuses other scholars of presentism. Therefore, we ask: When did American exceptionalism ‘start’? We argue there was no one ‘moment of creation,’ but rather many moments of becoming, long before 1945. This is the historical critique. This leads us to the final and most foundational area of disagreement:

Third: How should American exceptionalism be studied? What is the value added of treating American exceptionalism as a set of ideas or an identity? We argue Hughes’ critical theory argument is in fact reductionist – in that he reduces all scholarship on American exceptionalism to an ‘apology’ for controversial US foreign policies. Our answer to the question is a defense of constructivism. Analysing American exceptionalism as an ideational construct, rather than a cynical political ploy, deepens our understanding of otherwise difficult to understand policy choices and diplomatic maneuvers. We give two short examples of how American exceptionalism can affect US foreign policy, namely by a) breeding solipsism in policy makers, and b) hampering US public diplomacy. Both examples are from the George W. Bush administration.

THE IDENTITY CRITIQUE

What is American exceptionalism? According to Hughes, American exceptionalism is a concept cynically invented in 1945 for the purpose of selling unilateral foreign policies to the American public.\[^12\] [Insert other perspectives from realists etc.] We disagree. We have argued in our earlier work that American exceptionalism is a kind of national identity, made up of several ideas about the meaning of ‘America’ for both its citizens and the world.\[^13\] The core ideas and assumptions that form the belief in

\[^12\] Hughes, p. 2.
American exceptionalism can be aggregated as follows: (i) the United States is a special nation, distinct from all others, with a special role to play in human history; (ii) the unique blend of values and principles on which US society and American national identity are built have universal application and appeal and should be adopted by all peoples for the betterment of humankind; (iii) finally, although it is not without its faults, US society is at the vanguard of human progress and provides an invaluable model for the rest of the world. Indeed, the United States is able to overcome its mistakes and move inexorably forward to make a more perfect union and a more perfect world, escaping the ‘laws of history’ that cause the rise and fall of great nations.

In terms of US foreign policy, these assumptions have underpinned a belief that US objectives are always benign and that ultimately the US should be considered a ‘force for good in the world.’ This is why, as Restad has argued, US foreign policy has often taken a unilateral form, as a uniquely good republic must forge its own unique path, unencumbered by the corrupted Old World perspective on international affairs. As McCrisken has argued, however, ‘Although these assumptions, or variations on them, form the foundation of most if not all exceptionalist thinking, their meaning, significance and consequences have been interpreted in different ways by different Americans at different times in their history.’

The larger issue at stake here is how to look at the role identity (or ideas about exceptionalism) plays in US history. Can one say that an exceptionalist identity is ever formed at any one point in time? Hughes chastises scholars for arguing there is a ‘seamless lineage’ of American exceptionalism that makes it ‘both organic and inevitable’. While that certainly is true of some works that take a cursory view of the role of ideas, beliefs and values in the development of the United States (and in the pursuit of US foreign policy), most of the scholarship that Hughes attacks directly in his article actually takes a far more nuanced and problematized approach than his claims would credit. Far from seeing the development of the belief in American exceptionalism as ‘organic and inevitable’, this scholarship actually recognizes exceptionalism as being constructed and reconstructed over time, sometimes deliberately by elites, sometimes inadvertently in more popular cultural interactions or the actions of citizens. Where such scholarship may have implied a linear progression,

---


15 Restad, ‘Old Paradigms’; American Exceptionalism.


17 We will get back to what kind of effects an exceptionalist identity has had in US foreign policy history in part III.

18 Hughes, ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ p. 534.
its authors would have to accept mea culpa. But most of the scholars cited by Hughes, and many who are not, would accept and have stated that American exceptionalism is a ‘fluid and adaptive idea’\textsuperscript{19}, ‘subject to continual reinterpretation’.\textsuperscript{20}

As with any beliefs system, there are dominant tenets that remain relatively unchallenged and unchanging over time, there are regressive elements, there are some contradictory aspects, and some discordant reactionary strains that act to disrupt the core, all of which contribute to an ongoing process of production and reproduction. Americans themselves and observers of the United States, academic and otherwise, often do make discursive attempts to simplify and give order to the wide-ranging elements of American identity. The belief in American exceptionalism is an attempt by US citizens, whether they sit in the Oval Office or in an Arizona coffee house, to give order to their place in the world, to build a homogeneous stable identity. It is perhaps inescapable that some (but certainly not all) academics who have engaged with that belief have to some extent reinforced its existence. However, that does not mean that they have accepted it uncritically or that we should dismiss the vast majority of existing scholarship or ignore the belief itself because it is deemed dangerous. The necessary response is to recognize the discursive power of the belief, to critique it, trace its roots, and expose its consequences in order to better understand and resist its most tenacious qualities.

Ironically, the person guilty of simplistic scholarship is Hughes, in that he is arguing that American exceptionalism was invented whole cloth in 1945. We contend, rather, that all forms of identity are constructed in a combination of deliberate and not so deliberate acts over time. There is no ‘single point of origin.’\textsuperscript{21} Certain ideas take hold and are retained over long periods of time largely unchanged but frequently reproduced, others develop slowly in fits and starts with elements being created, discarded, refound, adapted, dismissed, appropriated, and embedded in identity in almost equal measure. As David Campbell has written, ‘The contours of [American] identity have been the subject of constant (re)writing: not rewriting in the sense of changing the meaning, but rewriting in the sense of inscribing something so that which is contingent and subject to flux is rendered more permanent.’\textsuperscript{22} The construction of identity, especially a dominant national identity, is a long and complex process full of contingency and contestation. To identify points of particular import and to afford them some linear progression in genealogical development may well be an academic exercise in imposing order where there is none.

