

4-18-2015

The Myth of American Exceptionalism

Carter A. Wilson Dr.

Northern Michigan University, carwilso@nmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.nmu.edu/facwork_conferencepresentations



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carter A. Wilson, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association, April 2015

This Conference Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by The Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conference Presentations by an authorized administrator of The Commons. For more information, please contact klumpne@nmu.edu, kmcdonou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.

Abstract

This paper critiques the contemporary literature on American exceptionalism. It examines the multiple religious, intellectual and racist traditions that make up U.S. political culture. It demonstrates that the doctrine of American exceptionalism is full of contradictions and fallacies and that rather than promoting democracy and equality these religious, intellectual and racist traditions did more to sustain and promote racial repression. Finally, this critique reveals not only the contradictions and fallacies of American exceptionalism, but the contradictions of contemporary U.S. public policies as well: the contradiction between the rhetorical commitment to freedom, equality and limited government and the reality of a stingy and intrusive welfare state and a racially repressive criminal justice system.

The Myth of American Exceptionalism

By

Carter A. Wilson, Ph.D.

Department Head and Professor of Political Science

Northern Michigan University

Paper Delivered at the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago Illinois, April 16-19, 2015

American political culture is complex and diverse with both progressive and reactionary currents competing for ascendancy. However, the frequent academic and political use of the concept of American exceptionalism oversimplifies this culture, portrays it as homogeneous and progressive, and denies the existence of dangerous and reactionary cultural currents. These reactionary currents have supported patterns of racial oppression in the past and continue to do so today. In this paper, I examine and critique the concept of American exceptionalism. I insist that this concept masks persisting racism and operates more as nationalist ideology than as a useful tool for analyzing contemporary public policies.

The concept of American exceptionalism refers to a particular political culture which is asserted to be unique to the United States, which is associated with a particular set of American values and an intellectual tradition, and which has permanently shaped public opinion, public policy and institutional and political arrangements. The historical circumstances and cultural characteristics that have allegedly produced American exceptionalism include: The absence of both a feudal past and an established

aristocracy; the event of the American Revolution, fought against both a monarchy and a centralized government; the experience of an open frontier and westward expansion; the ascension of the American brand of evangelical Christianity—all presumably instilled a strong sense of individualism; reinforced the values of democracy, equality, and freedom; and produced hostility toward a centralized authority and passion for democracy and limited government.

Scholars, political leaders, and media personalities use the underlying assumptions of the concept of American exceptionalism to explain and justify contemporary public opposition to a European style expansive welfare state, hostility to universal health care, and opposition to affirmative action. They argue that Americans believe in equal opportunity, but have long opposed the use of and denied the need for governmental powers to produce equal results. Americans oppose welfare and affirmative action in the name of individual responsibility, equal treatment and merit.

In this paper I examine and critique the concept of American exceptionalism. I believe this examination and critique is important for two reasons. First, the use of this concept has increased exponentially within the past couple of decades. Examples in the academic literature include: Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (1996); Charles Murray, *American Exceptionalism* (2013); Peter Schuck and James Q. Wilson editors, *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation* (2008); Charles Dunn editor, *American Exceptionalism: The Origins, History and Future of the Nation's Greatest Strength* (2013); Hugh Heclo, "Varieties of American Exceptionalism (2013)"; William Kristol, "Is Exceptionalism a Myth? Has It Always Been? (2013)" and many others. American exceptionalism became a major issue in the 2012 presidential election, particularly on the Republican or conservative side. It was promoted by most presidential candidates, especially Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, and Mitt Romney. In fact, Gingrich and Romney published books on American exceptionalism. Gingrich published *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* (2011). Romney wrote *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* (2010).

Sarah Palin included a chapter entitled, “American Exceptionalism,” in her book *American by Heart* (2010).

Second, the academic and popular use of the concept of American exceptionalism is plagued by contradictions, omissions and fallacies. This concept assumes fallaciously that American culture is homogeneous. It ignores contradictory intellectual and religious traditions. It downplays the extent to which racial oppression is deeply ingrained in the dominant culture and shapes political institutions in contradictory ways.

This essay is not the first critique of the doctrine of American exceptionalism. Richard Hofstadter (1948) and Daniel Elazar (1984) have long since demonstrated America’s multiple political traditions. Judith Shklar critiqued this doctrine in her 1990 presidential address to the American Political Science Association (Shklar 1991; see also Abbot 1995; 2010). Since then several books and articles have challenged this doctrine (Rogers M. Smith 1993; 2005. Rana 2010; Lopez 1995; Lopez 2013; Roediger 1991; Saxton 1990). Despite these challenges, the political science literature promoting this doctrine has proliferated.

I divide this paper into three parts. First, I briefly summarize the contemporary literature on American exceptionalism. This summary is important because in it I identify the targets of my critique.

Second, I examine the complex and contradictory currents in American culture. I focus on the religious, intellectual and racist traditions. For each tradition, I make the following points:

Religion Tradition:

American political culture contains multiple forms of Christianity, most of which, contrary to the doctrine of American exceptionalism, either sustained or promoted racial repression.

Intellectual Tradition:

American political culture has contained multiple intellectual traditions, some progressive and others reactionary and racist. Reactionary and racist traditions have generally used the principles of states' rights and limited government in a contradictory way to promote and protect the privileges and prerogatives of the dominant class at the expense of oppressed classes and racial groups.

Racist Tradition:

Throughout U.S. history, there have been not one form of racism, but multiple forms including biological, Herrenvolk, constitutional, plutocratic, cross-over and cultural racism. The doctrine of American exceptionalism not only trivializes racism, it is tainted by it.

Finally, I demonstrate the relevance of this critique to a more thorough understanding of the current contradictions of U.S. public policies: the contradiction between the rhetorical commitment to freedom, equality and limited government and the reality of a stingy and intrusive welfare state and a racially repressive criminal justice system.

PART ONE: THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE

In this section, I examine the concept of American exceptionalism. I showcase the contributions of select scholars: Hugh Hecllo, James Q. Wilson, Seymore Martin Lipset, Charles Murray and Gunnar Myrdal.

Hugh Hecllo

Hugh Heclo (2013) conducted a content analysis of books and articles published over a period of more than 220 years. His analysis revealed that the concept that the United States was exceptional emerged as early as 1800. It was used by Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville. In the 1920s, it was popularized by leaders of the Communist Party to explain the failure of socialism to emerge in the United States. Heclo argues that Americans' tenacious commitment to individualism, limited government and laissez faire capitalism explains America's strong resistance to socialism and its opposition to an expansive welfare state.

James Q. Wilson

In a 2006 article, James Q. Wilson sums up his view of the concept of American exceptionalism:

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville discussed American exceptionalism in *Democracy in America*, and he is still correct. There was then and there continues now to be in this country a remarkable commitment to liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, and laissez-faire values. He gave three explanations for this state of affairs: we came to occupy a vast, largely empty, and isolated continent; we have benefited from a legal system that involves federalism and an independent judiciary; and we have embraced certain "habits of the heart" that were profoundly shaped by our religious tradition. Of these, Tocqueville rightly said that our customs were more important than our laws and our laws more important than our geography. What is remarkable today is that a vast nation of around 300 million people still share views once held by a few million crowded along the Eastern seaboard (Wilson 2006, 2).

Wilson adds:

America was slow to adopt welfare programs, social security, unemployment insurance, and government supported health care, while Europe adopted these policies rapidly. We have kept our tax rate lower than it is in most of Europe. The central difference is not that Europeans are either smarter or dumber than we, but that a parliamentary system permits temporary popular majorities to make bold changes rather quickly, whereas a presidential system with a powerful, independent, and internally divided Congress requires that big changes undergo lengthy debates and substantive accommodations (Wilson 2006, 2).