We contend that the construction of the meaning of ‘America’, and with it the idea of exceptionalism, is not something that began at any specific point in history (such as

\textsuperscript{19} McCrisken, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{21} Campbell, \textit{Writing Security}; p. 74
\textsuperscript{22} Campbell, \textit{Writing Security}; p. 31.
1945 or even 1776). We argue that it is most certainly not a ‘twentieth-century invention’. It is a meaning, a sense of identity, which has roots back to before the Founding, as the next section will show. This meaning is not only produced and reproduced by those elites that occupy the White House, or the Capitol Building, or even the universities, but also the makers of films, the writers of novels, the designers of clothing, the traders of financial districts, the builders of monuments and buildings, the high school teachers, the tattoo artists, indeed to some extent all adults and children both naturalised and native born who have occupied the land we now know as the United States, but also the countless ‘foreigners’ who have spoken or written about the United States, the ‘others’ that Americans have encountered in their interactions with the outside world. ‘America’ is a script that is continually being written and re-written. Coalescing at the core of these processes are a number of ideas and assumptions that form the belief in American exceptionalism. They are not unproblematic, they are not without contradiction, and they certainly do not lead to an unblemished record either domestically or in foreign policy. They do need to be taken seriously, however, to be addressed directly and critically if we as scholars are to develop a more complete understanding of the United States, its foreign policy decisions and actions, and the claims made by its political leaders and other opinion shapers.

The growth of the belief in American exceptionalism has not been teleological. Complex forms of interaction between a range of ideas over time have been responsible for the formation of American national identity. There have been deliberate creations along the way, not least in the formalization of repetitive rituals and symbols that publicly and officially reinforce the idea of ‘America’, some of which have been present since soon after independence from Britain while others have only been officially sanctioned relatively recently. The national anthem, ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ for instance, was written as a poem in 1814 and set to an already popular tune. Although it became an officially recognized US Navy song in 1889 and was endorsed by Woodrow Wilson in 1916, it only became the national anthem by congressional resolution on March 3, 1931, i.e. rather late in U.S. history. Until the official sanctioning of ‘The Star Spangled Banner’, other songs such as ‘Hail, Columbia’ (1789), ‘America (My Country ‘Tis of Thee)’ (1832), and more latterly ‘America the Beautiful’ (1910) and ‘God Bless America’ (1918), acted as de facto anthems. Independence Day, on the other hand, has been celebrated on the ‘Fourth of July’ in some form or other since its first anniversary in 1777 and was formally made a national holiday by Congress in 1870. Thanksgiving was proclaimed a national day as early as 1789 by President George Washington and has been a Federal holiday since 1863. The US national flag, the so-called ‘stars and stripes’, was adopted by the Flag Resolution of the Second Continental Congress in June 1777 and has only been changed significantly with the addition of stars as more states acceded to the Union. The Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, recited at the start of every congressional session, many public and private meetings, and the start of the day in most public schools, was written in an early form in 1887, published in heavily
revised form by a Christian socialist Baptist minister in 1892, formally adopted by Congress in 1942, and last revised with the addition of ‘under God’ in 1954. Perhaps this was a cynical ploy by Congress to assert the religious part of the US national identity in the face of the godless Soviet Communists, perhaps not.

The United States – like most other modern states - is replete with such ‘invented traditions’ deliberately designed to affirm and reinforce a sense of national identity. As Eric Hobsbawn has argued, ‘Americanism’ is a ‘notably ill-defined’ concept but the practices that inscribe it are ‘virtually compulsory’. They operate for Americans as ‘emotionally and symbolically charged signs of club membership.’ Such symbolic representations of ‘America’ are crucial repetitive elements of the performative production and reproduction of the ‘imagined community’ that Benedict Anderson demonstrated to be at the centre of the idea of ‘nation’. ‘America’ has been described as ‘the imagined community par excellence’ since it is ‘peculiarly dependent on representational practices for its being. Arguably more than any other state, the imprecise process of imagination is what constitutes American identity.’

THE HISTORICAL CRITIQUE

When did American exceptionalism start? According to Hughes, ‘Arguably the worst problem with contemporary accounts of US exceptionalism is the widespread assumption that its roots can be traced all the way back to US pre-history.’ Rather, Hughes argues, American exceptionalism is an invention of the postwar era, designed to garner support for controversial foreign policies. Hughes is not a gun-shy writer, indeed he lines up a series of intellectual opponents for dressing down in the paragraphs that follow, and this article’s authors are among the culprits. According to Hughes, scholars such as Michael Ignatieff, William Spanos and William Pfaff are all ‘wrong’ about the historical lineage of the concept; McCrisken ‘goes too far’ when claiming that ‘throughout American history, exceptionalist beliefs have framed the discourse of foreign policy making by providing the underlying assumptions and terms of reference for foreign policy debate and conduct’; Restad ‘has it precisely backwards’ when she claims ‘[s]ignificantly, exceptionalism was formulated and identified with before the impressive increase in American power and influence in international politics exhibited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.’

This element of the assault on the existing scholarship is problematic for at least two

---

25 Campbell, Writing Security; p. 91.
26 Hughes, “Unmaking an Exception,” p. 533.
27 Cited in ibid., pp. 534-535.
reasons, none of which are the troubling tone. Firstly, it rejects out of hand a large body of academic work that is rooted in extensive historical research of primary sources that show the prevalence of ideas about the uniqueness of the New World – what would later be termed ‘exceptionalism’ – from the earliest colonial times. Secondly, it assumes that because the specific term ‘American exceptionalism’ did not gain widespread salience until the latter half of the 20th century that the ideas that form the core of what have become labeled as exceptionalist beliefs also did not exist in earlier periods. Sure, the phrase ‘American exceptionalism’ first appeared as a scholarly term in Max Lerner’s work *America as a Civilization* (1957) and it was President John F. Kennedy (not Puritan Minister John Winthrop) who popularized the phrase ‘city upon a hill’ in the early 1960s. But this, we contend contra Hughes, does not tell us anything about the origins of exceptionalist ideas in US history.

First, Jack P. Greene is foremost among scholars who have addressed the colonial and early federal period to determine the extent to which exceptionalist beliefs and language developed during the foundational years of ‘America’. He has researched and analysed what he characterises as ‘an extraordinarily large body of contemporary testimony from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century and beyond that did indeed see America as a special, and in many ways even an exceptional, place.’ Greene concludes that:

> Far from being the creation of later historians and social analysts . . . the concept of American exceptionalism with its positive connotations was present at the very creation of America. Rooted in the earliest efforts by Europeans to come to terms with the new found continents on the western side of the Atlantic and the new societies they were creating there, this concept, already by the end of the sixteenth century and well before the English had succeeded in establishing permanent settlements anywhere in the Americas, had become one of the principle components in the identification of America.

Greene’s claim that ‘By the beginning of the nineteenth century the idea of America as an exceptional entity had long been an integral component in the identification of America’ is widely accepted and relied upon by other scholars who have addressed the genealogy of American exceptionalism. We agree with Greene’s argument that it is important to consider the roots of the belief in American exceptionalism, to acknowledge the ideas and assumptions about the American experience around which the early aspects of a national identity were formulated, and to ‘consider more fully precisely what it meant to the people who articulated and used it, how it served to help them organize, characterize, and achieve mastery over the new worlds they were

---


envisioning, creating, and observing in America. Thus, while there is much poor ‘scholarship’ on American exceptionalism, Hughes seems not to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Hughes spends much of his article trying to ‘debunk’ what he considers the wrongful location by other scholars of a ‘moment’ of creation for American exceptionalism either during Puritan settlement, the American Revolution, or during the period of westward expansion, which popularised the phrase ‘Manifest Destiny’. Hughes accuses the vast majority of the work on American exceptionalism of reading the present into the past – of presentism – yet this is a rather superficial view of what that scholarship has done. Hughes misses that a great deal of the work on exceptionalism has, as David Campbell suggests, sought to ‘trace how [contemporary] rituals of power arose, took shape, gained importance, and effected politics’ – in other words how ‘certain terms and concepts have historically functioned within discourse.’ That those terms and concepts were only collectively labeled ‘American exceptionalism’ in the mid to late twentieth century is beside the point. What we would now call ‘exceptionalist’ language has been key to the construction of identity over time in the United States and, before that, among the colonies of North America.

Second, Hughes claims to be interested in American exceptionalism for the ‘conditions of its discursive production’ yet by wanting to dismiss the notion that anything resembling the belief in exceptionalism existed prior to 1945 he actually obscures and dehistoricises the processes of production and reproduction that have formed the core tenets of exceptionalist beliefs over time. Just because the exact term ‘American exceptionalism’ was rarely used during the eighteenth and nineteenth century does not mean that the ideas and beliefs that would be latterly termed ‘exceptional’ were not forming and developing. As Greene argues: ‘the very pervasiveness and persistence of the assumption of American distinctiveness throughout the colonial era strongly suggests that modern analysts are making a mistake not to take it seriously.’

To deny the long history of ‘becoming’ that American national identity and the belief in American exceptionalism undertook is to ignore the ‘moments that enriched the discursive economy of identity/difference and from which contemporary articulations are drawn.’ In other words, while the articulation of what constitutes ‘America’ may not have used the exact formulation of the belief in ‘American exceptionalism’, at least in any widespread, commonplace sense, until the mid to late twentieth century, the discursive economy that was eventually labeled with the term ‘American exceptionalism’ has been in continual development – through production, repetition,

30 Greene, Intellectual Construction, p. 7
31 Campbell, Writing Security, p. 6.
33 Campbell, Writing Security; p. 92.
and (re)production – since before the founding of the first colonies on the North American continent. Ideas about the meaning of ‘America’ that would grow across the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and be performatively constituted as the belief in American exceptionalism by name in the twentieth century, have a genealogy that can be taken back to at least the ‘discovery’ of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492 but can be traced still further into tropes about promised lands, undiscovered countries and other fabled and mythical ideas about what might lie beyond the sea to the west of Europe that permeated fifteenth century European thought. As Campbell observes: ‘Long before anyone dreamed of exploring a new world, there existed in Europe a sense of what would be found. Through a series of myths and utopian writings, there existed an imaginary on the horizons of European thought that prepared the ground for later encounters.’ Indeed, early American ideas about cultural superiority and uniqueness were to some extent inherited from a sense of British exceptionalism.

Although the dominant tropes within the idea that constitutes American identity were mostly scripted by the dominant white Anglo-Saxon majority, they did not operate within a vacuum but were also influenced in their thinking about the ‘New World’ by everything they thought they knew (or believed) about the ‘Old World’, as well as the meanings ascribed to the land they increasingly occupied by those peoples who already inhabited the continent and whose own discursive constructions of the meaning of the places the ‘white man’ called ‘America’ had a co-constitutive effect on the foundational myths even if they were largely appropriated, subsumed or annihilated along the way.

Arguing, as Restad does, that American exceptionalism is made up of ideas that build on the Puritan idea of religious exceptionalism and the Founders’ idea of a political exceptionalism does not equal arguing that the term exceptional – or other specific terms such as ‘city upon a hill’ - must be traceable to 1776, or even 1630. As she writes in her book, this ‘entails arguing that the self-understanding as exceptional must be traceable. Whereas the terms have come and gone with each historic period (as seen with ‘Manifest Destiny’), the self-identification remains.’ Thus, when Hughes criticises authors for focusing too much on the Puritans, for example, he misses the mark. Certainly, it is correct that the Puritans were a small group that actually failed in their ‘mission’ after a few generations. And yet, the Puritan piece in the identity puzzle has been of disproportionate significance to their original size.