Wilson argues the American religious heritage played a major role in promoting the values of freedom, equality democracy and free markets and in shaping U.S. politics and public policy:

Religion has powerfully affected American politics: its leaders were at the forefront of efforts to abolish slavery and still struggle over war, abortion, and gay rights. Indeed, among white voters in the 2004 presidential election, religious differences explained a larger fraction of their votes than did their age, sex, income, or education (Wilson 2006, 5).

Seymour Martin Lipset

Seymour Martin Lipset insists that American exceptionalism explains why socialism never took root in the United States:

Ironically, much of the efforts by Marxists and socialists to account for the failure of the prediction stressed that from sociological and political points of view, the United States was too progressive, too egalitarian, too open, and too democratic to generate massive radical or revolutionary movements on a scale comparable to those of Europe (Lipset 1996, 77-78).

In *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edge Sword*, as well as in his *Continental Divide* coauthored with Louis Hartz, Lipset compares U.S. political culture and public policies to Canada, European nations, and Japan. He demonstrates that compared to other nations, the United States is unique in values, public opinions, public policies and institutional arrangements. In summarizing the meaning of American exceptionalism he says:

The American Creed can be described in five terms: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. Egalitarianism, in its American meaning, as Tocqueville emphasized, involves equality of opportunity and respect, not of result or condition (Lipset 1996, 19).

He maintains that although Americans are more religious than Europeans, American religious institutions are fundamentally different. They are non-hierarchical, independent from the state and dependent on their congregations for support. Protestant denominations encourage their members to seek a personal relationship with their God and Savior. Lipset claims that this type of church arrangement explains the much stronger sense of voluntarism and individualism in American culture compared to other nations. Lipset concludes that American exceptionalism is a double edge sword. Compared to other countries, the United States has on the one hand lower tax rates and a more decentralized government. On the other hand it has higher poverty rates, lower social welfare spending, and higher crime and drug addiction rates.

Charles Murray

In his most recent book, *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History*, Charles Murray asserts that Americans are hardworking, fiercely independent, and self-reliant. They believe in selfsacrifice and education to get ahead and they are committed to equal treatment. He adds, “The

egalitarianism of nineteenth-century America had nothing to do with equality of outcomes but with equality of human dignity (Murray 2013).”

He boasts that because of the absence of a feudal past, Americans do not accept titles of nobility, nor bow down to rich people, but neither do they like people of the lower class.

By the same token, Americans didn’t like the idea of a lower class, except for people who earned it. So Americans had invidious names for people with lower-class behavior—“white trash” and the like—but not for people who were simply poor but otherwise respectable (Murray 2013, 22).

Murray insists that whereas all founding fathers were committed to limited governments, political leaders today have abandoned this commitment:

The common understanding of the limited role of government that united the Founders, including Hamilton, are now held only by a small minority of Americans, who are considered to be on the fringe of American politics (Murray 2013, 41).

Like other proponents of American exceptionalism, Murray insists that the American evangelical brand of Christianity promoted equality and democracy, generated social forces that led to the American Revolution, precipitated the freeing of the slaves, established public schools, and laid the ethical foundations for women’s rights and civil rights (Murray 2013, 26-27).

Gunnar Myrdal and Liberal American Exceptionalism

The renowned Swedish economist and author of *The American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal, offers a liberal use of the concept of American exceptionalism. He argues that the American creed and

Christianity were powerful forces for combating racial prejudices and promoting progressive change. Like other social scientists, Myrdal assumes that there was a single unifying American political culture of which the American creed and Christian morality were integral parts. He believes that the American creed and Christian morality created pressures that would mitigate, erode and eventually eliminate racial prejudice and racist violence:

We shall find that even a poor and uneducated white person in some isolated and backward rural region in the Deep South, who is violently prejudiced against the Negro and intent upon depriving him of civic rights and human independence, has also a whole compartment in his valuation sphere housing the entire American Creed of liberty, equality, justice and fair opportunity for everybody. He is actually also a good Christian and honestly devoted to the ideals of human brotherhood and the Golden Rule (Myrdal 1944, xlvii).

Common Themes

Whereas there are certainly some differences and variations in themes and arguments among various scholars who use the concept of American exceptionalism, four themes remain constant. First, almost all claim that America's unique history generated strong values for freedom, equality, individualism, limited government, states' rights, and laissez capitalism.

Second, almost all agree that the American brand of Christianity promoted equality and individualism. Most expanded upon Tocqueville's observation that "Puritanism was not merely a religious doctrine, but corresponded in many points with the most absolute democratic and republican theories (Tocqueville 1948, 36; quoted in Lipset 1996, 61)." Almost all believed that since American

Protestant sects are independent from the state and “are congregational, not hierarchical, they have fostered egalitarian, individualistic, and populist values which are anti-elitist (Lipset 1996, 61).” Most argued that Christianity attenuated racism and spawned the abolitionist and civil rights movements. Myrdal insisted that it promoted the “ideals of human brotherhood and the Golden Rule (Myrdal 1944, xlvii).”

Third, almost all believed that democracy evolved over time. Whereas universal suffrage did not exist in the early years of this nation, it expanded gradually. The first major expansion occurred during the Jacksonian age. This expansion continued throughout the 20th century.

Fourth, most believed that American cultural values promoted not just a strong sense of equality and individualism, but an ethos of anti-statism and anti-authority and that these cultural factors best explain contemporary public opinions and public policy, especially hostility to European styled welfare state, resistance to universal health care, and opposition to affirmative action.

There are some differences among proponents of American exceptionalism. Conservative commentators insist that modern liberalism and public policy initiatives such as the New Deal and the Great Society represent a radical break from traditional American political culture. Louis Hart argued that the New Deal represented the triumph of pragmatism or classical idealism. Moderate scholars like Seymour Martin Lipset and Samuel Huntington see conflict between liberals and conservatives arising from liberals focusing on equality and conservatives focusing on individualism. They see liberals and conservatives as part of the same dominant homogeneous American culture.

PART TWO: CRITIQUE

In this second part, I examine the fallacies and omissions of American exceptionalism. I present evidence of a heterogeneous, complex and diverse American political culture with contradictory currents: currents that promote equality and currents that encourage racial repression. I divide my critique into three parts: religious traditions, intellectual traditions, and racist traditions.

Religious Traditions

One of the most troubling but enduring myths of American exceptionalism is the notion of the liberating and progressive influence of Christianity. From colonial times to today, there have been many different types of Christian orientations, distinguishable in terms of religious ideology and sociopsychological orientation. Religious ideologies have been progressive, in so far as they have condemned racial oppression; reactionary, in so far as they have explicitly defended racial oppression. Religious socio-psychological orientations have been either humanistic or authoritarian. Reactionary, authoritarian Christian orientations have promoted slavery, encouraged racial segregation, and enabled violent racial repression.

Humanistic Orientation

The humanistic orientation encourages one to identify with the entire human race, to put oneself in the position of others, and to empathize with them. This orientation spawned the abolitionist movement of the 19th century and the anti-poverty, Civil Rights, peace, women's rights, and prison reform movements of the 20th century. The humanistic Christian inspired abolitionist leaders opposed both slavery and the oppression of women. For example, Garrison insisted, "Our object is universal emancipation—to redeem woman as well as man from a servile to an equal condition (quoted in Ellis 1993, 167)." Angelina Grimke' and Elizabeth Stanton were both noted for their use of the Bible to attack religious leaders who defended the enslavement of blacks and the subjugation of women. However, abolitionists were not well supported by "traditional" mainstream Christians.