34 Campbell, Writing Security, p. 92.
36 See, for example, Francis Jennings, The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism and the Cant of Conquest (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); Edmundo O’Gorman, The Invention of America: An Enquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of its History (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1961);
37 Restad, American Exceptionalism, chapter 1.
When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that, ‘[t]he position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one’, he pointed back to their ‘strictly Puritanical origin’, as the first factor explaining this exceptionalism.38

Hughes identifies recent US presidents who have used ‘exceptionalist imagery’ – he cites Barack Obama’s claims that the United States is ‘not just a place on a map, but a light to the world’ and that it is the ‘indispensable nation’ (a claim actually made earlier by George H. W. Bush and particularly Bill Clinton), reflecting that it is similar to Reagan’s use of the ‘shining city upon a hill’ rhetoric.39 Yet despite acknowledging the use by presidents of language that can be termed ‘exceptionalist’, he fails to then recognise that such terms have been used by Americans since at least the founding of the Republic and also cannot see that such imagery predating the use of the exact term ‘American exceptionalism’ is a clear indication that a wide range of discursive elements make up the belief in American exceptionalism and that a genealogy of that term needs to go back much further than 1945 to determine its roots, its points of discursive production and reproduction. Indeed, while Obama was the first president to use the exact term “American exceptionalism” this does not mean he was the first president to use exceptionalist rhetoric.40 It is, in fact, not all that difficult to find historical evidence of various politicians and other important historical figures playing off of exceptionalism throughout US history, presumably both because they believed in this exceptionalism, as well as a conscious effort to strengthen the nascent national identity of this new and ever-expanding nation.

In order to prove his own argument, then, Hughes must not only provide evidence of American exceptionalism being a 20th century invention, he must also serve up politicians cynically invoking American exceptionalism ‘in the name of which all suspensions of domestic and international law can be justified’.41 And yet the evidence delivered by Hughes to argue that American exceptionalism did not exist before 1945 points to the opposite conclusion. Eighteenth and nineteenth century public officials, presidents, writers and academics were using language focused on the uniqueness of the American situation and its difference from Europe, on the notion that the ‘new’ continent could provide an outlet for the downtrodden of the world. Even if they did not aggregate these ideas under the term ‘American exceptionalism’, they were nonetheless building a body of thought, a sense of identity, that pivoted around the idea that the American continent and then the political and social entity of the United States were not only unique but could become superior among nations.

38 Ibid., p. 44.
39 Hughes, ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ p. 530.
40 Uri Friedman. “‘American Exceptionalism,’ A Short History,” Foreign Policy (July/August 2012). URL: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/06/18/american_exceptionalism
41 Hughes, p. 534.
The Framers of the Constitution (commonly now referred to as the Founding Fathers together with the signatories of the Declaration of Independence) were indeed pessimistic about the prospects for their experiment in governance, but they nonetheless wrote into its preamble the claim that they were attempting to forge ‘a more perfect union.’

It is these ‘pivotal moments in the construction of America—the moments of discovery, colonization, and revolution that continue to be represented in the contemporary era as embodying the defining characteristics of America.’

Each of them is produced and reproduced, selectively interpreted and reinterpreted. It may well be that ‘what has been affirmed is a fictional representation of the past’ but it is no less powerful as a consequence. Indeed, the very mythical nature of the elements that have come to make up the belief in American exceptionalism at the core of American national identity through decades of repetition and (re)production gives those tenets a deeper resonance than the ‘bare facts’ of the American ‘discovery’ and ‘founding’ could possibly embed in the consciousness.

Ironically, Hughes overlooks an important fact: His claim and ours can, in fact, be true at the same time. Not only that, Hughes’ own claim is infinitely more believable if our claim holds. If there was no such thing as an American exceptionalist identity, narrative, or discourse (choose your fancy) prior to the Second World War, then a claim that (who? Hughes is vague on this) constructed a discourse of American exceptionalism out of whole cloth for Cold War purposes seems unconvincing.

Would it not have to rely on cultural memories that rang true? On stories, narratives, collective memories and historical ‘facts’ (as they are) that fit this supposedly new discourse? If Americans had walked around feeling distinctly unexceptional for 150 years, how convincing would it have been that they suddenly were God’s chosen people?

It is not possible, therefore, to find a point in 1945 and say that is precisely where the belief in American exceptionalism has its moment of creation, just as it is not possible to place that ‘moment’ in 1620, or 1776, or 1845, or 1898, or any other year where significant events in the history of ‘America’ have taken place. In this respect, it is fair to say that no single moment of creation for the belief in American exceptionalism can be found in Puritan times, or during the American Revolution, or the 19th century westward expansion, but such a ‘false’ genesis point cannot then be replaced by Hughes by the year 1945 simply on the basis that he believes that to be the year that the United States acquired ‘great power status.’ Aside from the point that such claims could also be made, for different reasons, for 1898 (the Spanish-American War), or 1917 (US entry into World War I), or 1941 (US entry into World

---


43 Campbell, Writing Security, p. 130.

44 Campbell, Writing Security, p. 131.

45 Hughes, ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ p. 534.
War II), or 1949 (US co-founding of NATO), there is an inherent contradiction in arguing against a foundation for the myth while advocating for a specific starting point for the invention of American exceptionalism in 1945.

This is to say, it seems likely that in the Cold War of ideas, as it mostly were between the United States and the Soviet Union (but not, of course, for their respective allies in various parts of the world), politicians would use American exceptionalist ideas for all they were worth, updating it to a 20th century discourse to fit the fight of the day. But treating American exceptionalism only as a ‘product of US power, not identity’, as Hughes writes leaves one with a lesser understanding of the phenomenon, not a richer one.46

THE IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

In this last part, we will address two issues. The main issue we want to discuss is how a constructivist analysis of American exceptionalism helps us understand US foreign policy better. We will use two brief examples from the George W. Bush administration to make our point. This will be the second part of the ideological critique. First, however, we must specifically address a rather conspiratorial accusation from Hughes, which cannot stand unanswered.

A sinister conspiracy of scholars

Hughes accuses the majority of scholars who have addressed exceptionalism of perpetuating its belief, of being guilty of myth-making themselves, and (presumably worst of all) of being complicit in the policies that are subsequently carried out in the name of exceptionalism. Even though he cites directly the language used by these scholars, he seems to miss that they themselves have described, used and critiqued American exceptionalism as a ‘belief’ or ‘myth’ just as he does. For example, McCrisken argues that ‘exceptionalist beliefs have framed the discourse of foreign policy making’; Restad contends that ‘American exceptionalism has been a powerful, persistent and popular myth’; and Andrew Preston claims that ‘[p]rotestant exceptionalism helped breed American exceptionalism and led to a consistent belief in America as a chosen nation’.47 These are not scholars arguing blindly for a seamless lineage that proves the United States and its colonial antecedents are exceptional and can therefore be exempted from critical judgment. Rather, they and others like them are attempting to identify the roots of beliefs and myths about the invented and imagined meaning of ‘America’ and to demonstrate how these elements of identity

46 Hughes, ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ p. 535.
have underpinned and helped formulate the official responses to international events, the nature of US engagement with other states and peoples, and the ways in which US citizens have interpreted their actions and the actions of others. They do so not to exalt an American imperial agenda. They do so not because they believe the United States is exceptional. Rather, they do so in order to critically engage with the belief in American exceptionalism and its consequences.

Hughes most extreme claim is that ‘It is no accident’ that what he calls the ‘lazy historiography’ of works on American exceptionalism ‘begins in 1997/8, the same years in which the neoconservative think tank, Project for a New American Century (PNAC), was established with a view to forcing “regime change” in Iraq.’ Hughes names Walter McDougall’s Promised Land, Crusader State (1997) as representative of this trend and also cites McCrisken and Restad despite their works being published much later and actually being critical of the consequences of the belief in American exceptionalism has for US foreign policy. The claims in this specific paragraph of Hughes’ article, and the later accusations of complicity between scholars and policy makers, are bizarre in their conspiratorial tone and are not backed up with any evidence whatsoever. They also represent a severe misreading of the works being criticized. While many works on American exceptionalism promote the argument that the United States is exceptional, our claim that the formulation of the belief in American exceptionalism precedes the US rise to superpower does not represent any kind of ideological justification of American power masking as scholarship.

In arguing against constructivist scholarship on American exceptionalism, Hughes’ argument becomes reductionist. It is reductionist because he contends that anyone tracing ideas of American exceptionalism back to the founding of the Republic have an ideological motive, namely to justify any and all actions the United States has committed on its journey to world power. ‘This kind of seamless lineage serves to naturalise, and therefore legitimate, US exceptionalism’, writes Hughes, ‘by making it seem both organic and inevitable.’ Yet that is not what these works have done – in fact, they have critiqued the elements that make up the belief in American exceptionalism in order to show that they have been deliberately constructed and reconstructed over time, deepening that belief with every challenge. Most of the scholarship that Hughes condemns has actually attempted to expose and understand how ideas about the American past have been used by organisations such as PNAC, public office holders, the producers of culture, and indeed some traditionally minded or overtly patriotic scholars to construct what McCrisken has called ‘a benign meta-narrative’ of US foreign policy.

Hughes seems unable to disassociate scholarship that analyses and critiques the myths that form the belief in American exceptionalism from those myths themselves. In essence, he does not seem to understand how constructivist scholars approach

---

48 Hughes, ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ p. 534, 541.
international relations. Authors who identify the use of what they label exceptionalist language in the writings or speeches of John Winthrop, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Quincy Adams, Alexis de Tocqueville, John O’Sullivan, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and so many others, and argue that they have been constructed over time as a ‘canon’ of exceptionalist belief are not automatically themselves true believers in the way that Hughes seems to assume. That so many scholars have identified the repeated use over time of patriotic, nationalistic language in this American ‘canon’ and termed it exceptionalist does not make them exceptionalists themselves, any more than the scholars who have identified and studied the discourses established by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party are somehow adherents to Nazism. Hughes decries ‘the bulk of contemporary writing on US exceptionalism’ and accuses it of perpetuating the ‘same old myths…ad nauseum’, yet in doing so he misses the complexity and reflectiveness in the majority of those works. Far from arguing that the belief in American exceptionalism has had a ‘seamless’ development they tend to acknowledge that it has been highly contested with major foreign policy debates usually being rooted in differing conceptions of what American exceptionalism means and what its consequences for US foreign affairs behavior should be.