Mainstream Traditional Christianity

Richard Ellis provides an illustration of the difference between the humanistic and mainstream Christian denominations. He argues that even though the Garrisonian abolitionists and the New England Whigs both opposed slavery and had a common Puritan heritage, they had radically different perceptions of the role of law and the reverence for authority:

While Garrison abolitionists employed religious conscience as a standard by which to question authority, Whigs looked to religion to uphold authority. The predominantly Whig Congregational Association of Massachusetts, for instance, defended “deference and subordination [as] essential to the happiness of society, and particularly so in the relation of a people to their pastor.” Garrisonians, by contrast, attacked protestant churches for being “the bulwarks of American slavery” and indicted the clergy for its “truckling subservience to power...clinging with mendicant sycophancy to the skirts of wealth and influence.” The churches’ corruption stemmed, in their view, from the “desire among clergy to assert their authority.” Faced with a conflict between their preferred way of life and church membership, many Garrisonians withdrew from their church, thus escaping what they perceived as their “spiritual bondage (Ellis 1993, 168).”

Many mainstream, Northern Protestant church leaders preached brotherhood, but operated to maintain the status quo. Whereas Northern Christians believed that slavery was wrong, they accepted it as the law of the land. Although they believed that slavery would eventually and gradually fade away, they enabled its persistence by opposing the abolitionists as too radical and disruptive and by supporting the laws that protected the institution of slavery.

Many Protestant denominations were divided over the issue of slavery, most notably

Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptist, Lutherans and others. Quakers, Unitarians, Congregationalists were united in their opposition to slavery, but they had no “sizable Southern constituents (Wood 1990, 289).”

Historian Forrest Wood observes, “It was Tocqueville’s opinion that while Catholicism demanded obedience and Protestantism encouraged independence, neither was especially compatible with equality (Wood 1990, 291).” Because American Christian denominations depended on contributions from their congregants, they were most reluctant to challenge the status quo for fear of alienating their supporters. Few Northern American Christians, Protestant and Catholics alike, joined the abolitionist movement.

Wood adds that Interdenominational organizations such as the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the American Home Missionary Society scrupulously avoided any actions that might offend the members of any of its constituent denominations (Wood 1990, 292). Traditional American Christian societies and publishers “condemned every sin imaginable—except slaveholding (Wood 1990, 292).”

Political conflicts over slavery did not intensify until the era of westward expansion. This conflict emerged as plantation owners and Eastern farmers fought over Western land. Contrary to American exceptionalism, Christianity did not move this nation to end slavery. The Civil War did. The South pushed the nation into the Civil War. The Southern brand of Christianity promoted with such extreme religious zeal that it made the Civil War almost inevitable. Two aspects of Southern Christianity made it a powerful force in promoting slavery up until 1865, racial segregation slavery until 1965, and racial repression up until today: its ideology and its socio-psychological orientation.

Southern White Christian Ideology

Southern white Christian ideology has been and continues to be anathema to the American creed. Contrary to proponents of American exceptionalism, most Southern Christian leaders were unambiguous and uncompromising supporters of the institution of slavery. Almost all Southern religious leaders

promoted this institution with uncommon religious fervor. For them, slavery was ordained by God Almighty Himself and opposition to slavery was blasphemy. The President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis summed up the Southern religious view toward slavery:

Slavery was established by decree of Almighty God...It is sanctioned in the Bible in both Testaments from Geneses to Revelations...It has existed in all ages and has been found among the people of the highest civilization...

Southern religious leaders used both the Old and the New Testament to defend slavery. They pointed out that every patriarch of the Old Testament had slaves and that the laws of the Old Testament recognized and regulated slavery. They used Noah's curse of Ham to demonstrate that racial slavery was preordained by God. They insisted that Jesus himself never spoke a single word against slavery and that St. Paul admonished slaves to obey their masters (Finkelman 2003, 31).

Just as Southern Christianity promoted slavery, it promoted racial segregation after the Civil War at least until the 1960s. After slavery ended and a system of racial caste and segregation was established, Southern religious leaders defended this system as well (Blumenthal 2007).

The formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) was the exception. This civil rights organization was formed by progressive black ministers of the South and led by Martin Luther King Jr. White Southern ministers had strongly opposed the SCLC, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement.

Whereas the Southern Baptist Convention has now renounced its past practice of supporting slavery and racial segregation and recently elected an African American as president of this organization, this religious group continues to support punitive criminal justice polices, capital punishment and antidrug laws with severe penalties. Despite the fact that this nation incarcerates a higher percentage of its black

population than any other country in the world, Christian fundamentalist organizations both North and South continue to support draconian and racially repressive laws.

Authoritarian/Fundamentalist Religious Orientation

The authoritarian/fundamentalist orientation is found in the North and the South, but seems more common in the South. This orientation entails both a cognitive and an emotional dimension. The cognitive dimension is based on a binary view of the world as divided between the moral and the immoral, the good and the evil, the people of God and the people of Satan.

Much has been written about this emotional dimension or the authoritarian orientation (Adorno et al 1964; Altemeyer 1996; Fromm 1964; 1967; Stenner 2005; and George Lakoff (2002) who refer to this as the strict parent orientation). According to Erich Fromm, the authoritarian orientation arises out of the perception of a frightening world that produces unbearable anxiety. This anxiety facilitates, not freedom or individualism, but the impulse to escape from freedom. It is a sadomasochistic orientation (Fromm 1964).

The masochism arises from members' submission to authority. They surrender their will, their conscience, their reason, and their personal control to the larger organization: to the church, to its leaders, and to church doctrine. This submission allays their anxiety. It gives them a feeling of security and grounding. It provides them with a needed sense of certainty and stability.

The sadism arises out of members' relationship to "the other," the non-members, the non-believers, the impure, the immoral, the outcast, the godless, the evil-doers and the disciples of Satan. Members allay their fears and anxieties, compensate for their sense of powerlessness, and acquire a sense of potency by condemning, controlling, humiliating, or destroying "the other"—the impure, immoral, godless or demonic. They become Christian soldiers, willing to go to war against evil doers. These members tend to be excessively harsh and hostile toward "the other." Their authoritarian orientation

produces feelings of moral superiority. They are driven by a passionate sense of self-righteousness. They believe they have God on their side.

Undergirded by fear and anxiety, this orientation is subject to periodic moral panics according to James Marone (1998). U.S. history is filled with examples of periods of moral panics, episodes of violent repression against some amorphous evil or threat. The Puritans and the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the settlement that Ronald Reagan and other proponents of American exceptionalism called “The City on a Hill” providing a beacon of light to the world, provides the first example. Historian Howard Zinn claims that this colony began in violence, with the massacre the Pequot Indians:

In reality, we have never been just a city on a hill. A few years after Governor Winthrop uttered his famous words, the people in the city on a hill moved out to massacre the Pequot Indians. Here’s a description by William Bradford, an early settler, of Captain John Mason’s attack on a Pequot village.

Those that escaped the fire were slain with the sword, some hewed to pieces, others run through with their rapiers, so as they were quickly dispatched and very few escaped. It was conceived that they thus destroyed about 400 at this time. It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the praise thereof to God...(Zinn 2005, 20).