This is not to deny that Hughes’ ideological critique does fit the bill for some scholars. When uncritically recycling old tropes from historical scholarship long since abandoned by contemporary historians, for example, some IR scholars are unwittingly buying into an ‘exceptional’ origin story for the United States. Restad chronicles how earlier historical scholarship on ‘Manifest Destiny’ in fact bought into the idea of the United States having a manifest destiny itself, which helps explain why westward expansion was seen as something ‘domestic’ (as westward expansion was ‘natural’ and ‘organic’) and therefore fit into a narrative of a benign and moral kind of ‘isolationism’ in US foreign policy scholarship, when in fact it entailed acquiring territory from other countries or Native peoples (whether through war or commerce) and was therefore aggressive acts of foreign policy, suggesting a more steady (unilateral) internationalist foreign policy tradition throughout the 19th century.49

What Hughes is really arguing, however, is that only scholarship that treats American exceptionalism as a cynical discourse invented after the rise of American power in 1945 can be true scholarship. But, if we are to believe that American exceptionalism is a discourse that ideologically justifies an aggressive foreign policy, including violations of international law, why would this ideological justification begin in 1945? As Restad argues, US expansion and aggression has been pretty much constant from the beginning, lest Hughes is arguing that taking over an entire continent is not expansion?50 Ironically, Hughes falls prey to the very ideological mistake he is

49 Restad 2012; 2014.
accusing constructivist IR scholars of committing, when he assumes that US rise to international power begins in 1945. By assuming this starts in 1945, he falls for the outdated isolationist narrative that rests on the Manifest Destiny trope. Hughes argues that American exceptionalism is a discourse that was cynically produced in the wake of World War II in order to legitimate an imperial agenda. Since 1945, his argument goes, the United States has selectively drawn on different aspects of US history and ‘blended them with fiction in order to produce a variety of myths all testifying to the “exceptional” status of the United States’. Does this mean Hughes does not think U.S. foreign policy contained an imperial or at least expansionist agenda prior to 1945?

We would agree with Hughes that the producers of American national identity have ‘selectively drawn on different aspects of US history and blended them with fiction in order to produce a variety of myths all testifying to the “exceptional” status of the United States.’ This process, however, has been taking place for much longer and its architects are far broader than Hughes would accept.

The (real) problem with the belief in American exceptionalism

We turn now to what we believe to be the real problem with the belief in American exceptionalism, which is not that it did not exist as a phrase in 1620 or 1865, or that scholars who write about exceptionalism are automatically complicit in the worst excesses of US foreign policy. We would like to address two problems that stem from this belief, and then conclude with an area of agreement between the authors and Hughes.

The two problems (and there are, of course, others) are the following: 1) a sustained and widespread belief among US citizens in American exceptionalism can lead to a severe case of solipsism that prevents most policy makers, many media observers, the US electorate, and (yes) some academics from seeing that many people around the globe (including, it should be said, a great many US citizens) see the world differently than the core assumptions of exceptionalism would suggest. This can negatively affect actual policy planning, as we argue below it did in the case of the Iraq war in 2003. When the belief in American exceptionalism is near absolute among US policy makers, it makes it difficult or even impossible for them to see the ‘indispensable incompleteness, ceaseless displacement, and abundant contradictions of social and political life’ such that they miss the nuance, complexity and contingency of the foreign policy problems that they face. 2) A strong belief in American exceptionalism can in some instances hamper US public diplomacy. This is not

51 See Restad 2012; 2014 for more on this.
52 Hughes, p. ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ 534.
53 Ibid.
54 Campbell, Writing Security, p. 19.
because believing one to be exceptional inherently causes problems in diplomatic relations (many countries believe themselves to be exceptional but can still conduct diplomatic relations elegantly), but because the manner in which this belief in relayed to a foreign audience can sometimes be counterproductive, as we argue below happened in the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

First, solipsism means ‘someone believes that he is the world’. When combined with the unusually high degree of self-belief and optimism characteristic of American exceptionalism, Loren Baritz has argued, solipsistic thinking can create an ‘enabling ignorance’ about other peoples, their customs, beliefs and practices, that causes the US to intervene abroad without due attention to local circumstances and with an unshakeable belief that its actions will be understood and accepted, even desired, by the local population. Fifty years ago, this combination of solipsism and optimism ‘made the detailed particularities of Vietnam’s otherness beside the point.’ Baritz has shown how solipsistic thinking about Vietnam as a country and the Vietnamese as a people led US policy makers to assume that their intervention in that country would be welcomed and supported. Similar conclusions can be reached concerning the George W. Bush administration’s approach to Iraq. Indeed, Baritz’s argument still holds if the word ‘Vietnam’ is replaced with ‘Iraq’:

The myth of the city on a hill combined with solipsism in the assumptions about [Iraq] made by the American war planners. In other words, we assumed that we had a superior moral claim to be in [Iraq], and because, despite their quite queer way of doing things, the [Iraqis] shared our values, they would applaud our intentions and embrace our physical presence.55

Contemplating the Iraq invasion in 2002 and early 2003, the George W. Bush administration was buoyed by hubris in the wake of the apparent swift defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan.56 Their solipsism convinced them that the Iraqi population would welcome the US with open arms if Saddam Hussein’s regime were deposed. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, for example, was convinced that: ‘The Iraqi people understand what this crisis is about. Like the people of France in the 1940s, they view us as their hoped-for liberator.’57 General Tommy Franks, CENTCOM Commander and architect of the Iraq war plan, assumed that if the United States demonstrated sufficient resolve and commitment as it invaded, the Iraqi population would turn against the government. This solipsistic line of thinking, however was, as Bob Woodward observes, ‘based less on solid intelligence from

inside Iraq than assumptions about how people *should* feel toward a ruthless dictator’ and, we would add, how the Bush administration thought the world would view the United States as coming to ‘liberate’ the Iraqi people.\(^{58}\)