Apologists for the Puritans claim that these settlers had no choice in what they did because the Pequots were savages and had “plotted to exterminate all Christians in New England (Cave 1996, 2).” However, historian Alfred Cave insists that there was absolutely no evidence of such a plot and that even

if there was, it did not justify the merciless slaughter of women and children. Cave also noted that the Puritans had racialized and demonized the Pequots, portraying them as people of the devil.

The Salem witch trials is another historical example. Reviews of court records, written eye witness accounts and other documents have revealed that most of the people sentenced to death by these trials were eccentric women whose behavior and demeanor threatened the authority of the Salem church leaders and the hierarchical social order (Starkey 1949/1989).

The mixture of religious ideology, the binary view of the world and the authoritarian orientation produced a form of Christianity that was quite contrary to the doctrine of American exceptionalism. This form of Christianity enabled the worse forms of racial violence; the near genocide of Native American populations and the sadistic institution of plantation slavery. This orientation tolerated and legitimized 100 years of lynching in the South, often incited by the imagined threat of over sexed, immoral, unrestrained savage black male rapists threatening the virtue and purity of the Southern white women.

This authoritarian Christian orientation reinforced racial segregation. Middle class, white Christians felt threatened by their perceptions of dirty, smelly, uneducated, immoral, promiscuous, drunken, criminal prone blacks invading their communities and threatening their children and families. This orientation did not end with the civil rights movement. Parts of it reappear in the contemporary urban underclass literature, which define this group as a dangerous class consisting of pimps, prostitutes, crackcocaine addicts, street predators and other frightening alien beings. (See Auletta 1983). Rather than promoting equality and the brotherhood of man and ameliorating racial prejudices, this orientation enables the worse forms of racial violence.

Intellectual Traditions

There is no question that the proponents of American exceptionalism are correct in their characterization of the ideas of Jefferson and Madison. Both Jefferson and Madison promoted the ideas of

small localized republic government close to the people. Jefferson reflected the writings of John Locke and Charles Montesquieu. He paraphrased Locke's natural rights and social contract thesis in the Declaration of Independence. He had a well-developed vision of a new Republic. In this vision, he shared Montesquieu's ideas that small and localized governments were closer to the people, more likely to express the will of the people and tended to be more democratic.

The ideas of checks and balances and the problems with factions were well expressed by Madison, particularly in Federalist Paper Number 10. This aspect of the American intellectual tradition is fair and accurate. The fallacy of American exceptionalism arises from the almost exclusive focus on Jefferson and Madison, to the neglect of alternative intellectual traditions. This point becomes clear after a brief review of the ideas of Hamilton, Adams, Paine and Calhoun.

Alexander Hamilton and John Adams

Although they were both authors of the *Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton's ideas differed from those of James Madison. Hamilton believed in shifting more power to the federal government than either Madison or Jefferson. Hamilton was far more enthusiastic about increasing federal powers than the proponents of American exceptionalism have been willing to acknowledge. In Federalist Paper Number 26 Hamilton argued "that the greater energy of government is essential to the welfare and prosperity of the community (Hamilton 1787-88/1982, 150)". In his analysis of Hamilton's contributions to the Federalist papers, Richard Ellis argues that Hamilton rejected Jefferson's argument that localized governments are best and advocated for the European model:

In *The Federalist*, he spoke of "reasons of state" and did not disguise his admiration for European style state-building. In Federalist No. 17 Hamilton likened America under the Articles of Confederation to the "feudal anarchy" of medieval Europe, and he approvingly cited England's

successful drive to subdue the “fierce and ungovernable spirit” of localism and reduced “it within those rules of subordination” that characterized “a more rational and a more energetic system of civil policy.” The Constitution would thus enable the United States to follow the European pattern of state-building (Ellis 1993, 1979, 79).

Hamilton’s pamphlet, “Report on Manufacturers” provides a broader picture of his view of the role of government in society, a view more like the modern industrial state. He advocated broader federal powers and responsibilities including subsidizing Northern manufacturers, building ports, roads and other instruments of commerce and establishing a centralized, national bank.

John Adams also favored an expansive role of the federal government in U.S. society. Like Hamilton, Adams advocated for much stronger federal powers. When he became president, his administration expanded federal powers. Two polices initiated by the Adams’ administration illustrate this point: the Act for the Relief of Sick and Disabled Seamen of 1798 and the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798.

The Act for the Relief of Sick and Disabled Seamen of 1798 (the Seaman Act for short) mandated that all sailors entering U.S. ports pay one percent of their salaries to the federal government for the creation of government operated marine hospitals for sick or injured sailors. This fee constituted to the first federal payroll tax, as the owners of vessels or the employers of the sailors were responsible for collecting the tax and delivering the money to the federal government. This bill received considerable bipartisan support. There was little debate over whether this federal health care program violated the constitution or the intentions of the Framers, as many of the authors of this bill were also authors of the constitution.

The Alien and Sedition Act expanded federal police powers enormously and in the eyes of its critics, threatened to establish a federal police state. Adams had expanded federal powers, well beyond anything ever imagined by Jefferson or Madison.

Jefferson and Madison openly opposed this law. They drafted the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions and claimed that state governments had the right to nullify unconstitutional federal laws. And of course, these conflicts over the relative power of the national government and the state governments was at the heart of the Federalist-Anti-federalist conflicts. These conflicts persists today.

Thomas Paine

Of all of the intellectual leaders of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine was the most inspirational, and the most misrepresented. In his book, *Glenn Beck's Common Sense: The Case Against An Out-of Control Government, Inspired by Thomas Paine*, Glenn Beck portrays himself a disciple of Paine and presented Paine as an advocate of limited government, individualism and other conservative ideas. Nevertheless, Paine's ideas are anathema to modern conservatism and antithetical to American exceptionalism. Paine was an advocate of an expansive, European style welfare state. His writing supported the ideas of the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. He specifically advocated taxing the rich and redistributing resources to eliminate poverty. He was uncompromising and unwavering in this opposition to slavery. He defended the rights of Native Americans to their land. He had more of a vision of a just and diverse American society than any other leader of the American Revolution.

In his pamphlet, *Agrarian Justice*, Paine insisted that in the state of nature, prior to the formation of government, there was no poverty, no human misery and no extreme inequality. He argued that the purpose of government is to make sure that the quality of the lives of its citizens is better than, not worse than, it was in the state of nature:

In *The Rights of Man Part II*, Paine expanded on his critique of inequality and his advocacy of democracy. Like modern liberals, Paine rejected the notion of a choice between equality and inequality. Instead he distinguished between natural inequality, brought out by differences among people in terms of

levels of work, education, skills etc. and unnatural inequality, created by the idle rich who profit exclusively from the labor of others. He believed that exploitative aristocracies produce poverty. He also believed that extreme wealth was a product of modern society and governments, and that the wealthy had obligations to pay back to society and contribute to government. Paine not only opposed aristocracies and titles of nobility, he also opposed hereditary wealth.

Paine had strong differences with Madison over ideas of democracy. Madison was an elitist, whose fear of the tyranny of the majority over the propertied or wealthy minority was a fear that democracy would transfer political power from the enlightened property-owning elite to uneducated property-less masses who would use political power to take property from the rich and distribute it to the masses. Paine believed that democracy was the best antidote to extreme inequality. He opposed the extent to which Madison would limit government powers to protect the interest of the property-owning elite and rejected Madison's effort to limit democracy and the power of the majority, in order to protect the interests of the elite.

Paine was also noted for his blistering critique of fundamentalist religions. In the *Age of Reason* he made it clear that he abhorred religions that oppressed humanity but favored religions that opposed oppression.

John Calhoun: The Reactionary and Racist Tradition

John Calhoun was a prominent, passionate, and erudite advocate for the dominant plantation owning class of the South during the so-called Age of Jacksonian Democracy. He was both a political leader and scholar. Phil Abbot referred to Calhoun as a reactionary enlightened scholar (Abott 2010). Richard Hofstadter (1948) called him the Karl Marx of the rich, dominant class.

In his early political career, especially as Federalist John Quincy Adams's Vice President, he advocated strengthening the role of the federal government to support economic development in both the

North and the South, particularly through the building of canals, ports and roads and by subsidizing the nascent railroad industry. In his later years, Calhoun became a strong advocate for states' rights and limited federal powers. Whereas most historians suggest that his ideas shifted, Calhoun's double standard on federal powers was quite consistent with Ira Katznelson's recent study of Southern political ideology and the New Deal (Katznelson 2012). Katznelson demonstrated that Southern political leaders during the 1930s supported a larger role of the federal government so long as that role never tampered with the Southern racial hierarchy.

Calhoun drew from the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson and Madison to develop a constitutional philosophy designed to protect Southern interests. Like Madison, he advocated a system of checks and balances and states' rights. He expanded on Jefferson and Madison's Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions which provided the ideological foundation for nullification and interposition. That is, he argued that the state governments created the federal government and the U.S. Constitution. When the federal government passed laws that violate the constitution, state governments have a legal right to nullify those laws and to position the state government between the people of the state and the federal government.

Calhoun served as a strong defender of slavery. He argued that slavery was good for the national economy, good for civilization, good for African Americans, and good for human relations. He insisted that the life of the Southern slave was better than the life of the Northern worker (Hofstadter 1948, 90). He argued that all prosperous and civilized societies were built on some form of slavery:

It would be well for those interested to reflect whether there now exists, or ever has existed, a wealthy and civilized community in which one portion did not live on the labor of another; and whether the form in which slavery exist in the South is not but one modification of this universal condition (Hofstadter 1948, 90).

Whereas Calhoun believed that class struggle was inevitable, he insisted that the Southern system of racial slavery insulated it from this form of conflict:

There is and always has been in an advanced stage of wealth and civilization, a conflict between labor and capital. The condition of society in the South exempts us from the disorders and dangers resulting from this conflict; and which explains why it is that the political condition of the slave-holding states has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North... The experience of the next generation will fully test how vastly more favorable our condition of society is to that of other sections for free and stable institutions, provided we are not disturbed by the interference of others (Quoted in Hofstadter 1948, 82-83).

In other words, relegating blacks to the lowest, most exploited class in society is the best way to prevent European style class conflict from emerging.

Calhoun had a different view of liberty than Jefferson, Paine and Locke. Whereas these social thinkers believed liberty was a natural right, Calhoun believed that liberty was a privilege reserved only for the more deserving, virtuous and intelligent and that extending liberty to all people was dangerous to undeserving people and destructive to the entire society. In his book, *Discourses* he rejected the view that all people were equal and entitled to liberty as a right:

Liberty, then, when forced on a people unfit for it, would, instead of a blessing, be a curse, as it would in its reaction lead directly to anarchy—the greatest of all curses. No people, indeed, can long enjoy more liberty than that to which their situation and advanced intelligence and morals fairly entitle them...

It follows, from what has been stated, that it is a great and dangerous error to suppose that

all people are equally entitled to liberty. It is a reward to be earned, not a blessing to be gratuitously lavished on all alike—a reward reserved for the intelligent, the patriotic, the virtuous, and the deserving—and not a boon to be bestowed on a people too ignorant, degraded, and vicious, to be capable either of appreciating or enjoying it (Calhoun 1853/1953, 42).

Calhoun's view of liberty was consistent with his defense of slavery and his advocacy for the dominant class. He insisted that freeing the slaves would only destroy them and the whole Southern society.

Calhoun's promotion of individualism, states' rights and limited government was marred by his racism. He also promoted the idea of the inherent inferiority of blacks. Given the permanent system of hereditary slavery, his promotion of the ideas of states' rights and limited federal powers guaranteed the maintenance of the Southern system plantation slavery and white supremacy.

Not only did he have a different understanding of liberty than other Enlightenment philosophers, Calhoun also had a different view of tyranny. For Locke, tyranny arose when a ruler used governmental powers for his own self-interest and against the interests of and to the harm of the people (Locke 2002). Tyranny did not arise when the ruler used his powers for the benefit of the people. Calhoun rejected Locke's definition tyranny. Drawing from Madison, Calhoun argued that the tyranny of the majority arose when the majority controlled government and used it to expropriate wealth from the rich and redistribute it to the masses.

His concept of tyranny both legitimized and disguised a profound contradiction in the historical and current use of the principle of states' rights and limited federal powers. Tyranny arose whenever the federal government threatened to use its powers to protect the rights of oppressed subordinate racial groups. The protection of these rights violated the property rights of the dominant class and states' rights of the South. Tyranny did not arise when the federal government used its powers to protect the property rights and prerogatives of the dominant slave owning class in the South. The use of federal powers to protect of the rights of the dominant class superseded states' rights. Several examples illustrate these

points.

First, during the era of slavery, John Calhoun and other Southern leaders responded to Northern abolitionists with cries of states' rights and limited government. However, they demanded the expansion of federal powers to protect the institution of slavery.

The fugitive slave issue profoundly contradicted the principle of states' rights and limited federal powers. Federal powers expanded to enforce fugitive slave policy. Historian David Ericson makes this observation:

The fugitive-slave policy area is the clearest case of a slavery-related institutional development. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 mandated the establishment of an autonomous federal law-enforcement apparatus separate from and, in many ways, antagonistic to the Northern state apparatuses (Ericson 2011, 170).

The fugitive slave clause of Article IV of the constitution superseded states' rights. In other words, this clause required Northern states to return run-away slaves to their owners, even if doing so violates the religious beliefs of state officials. The fugitive slave Act of 1850 gave

Federal Marshalls extraordinary police powers to go into Northern states in order to capture and return fugitive slaves to their owners. This enormous expansion of federal police powers was promoted in the name of protecting private property. They superseded states' rights.

Federal powers also expanded in other areas related to the institution of slavery. Ericson notes that Southern slave holders lobbied Congress to get the federal government to expand its program of expelling Native Americans:

Slaveholders demanded removal not only because they wanted native American lands but also because they wanted to better secure their slaveholdings against slave runaways to native American lands as well as against native American slave raids on their plantations. In their

analysis of the congressional vote on the Indian removal Act of 1830, Leonard Carlson and Mark Roberts found, even after controlling for party and section, that the larger percentage of slaveholders in a congressional district, the more likely the members of Congress from that district was to vote for the act (Ericson 2011, 8).

The 20th Century and the Contradictions of States' Rights and Federal Powers

The South only ascribed to the principles of states' rights when the Southern system of racial oppression was threatened. Ira Katznelson demonstrates that long before the New Deal, Southern political leaders advocated the expansion of federal powers to assist in the economic development of the South, providing that these powers did not interfere with the Southern system of white supremacy. He notes that Southern leaders played a central role in the passage of legislation that comprised Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom. This legislation included "tariffs, economic monopolies, currency, banking, farm relief, railroad regulation" and much more (Katznelson 2013, 146).