The combination of optimism and solipsism – Baritz’s ‘enabling ignorance’ – not only hindered planning for the post-war resolution of Iraq’s domestic problems, but even led to clear warnings about potential difficulties being downgraded or ignored. The Pentagon’s Undersecretary for Policy, Douglas Feith rejected State Department plans for a new Iraqi civil administration that would focus on the crucial needs of electricity, water and communications.\(^{59}\) George Tenet, the CIA Director, warned Bush that ‘the people in Iraq were skeptical’ about US intervention.\(^{60}\) Yet, Bush showed little concern for what would happen in the aftermath of invasion, stating in an NSC meeting nine days into the conflict: ‘Only one thing matters: winning. There’s a lot of second-guessing regarding the post-Saddam world. …Don’t worry about the carping and the second-guessing. Rise above it, be confident… It’s not a matter of timetable, it’s a matter of victory.’\(^{61}\) In fact, this kind of thinking is rather common throughout the history of US foreign policy. The world needs the United States to teach them how to: The Cubans were aching for American liberation in 1898; the Mexicans needed to be taught a lesson about good governance from President Woodrow Wilson; as did the Iranians in 1953, etc. etc. While there is always an important element of good old-fashioned power politics in how the United States has acted in the world since its very Founding, US definitions of ‘the national interest’ has in each historical period been seen through a lens of American exceptionalism. The mantra has not simply been, ‘we are exceptional, so we should rule the world’, it has been, ‘we are exceptional, so the world will *want* us to rule’.

Second, a strong belief in American exceptionalism can actually hamper US public diplomacy. In fact, the rhetoric heavily laden with the belief in American exceptionalism espoused during the war on terror by the Bush administration proved internationally counterproductive. After the Bush administration’s Global War on Terror (GWOT) had caused a drastic dip in the Middle East’s esteem for the United States,\(^{62}\) President Bush named his former advisor Karen Hughes Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy. The Under Secretary then went on a ‘listening tour’ through the Middle East. The tour was a spectacular failure, as seen from the

\(^{59}\) Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, p. 322.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 64.
perspective of its intended audience.\textsuperscript{63} According to the well-known Palestinian-American syndicated columnist Rami Khouri,

[Hughes] never understood that her particular brand of moralizing and arrogant cheerleading – “Go Muslims, go! Reach for the sky! You can be modern and democratic, if you really try!” – was part of the problem, not part of the solution.\textsuperscript{64}

In thinking that public diplomacy consists of communicating American exceptionalism (our values are the best, be like us) rather than engaging in serious discussions over policy differences, the Bush administration failed to grasp why the United States had taken a deep dive in its Middle Eastern ratings. Inconceivable as it were to President Bush and Undersecretary Hughes that countries in the Middle East did not – albeit secretly – want to be more like the United States, the public diplomacy message during the Bush administration focused on the inherent superiority of American values, rather than on the highly controversial war on terror and the war in Iraq.\textsuperscript{65}

These brief examples illustrate why taking seriously the belief in American exceptionalism and the solipsistic thinking and one-way rhetoric that flows from it is so important if we are to gain a better, deeper understanding of the ideational bases of US foreign policy and the consequences for US actions. Few scholars of American exceptionalism deny the claim that ‘exceptionalism entails a belief in the inherent superiority of one’s own nation.’\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, that’s exactly how McCrisken defines the concept at the outset of his study: ‘The term American exceptionalism describes the belief that the United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; not only unique but superior among nations.’\textsuperscript{67} The belief in American exceptionalism might indeed be seen by its advocates as something positive. If voters and policy makers believe that the US ‘goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy’ but is rather drawn into the world against its will, primarily in order to improve the lot of humankind, then they might expect that all should welcome this exceptional nation’s benevolent foreign policy. Hughes finds this view particularly problematic, protesting that those scholars who write about American exceptionalism (though presumably not himself) reinforce the belief by the very practice of their scholarship and, worse still, that they are complicit in the actions of the US abroad,

\textsuperscript{65} See Restad, \textit{American Exceptionalism: An Idea that Made a Nation and Remade the World}, chapter 7.
\textsuperscript{66} Hughes, ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ p. 531.
\textsuperscript{67} McCrisken, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, p. 1.
which are often anything but benevolent in their outcomes. Hughes objects in
particular to what has been termed ‘exemptionalism’ of which the George W. Bush
administration was deemed to be particularly guilty. Yet we would agree, and have
done in our earlier work criticised by Hughes, that the claims to exemptionalism are
symptomatic of the solipsism that is bred by the belief in American exceptionalism. It
is commonplace in the existing literature to critique Bush and his advisers for
conducting the ‘war on terror’ and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in ways
inconsistent with the claims he made about the benign nature of the ‘exceptional’
nation. The administration and its defendants did contend that what they conceived as
the existential threat of terrorism post-‘9/11’ warranted the adoption of exceptional
measures. Yet these ‘exceptional measures’ included interrogation techniques that
critics condemned as torture; the forced removal or ‘rendition’ of suspected terrorists
or sympathisers; the physical and mental abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay in
Cuba and at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq; and high levels of civilian casualties in
both Afghanistan and Iraq, all of which are actions condemned by us and other
scholars who have written about Bush and exceptionalism. We are in complete
agreement with Hughes that ‘Bush-era exceptionalism… was neither an aberration in
US foreign policy, nor did it end when Bush left office.’ Indeed, American
exceptionalism ‘transcends party-political differences.’