Southern support for the expansion of federal powers continued with the New Deal. From 1933 to 1936, limited government and laissez faire capitalism went out the window as Southern Democrats overwhelmingly supported the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, The Banking Act of 1933, the National Industrial Relations Act of 1933, the Reciprocal Trade Act of 1934, the Securities and Exchange Act of 1934, the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1935, the Public Utilities Holding Company Act of 1935, and the Social Security Act of 1935. Southern Democrats made sure that the social security and minimum wage bill excluded farm and domestic workers, thus barring most blacks from these programs. The moment Northern Democrats introduced any piece of legislation that threatened to alter the racial caste system, fierce opposition emerged in the name of the doctrines of states' rights, laissez faire capitalism and limited federal government. Three bills illustrate this point: the federal anti-lynching, the Fair Employment Practice and the voting rights bills.

In response to a surge in both the number of lynching and the horrendous nature of Southern lynching cases, particularly the murder of Claude Neal who before a cheering crowd of 4,000 people, had been stabbed, castrated, mutilated, burned alive and then lynched, Senators Wagner and Costigan introduced a bill that made it a federal crime for state officials to collude in a lynching. Arguments arose that the anti-lynching law violated the constitution, that the federal government lacked the constitutional authority to enact such a law, and that the law violated the rights of the Southern States.

Southern opposition to federal powers erupted again over discussion of voting rights. Katznelson noted intense opposition from even one of the most liberal southerner in the House. He quoted Claude Pepper, a liberal Representative from Florida saying: "...whatever may be written into the Constitution, whatever may be placed upon the statute books of this Nation, however many soldiers may be stationed about the ballot boxes of the Southland, the colored race will not vote, because in so doing...they endangered the supremacy of a race to which God has committed the destiny of a continent, perhaps the world (Katznelson 2013, 144)."

Southern Democrats' opposition to the anti-employment discrimination bill in 1946 was just as strong. They characterized the bill as a threat to free enterprise and property rights. Georgia Senator Richard Russell claimed that the bill was not only an assault on Southern states' rights, but would lead to the nationalization of all employment in industry, business, and all other lines of work," taking "away from the employer the fundamental right to say whom he shall hire, whom he shall promote, whom he shall discharge (Katznelson 2013, 189)." Southern Democrats referred to this bill as something coming out of Nazi Germany or communist Soviet Union. (Katznelson 2013, 189). The cry of constitutional violations, excessive federal powers, the trampling of states' rights and the specter of totalitarianism emerged again in the 1950s after the *Brown v Board of Education* decision. The point is that hysterical opposition to federal powers has historically emerged wherever these powers threatened the prerogatives or rights of the dominant class or promoted the welfare of oppressed racial minorities.

Racist Traditions

Whereas religious and intellectual traditions enabled racial oppression, a separate racist intellectual tradition emerged and independently, directly and strongly promoted racial oppression. Much has been written about the old style but now extinct intellectual tradition of scientific and biological racism, especially eugenics, genetic based intelligence, craniology, poly-genetics and others (see Gossett 1971). Several other intellectual traditions of racism have eluded scholars: Herrenvolk, plutocratic, constitutional, cross-over, and cultural racism.

Herrenvolk Racism

Herrenvolk racism is a system in which democracy and equality is given to the dominant racial group, but denied to the subordinate racial group; in which a large part of the wealth of the dominant racial groups is generated from the exploitation, enslavement or conquest of the subordinate racial group; and in which the dominant ideology legitimizes this system by portraying this arrangement as normal and legitimate, by depicting the dominant group as superior to and endowed with a high level of civilization, intelligence and morality than the subordinate group. The Herrenvolk racism is a system of white supremacy. In this system, wealth, democracy, rights and privileges for whites expand at the expense of non-whites.

Whereas the Jacksonian era is often portrayed as a period of expanding democracy and equality, it was the quid essential era of Herrenvolk racism. This was a paradoxical period of expanding rights for white males and diminishing rights for black males. In 1790, only 23 percent (3 of the 13) of the states excluded blacks from the franchise; by 1840, the peak of the Jacksonian era, 77 percent (20 out of 26) of the states “had removed nonwhites from the rolls, either by directly specifying that African Americans could not vote or by indirectly disenfranchising them through the implementation of onerous property

requirements applicable only to Africans (Uggen 2008, 53). This paradox is inexplicable in the context of American exceptionalism. It is perfectly understandable in the context of Herrenvolk racism. That is, whites of all classes, not just the propertied slave owning elite, benefited from the oppression and subjugation of people of color. The system of plantation slavery generated wealth from which all classes of whites benefited.

Indeed, as demonstrated earlier, John Calhoun gave full expression to Herrenvolk racism.

Uggen insists that the right to vote expanded to property-less white males because the dominant class of plantation owners needed them to expand state militias and create a professional federal army in order to suppress slave revolts, to maintain control over the slave system, to expropriate territory from Native Americans, to force them to march to reservations east of the Mississippi, to suppress the Seminole in Florida and to conquer territory in Mexico. Political leaders like Calhoun promoted the notions of the supremacy of whites and the inferiority of people of color.

Plutocratic Racism

Whereas Herrenvolk racism is often promoted by the dominant class of whites to enlist the support of lower class whites and reward them with extra-privileges, enhanced esteem and greater material benefits in a system of racial oppression, plutocratic racism is often promoted by the dominant class of whites in order to pit lower-class blacks against lower-class whites in order to super-exploit both. Under plutocratic racism general the quality of the lives of poor whites and poor blacks diminish, the rich become richer, and inequality increases dramatically.

Plutocratic racism arose when the dominant planter class in the South emerged to redeem the South from the Republican Reconstruction programs. This class targeted both blacks and poor whites for disenfranchisement. Illustrating this point in his book, *Race, Class and Civil Rights*, Jack Bloom presents

data indicating that between 1896 and 1900 voting participation in Louisiana declined by 90 percent among blacks and by 60 percent among whites (Bloom 1989).

Keysar noted that in the early 20th century, a number of states passed a range of laws that restricted the right to vote among poor whites and poor blacks in both Northern and Southern states. For example, in 1908, Michigan passed laws that restricted the right to vote to property owning tax payers in referendum elections involving state expenditures. In the 1915 *Myers v Anderson* (238 U.S. 368, 1915), the Supreme Court stated that the constitution does not prohibit denying the right to vote on the basis of not owning property or paying taxes or any other financial criterion. A number of other states passed laws allowing the denial of the right to vote in special elections to citizens who did not pay property taxes or who received poor relief or welfare (Keysar 2000, 131-141).

Social Darwinism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century and complemented plutocratic racism. Social Darwinism was enthusiastically promoted by the dominant corporate class (Gossett 1971). Its founder, Herbert Spencer, had worked out much of his theory before Charles Darwin published his major work, *The Origin of the Species*. Spencer, not Darwin, coined the expression, “The survival of the fittest.” Spencer argued that humanity and human societies would evolve naturally and slowly over time and that government interference or intrusion into the process would never improve circumstances, but would only make matters worse. Spencer says:

No adequate change of character can be produced in a year, or in a generation, or in a century. All which teaching can do—all which may, perhaps, be done by a wider diffusion of principles of sociology, is the checking of retrograde action. The analogy supplied by an individual life yields the true conception. You cannot in any considerable degree change the course of individual growth and organization—in any considerable degree antedate the states of development (quoted in Gossett 1971, 147).

Spencer opposed government involvement in this process of evolution or any government efforts to improve the human condition or to ameliorate the hardships of poverty or the suffering of the poor. He believed that government assistance to people in need would cause more harm than good. He opposed poor relief, free public education, minimum wage, and maximum working-hours legislation. Thomas Gossett adds,

He [Spencer] was opposed to sanitation laws, to efforts to license doctors and nurses, and to compulsory vaccination. People who were stupid enough not to avail themselves of proper medical care ought to be allowed to reap the consequences of their folly. In the ideal society there would be no social legislation, no regulation of industry, no poor relief, nothing which would interfere with the laws of natural selection (Gossett 1971, 148).

By the early twentieth century Social Darwinism had three distinct components: laissez faire capitalism, evolutionary theory of human development, and racialistic thinking. The laissez faire component resonated with American business leaders, as it was consistent with their political position. The evolutionary theory component justified cut-throat competition and the drive to eliminate competitors. The racialistic thinking gets omitted from most reviews of Social Darwinism. Nevertheless, Spencer explained the rise of European colonial powers, not in terms of the development of gunships, but in terms of superior races that had larger brains, higher intelligence and higher morality.

The chief disciple of Herbert Spencer in the United States was William Graham Sumner, a Harvard University professor of political science. Sumner played a major role in promoting Social Darwinism within the social sciences. Gossett points out that while Sumner was not as blatant a racist as Spencer and spent most of his energies promoting laissez faire capitalism, he too promoted racist conceptions of inferior and superior races:

The battles against economic reformers took most of Sumner's energy, and race theory plays a comparatively small direct part in his sociology. He certainly was not a race egalitarian. He opposed Negro suffrage. He said that if you had asked Thomas Jefferson whether the statement "All men are created equal" was meant to include Negroes, Jefferson would have replied that "he was not talking about negroes (Gossett 1971)."

Whereas the ideologies of Social Darwinism and laissez faire capitalism of the early 20th century were not explicitly racist, the gross insensitivity of these ideologies to the suffering of people of color was undergirded by notions that these people were inferior, primitive, immoral and underserving. To a large extent the doctrine of American exceptionalism conflates the old Social Darwinism and laissez faire capitalism with neoliberalism and neoconservatism and mask the extent to which these ideologies are tainted by a racist culture that continues to characterize people of color as underserving. To the extent to which proponents of this doctrine conflate Social Darwinism and laissez faire capitalism with neoliberalism and neoconservatism and ascribes these ideologies to the founders of this nation, this doctrine functions as a national ideology that masks the racism.

The writings of Charles Murray illustrates this point. He promotes the doctrine of American exceptionalism in his most recent book (Murray 2013). In *Losing Ground* he argues that it is wrong to take money from hardworking Americans and to give it to lazing, irresponsible people or girls who have babies just to get on welfare. In *The Bell Curve* he cited the eugenics literature to legitimize the old racist view that compared to white males, black males had small brains and large penises (Murray and Herrnstein 1994). Whereas there is nothing racist about his book, *American Exceptionalism*, his use of this doctrine operates as a national ideology that masks his racism.

Legal/Constitutional Racism

Legal/constitutional racism involves the use of racist assumptions in constitutional interpretations that legitimizes racial oppression. This form of racism was quite evident in the *Dred Scott v Sanford* (1857) decision. Most accounts of this decision focus on Dred Scott as a slave and as personal property and suggest that regardless of our sentiments or personal feeling, the constitution protects the property rights of slave owners. Omitted from this account is Chief Justice Taney's proclamation that free African Americans are not citizens, were not part of "the people" who were considered equal in the Declaration of Independence, and not part of "We the People" in the Preamble of the Constitution. Taney stated that whites considered blacks to be of an inferior race and not entitled to any constitutional protections. This racialized legal intellectual tradition was no minor issue. It played a major role in defining the American creed in ways that excluded African Americans and enabled and legitimized racial oppression. See Higginbotham (1998) for other examples of legal/constitutional racism.

Crossover and Racism

The doctrine of American exceptionalism ignores the extent to which racist thinking contaminated the thinking of some leaders of the American Revolution. Whereas most of these intellectual leaders did not engage in racialized thinking, Thomas Jefferson stands out. In his early years Jefferson advocated human equality. However, in his later years, especially in his *Notes on Virginia*, he engaged in polygenetic thinking. Despite his personal acquaintance with the African American scientist, almanac author, and surveyor, Benjamin Banneker, Jefferson concluded that blacks were inferior to whites, physically and intellectually. He argued that even though the conditions of Greek and Roman slaves were more deplorable than the conditions of African American slaves, Greek and Roman slaves became artists, educators, and authors. Thus, Jefferson argued that the Greek and Roman slaves must have been superior to black slaves. Jefferson concluded, "I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and of mind (Jefferson 1903, II, 199-201 quoted in Gossett

1971, 41).”

Tocqueville and Cultural Racism

No analysis of the problems of American exceptionalism and racism would be complete without a discussion of Alexis de Tocqueville. He has contributed much to our understanding of American democracy. Most promoters of American exceptionalism cite him. In his magnum opus, *Democracy in America*, he demonstrated the importance of education, mores, “the habits of the heart,” the spirit of religion, and the commitment to equality and liberty to the cultural foundation of a democratic society. Indeed, as noted above, most proponents of American exceptionalism recognize his influence in shaping their understanding of the formation and persistence of American democracy.

To his credit, Tocqueville had been a passionate opponent of Herrenvolk and biologically based racism and a relentless critic of the institution of slavery. He argued that slavery hurt both the slave and the master, that it retarded the economic development of the South and that it obstructed the emergence of higher culture. He concluded that slavery cannot survive in democratic America.

Although he rejected all aspects of biological racism Tocqueville made predictions about the future of African Americans and Native Americans that revealed a form of cultural racism. Although he was offended by biological determinism, he engaged in cultural determinism and essentialism. The conditions, life style and behavior of Native Americans and African Americans make them fundamentally, essentially and inconvertibly different and incompatible with European Americans. He predicted that America will emerge as a white democratic nation and that Native Americans will not survive and that African Americans cannot coexist with European Americans:

The Negro is placed at the extreme limits of servitude; the Indian, at the extreme limits of liberty. The effect of slavery on the first is hardly less catastrophic than the effect of independence on the second (Tocqueville 2000, 149).

What is racist about this perspective is that Tocqueville maintained that as a result of their past history and current circumstances, they are unable to engage in self-rule, ill-suited for modern society and democratic governance, and ill-prepared to co-exist with civilized and morally superior whites. His view of Native Americans echoes Rousseau's description of the noble savage. Tocqueville says this of Native Americans, "Abandoned to the usual vicissitudes of savage life, they exhibited the vices and the virtues of uncivilized peoples (Tocqueville 2000, 149)." His view of African Americans, enslaved or free, is that of dehumanized victims stripped of their history and culture. Adam Dahl offers this critique of Tocqueville's cultural racism:

Tocqueville tragically condemned the slave and freed person to perpetual tyranny and domination, allowing them no place in the American future due to their cultural incapacity for democracy. His laments over the total domination of slaves led him to pontificate, "Oppression has with one blow taken from the descendants of the Africans almost all the privileges of humanity!" he thus criticized slavery for stripping the slave of agency and mastery necessary for the exercise of modern freedom. But presenting slavery as a system of total dehumanization, Tocqueville affirmed the very thing he sought to evade: the rendering of the slave as absolutely dominated, and thus absolutely incapable of freedom (Dahl 2012, 22)

Whereas Tocqueville advanced our understanding of democracy in America and condemned slavery and most forms of racism, his analysis of democracy was limited by its comparison with European aristocracy. His discussion of race was marred by his introduction of cultural racism.

Today, social scientists have completely discredited biologically deterministic racism, but have continued to promote culturally deterministic forms of racism. The emergence of the urban underclass literature in the last decade of the 20th century falls into this category as it defines members of this class as violent street criminals, drug addicts, drug dealers, intergenerational welfare dependents, pimps, prostitutes.