Finally, we want to conclude with an area of complete agreement. In coupling
American exceptionalism with US foreign policy, Hughes identifies and challenges a
practice fairly common in the academic work on exceptionalism that Restad has also
critiqued, which she calls the ‘identity dichotomy’. Several prominent scholars,
including Michael Hunt and H.W. Brands, have aggregated the various versions of
exceptionalist belief into two main strands or variants – what McCrisken has termed
the ‘exemplary’ and ‘missionary’ strands of exceptionalism. The exemplary form of
exceptionalism is portrayed as a tendency toward the belief that because it is
exceptional the US should ‘provide an example to the rest of the world but that
wherever possible it should remain aloof from the problems and conflicts besetting
other states and focus on perfecting its own society rather than interfering with
others.’ The missionary strand, meanwhile, is characterised as the belief that simply
being an example is insufficient and that the US ‘has a right and a duty to take an
active role in world affairs in order to promote its agenda and objectives.’
Mccrisken’s position perhaps needs some clarification since he agrees that to see
these two aggregations as a black and white dichotomy is problematic because they
actually represent a much more complex spectrum of different interpretations and
applications of the fundamental exceptionalist ideas. As noted earlier, McCrisken has

---

68 Croft, America’s War on Terror, pp. 52-3.
70 Hughes, p. 529.
71 Ibid. See also Restad, American Exceptionalism.
argued that the belief in American exceptionalism is a ‘fluid and adaptive idea’. There are inherent tensions within exceptionalist beliefs that have played out in a number of different foreign policy ‘grand debates’ at important junctures in the development of the US and its international relations. What several authors have identified as the two strands of exceptionalism might be better conceived as marking the parameters of discourse within the belief in exceptionalism that have formed the boundaries for debate over the nature, extent, and consequences of US engagement internationally – the debate, for example, over having commercial relations with foreign states in the years following independence but ‘entangling relations’ with none; the post-frontier debate between so-called ‘imperialists’ and ‘anti-imperialists’ at the end of the 19th century who both employed exceptionalist ideas to advocate their positions; the interwar debate between so-called ‘isolationists’ and ‘internationalists’ over the degree to which they should engage internationally beyond the Western hemisphere, especially in European disputes; and in more recent years the debate between so-called ‘unilateralists’ and ‘multilateralists’ on the extent to which the US should seek allies in its foreign adventures.

McCriskien and Restad have both argued, though with different emphases, that the core assumptions and ideas at the centre of the belief in American exceptionalism capture both a sense of mission and a sense of example, but that in general the missionary attributes win out. They are also agreed that the United States has never been ‘isolationist’ (a term which should be discarded)\(^\text{73}\) in its foreign affairs and that the term ‘unilateral internationalism’ is a better term for understanding the dominant approach to foreign policy. There has been reticence to engage at times when US interests do not appear best served by intervention but the US has not closed up its borders to foreign affairs at any time in its history. When the US has been at its most interventionist in World War II, the Cold War, and the post-‘9/11’ ‘war on terror’, it has usually attempted to do so in alliances or coalitions, but no matter how many allies are acting in concert with the US or how ‘mutilateral’ an effort appears to be, it is Washington that insists on leading. It regards itself, after all, as the exceptional nation. In this analysis, Restad, McCrisken and Hughes can all find agreement.

CONCLUSION

At various points in US history, scholars and other observers have declared ‘the end of American exceptionalism.’ They did so during the Philippine insurrection that followed the Spanish-American War of 1898, when the US entered World War I, when US objectives were defeated in Vietnam, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent war in Iraq, and in the aftermath of the 2008 financial

---

crisis and the partisan debates over President Barack Obama’s patriotism. Currently, there is a debate over what, exactly, President Donald Trump means by his mottos ‘Make America Great Again’ and ‘America First’. Hughes declares that ‘pronouncing the death of exceptionalism only serves to keep it alive as a discourse’, without seeming to be aware of the irony of such a statement in an article designed to ‘unmake’ the concept. As other scholars have demonstrated, however, despite all the difficulty (if not impossibility) of proving quantitatively that the US is exceptional, and the stack of evidence against the notion that it is qualitatively superior, the belief in American exceptionalism is nevertheless highly resilient. As Hughes accepts, ‘US exceptionalism exhibits an extraordinary capacity for resurrection.’ Although he asks why the belief in exceptionalism should persist despite fairly regularly being declared dead, Hughes fails to see that the answer lies in the role the idea of exceptionalism plays in inscribing the meaning of ‘America’.

We are grateful for Hughes’s critical engagement with our work, which has given us an opportunity to clarify why researching American exceptionalism as a social construct is important for those seeking to understand US foreign policy. We admit that Hughes’ article is clever. It offers an origin story of our origin story—a genealogical critique—that examines work on American exceptionalism by referring to its ideological work. Following a tradition of critical theory that examine theories and ideas as ‘always for someone and for some purpose’, Hughes argues that only scholarship that treats American exceptionalism as a cynical discourse invented after the rise of American power in 1945 can be true scholarship. In doing so, Hughes implicitly argues that constructivist scholarship on ideas is without merit. Hughes concludes that, ‘If IR scholars can learn to see US exceptionalism, not through the lens of the many myths it produces, but instead as a discourse that works to lend unwarranted legitimacy to the United States’ extra-legal behaviour, they will be less complicit in some of the United States’ most dubious foreign policy decisions’.

---


For more on Obama and American exceptionalism, see Restad, American Exceptionalism, Introduction.

75 See, for example, Restad, “The Unexceptional Nation: Donald Trump and Making America Great Again,” Starting Points

76 Hughes, ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ p. 532.

77 McCrisken, American Exceptionalism.

78 Hughes, ‘Unmaking an Exception,’ pp. 533.


80 Hughes, p. 551.
We welcome Hughes’ contribution to the debate over, and scholarship on, American exceptionalism as a concept and how it has influenced (or been influenced by) US foreign policy. In declaring the end of constructivist scholarship on American exceptionalism on behalf of critical theory, however, Hughes overreaches. We fundamentally disagree with Hughes’ argument that, ‘The relevance of US exceptionalism for IR scholars is that it provides a cultural mechanism for legitimating foreign policy decisions and practices that the United States would normally condemn in other countries.’ Rather, we have argued that its relevance is as a social construct that helps situate and explain how the United States sees itself and its role in the world. In our response to Hughes’ critique, we hope to have moved the conversation about how to fruitfully study American exceptionalism forward, and we welcome research on the topic – whether coming from IR theorists or critical theorists.

---

81 Hughes, p. 528.