Racialized thinking has never been a marginal phenomenon in American political culture, as proponents of the American exceptionalism doctrine imply. It has existed throughout U.S. history. It has mixed with and augmented other forms of thinking in ways that legitimized in powerful ways extreme racial oppression and repression.

American Exceptionalism Versus Persisting Racism

Several points emerge from this critique of the doctrine of American exceptionalism. The doctrine of American exceptionalism, that Americans are committed to individual rights and limited government cannot explain the exponential increase in the prison population, the growing number of cases of excessive use of police powers, nor the strong opposition to any notion of a human right to health care. The notion of a national commitment to individual rights and limited government cannot explain the proliferation of laws mandating the drug testing of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) recipients.

A substantial body of recent research suggest that the doctrine of American exceptionalism mask persisting racism. This research demonstrates that the new cultural forms of racism are filled with powerful and controlling images of black welfare queens, black teenaged girls deliberately having babies to get on welfare, and families trapped in long-term and intergenerational welfare (Gilens 1999; Hancock 2004; Hill-Collins (1990); Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Schram, Soss, and Fording 2003; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). In his book *Why American Hate Welfare*, based on media content analysis and public

opinion data, Martin Gilens demonstrates that the media promoted negative stereotypes of blacks on welfare, which incited opposition to the AFDC/TANF program. In his analysis of public opinion data he controlled for much of the American exceptionalism explanation and found that only a small part of opposition can be explained by conservative ideology and belief in limited government. Much of American's opposition to welfare can be explained by the persistence of stereotypes of welfare recipients (Gilens 1999). Studies of the criminal justice system also demonstrate that the astronomical incarceration rates is a function of a war on drugs conducted as a war on black communities; racially targeted police enforcement; subtle racial biases at every stage in the criminal justice process from arrest to conviction; and the passage of the most draconian criminal justice laws in U.S. history (Alexander 2011; Donziger 1996; Mauer 1999; ACLU 2013; The Sentencing Project 2013).

Contrary to the myth of American exceptionalism, racism was never just an incidental or marginal phenomena in American political culture. Racism is now and has always been deeply embedded in American culture. Racism has functioned to desensitize the entire U.S. society to the extreme exploitation and severe oppression of the slaves. Racism disguised and circumvented class struggle in the United States and desensitized Americans to the super-exploitation of the most oppressed workers. Racism allowed for a level of violence and exploitation not tolerated in non-racist societies.

While humanistic Christianity may have played a role in promoting equality and human rights, mainstream traditional Christianity with a few exceptions, did more to maintain the status quo than to promote progressive change. Southern Christian fundamentalism did much to promote racial repression.

American exceptionalism presents a narrow, unidimensional view of American political culture which to a large extent glamorizes American history. It focuses on and exaggerates the positive features of American culture in ways more becoming of a nationalistic ideology or a form of national chauvinism, than a legitimate scholarly perspectives.

References

Abbott, Philip. *Political Thought in America: Conversations and Debates*. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 2010.

-----, "Redeeming American Exceptionalism/Redeeming American Political Science: An Analysis of Judith N. Shklar's Presidential Address." *The Social Science Journal*, vol. 32, no. 31, 1995.

Adorno, Theodore; Betty Avon, Maria Hertz-Levison, and William Morrow. *The Authoritarian Personality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow* (New York: New Press, 2011).

Altemeyer, Bob. *The Authoritarian Specter*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.

American Civil Liberties Union, "New ACLU Report Finds Overwhelming Racial Bias in Marijuana Arrests," ACLU Press Release, media@aclu.org (June 4, 2013).

Auletta, Ken. *The Underclass*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.

Beck, Glenn. *Glenn Beck's Common Sense: The Case Against an Out-of Control Government, Inspired by Thomas Paine*. New York: Mercury Radio Arts/Threshold Editions a division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2009.

Blumenthal, Max. "Agent of Intolerance," *The Nation*, May 28, 2007.

Calhoun, John C. *A Disquisition on Government: and Selections from the Discourse*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1853/1953.

Dahl, Adam. "Tocqueville's Cultural Racism." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, Portland, Oregon, March 22, 2012.

Donziger, Steven (ed.). *The Real War on Crime: The Report of the National Criminal Justice Commission*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

Dunn, Charles editor. *American Exceptionalism: The Origins, History and Future of the nation's Greatest Strength*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield publishers, 2013.

Elazar, Daniel. *American Federalism: A View from the States*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

Ellis, Richard. *American Political Cultures*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Finkelman, Paul. *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the old South, A Brief History with Documents*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.

Fromm, Erich. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

----- . *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. New York: Bantham Books, 1967.

Gilens, Martin, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Anti-poverty Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Gingrich, Newt. *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Co., 2011.

Gossett, Thomas. *Race: The History of an Idea in America*. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

Hamilton, Alexander. "Report on Manufacturing." Westport, Connecticut, 1791/1994.

Hecl, Hugh, "Varieties of American Exceptionalism," in Charles Dunn editor. *American Exceptionalism: The Origins, History, and Future of the Nation's Greatest Strength*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013.

Herrnstein, Richard and Charles Murray. *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.

Higginbotham, Leon. *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hodgson, Godfrey. *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Hofstadter, Richard. *American Political Tradition*. New York: Vintage Books, 1948.

Keyssar, Alexander. *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* New York: Basic Books, 2009.

Lakoff, George. *Moral Politics: How Liberal and Conservatives Think*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Lichtenstein, Alexander and Michael Kroll. 1996. "The Fortress Economy: The Economic Role of the U.S. Prison System," in *Criminal Injustice: Confronting the Prison Crisis*, edited by Elihu Rosenblatt, (Boston: South End Press, 1996), p. 22.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996).

Lopez, Ian Haney. *White By Law*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.

Mauer, Marc, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), p. 147.

Morone, James, "The Corrosive Politics of Virtue." *American Prospect*.

<http://prospect.org/article/corrosive-politics-virtue> 2005

Murray, Charles. *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2013.

Murray, Charles. *Losing Ground: American Social Polity 1950-1980*. New York: New York University Press, 2003/1984.

Myrdal, Gunnar. *An American Dilemma*. New York: Harper, 1944.

Neubeck, Kenneth, and Noel Cazenave. *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Palin, Sarah. *American by Heart*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.

Peter Schuck and James Q. Wilson editors. *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation*. New York: Public Affairs, 2008.

Rana, Aziz. *The Two Faces of American Freedom*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1991.

Romney, Mitt. *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010.

Saxton, Alexander. *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Verso, 1990.

Schram, Sanford, Joe Soss, and Richard Fording (eds.). *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*. Ann Arbor University of Michigan Press, 2003.

Shklar, Judith N. "Redeeming American Political Theory." *American Political Science Review* v. 85, no. 1, 1991, 3-15.

The Sentencing Project Website(<http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cjm?id=123>).

Soss, Joe, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Starkey, Marion. *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1949/1989).

Stenner, Karen. *The Authoritarian Dynamic*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. Translated and Annotated by Stephen Grant. *Democracy in America*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Co., 2000.

Wilson, James Q. "American Exceptionalism" *The American Spectator* <http://spectator.org/print/46395> October 2, 2006.

Wood, Forrest. *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper, 2010.

Zinn, Howard. "The Power and the Glory: Myths of American Exceptionalism," *Boston Review*, vol 30, Issue 3-4, 2005.

Cases

Dred Scott v Sanford 60 U.S. 393 (1857).

Myers v Anderson 238 U.S. 368 (1915)