HAS EXCEPTIONALISM INHIBITED THE UNITED STATES FROM REMAINING INNOVATIVE?

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EXCEPTIONALISM?

Who coined *exceptionalism*?

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that “The position of America is quite exceptional” (vol. 2, ch. 9, pp. 517-18).

(How so? “The situation of the Americans is entirely exceptional, and there is reason to believe that no other democratic people will ever enjoy anything like it. Their wholly Puritan origin; their markedly commercial habits; the very country they inhabit, which seems to discourage study of science, literature, and the arts.)

Another origin-of-the-term theory:

“In 1929, communist leader Jay Lovestone informed Stalin in Moscow that the American proletariat wasn’t interested in revolution. Stalin responded by demanding that he end this ‘heresy of American exceptionalism’” (McCoy). (Based on his criticism of the American communist party.)

Whatever its origins, it has stuck, with its many connotations and “its whole gnarly matter” (Michael Kammen).
EXCEPTIONALISM

• In short, “the notion that the United States has had a unique destiny and history, or ... a history with highly distinctive features or an unusual trajectory...” (Kammen, 6). Exceptionalism has played a part in our self-identity.

• The past as a burden to shed (Emerson and others).

*But doesn’t every country have its own identity?*

Every country is different, but the U.S., by virtue of its standing in the world, invites comparisons—and observation.
EXCEPTIONALISM

• Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828): cultural independence must be reflected in our language. (“In 1806 Webster published *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, the first truly American dictionary” (Merriam-Webster at: https://www.merriam-webster.com/about-us/americas-first-dictionary.)
  • Descriptive not prescriptive; parallels to Johnson’s *Dictionary*.

• Given our presence on the international stage, American exceptionalism stands out. In the opinion of historians, *the expression is intended to have ideological force.*

• We sometimes seek to impose an American brand of democracy on the world.

• This is complicated by our alternating realist and cosmopolitan approaches to global politics.
“How did a phrase intended as derision become a rallying cry of American awesomeness? As significant portions of the electorate -- think southern democrats -- shifted toward the GOP in the 1960s and 1970s, conservative thinkers charted a new republican identity emboldened by triumphalism and uncompromising patriotism. Doubting exceptionalism became "Un-American."
Looking to history for more evidence, conservative intellectuals stumbled across [de] Tocqueville, who in *Democracy in America* had described a nation as "exceptional" for its devotion to practicality over art or science. He lent enough oomph to credibly define America as categorically transcendent, [Daniel] Rodgers said.” (Terrence McCoy)
“I AM LARGE, I CONTAIN MULTITUDES”

• Kamman, who in the 1990s made a thorough study of the scholarship on exceptionalism, concluded that “... we have not had a singular mode or pattern of exceptionalism” (p. 3).

• Walt Whitman: “I am large, I contain multitudes” (Song of Myself, 1855-1892; many textual changes.) Quintessentially American. The powerful poetic self (“I”)—parallels a sense Americanism. How Americans like to see themselves.

• Can we conclude that the United States is different from all other cultures? [That is the topic for another talk!]

• But American “might, superiority, exceptionalism” does form a backdrop to our role as informational professions on the international stage.
REALISM VS COSMOPOLITANISM

• It is not just American Exceptionalism which flavors its relationship to other countries, but its ongoing foreign policy shifts between realism and cosmopolitanism.

• **Realism** focuses on “power politics.” In international relations, it can be a conflictual view. A lack of diplomacy, often with a strong military component. (Force is the ultimate test of power.) Individual sovereignty; to win.

• **Cosmopolitanism** sees the single-minded focus on power as insufficient in a complex world. Diplomacy is a key component. Emphasis on social bonds.

*The constant shift in America’s positions impacts all of us in our global relationships.*
“ITS WOOD COULD ONLY BE AMERICAN” (MELVILLE)

• THE UNITED STATES IS DIFFERENT AND DISTINCTIVE, BUT NOT EXCEPTIONAL (Kammen, Dawley) BUT: WE ARE GOING TO NEED A BIGGER BOAT!

• AND IF EXCEPTIONALISM IS EMBEDDED IN OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE REST OF THE WORLD…
What we *can* do is consider ways in which our cultural heritage institutions are different in the U.S. than elsewhere. (Many critics of American culture and its mediocracy; e.g. from Fanny Trollope, on.)

**Archives** (in Europe, national archives replaced royal archives; in U.S. government agencies maintained their own records until 1934 when the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) was created, under FDR. The public records tradition in the U.S. with historical records/manuscripts in historical societies.)

- De Tocqueville commented on this decentralized approach, and its poor record keeping practices.
• **Public Libraries:** although some libraries were open to parts of the public as far back as ancient Rome, the public library—free to all, funded by public sources, and governed by a board who serve the public interest—is an American idea. Public libraries are often seen as beacons of democracy. Also, parallels to Free Speech. The public library as a protected public space.

  No national library. While the Library of Congress serves a lot of the functions of a public library (national library service for the blind and physically handicapped; access to parts of its collections; standards; copyright) it serves the legislative branch of government—Congress--though the Librarian of Congress is appointed by the President.

• **Museums:** diverse funding sources: public, private, corporate, federal. *No national museum.* The Smithsonian the closest. (It was founded with money bequeathed to the U.S. by an Englishman, James Smithson, in 1829; museum founded in 1846.)
WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

1. Complacency can stunt growth.
2. International collaboration will be thwarted by a mis-appropriation of the concept of exceptionalism and our current realist approach to the world.
3. In the U.S., the concept of “the public good” seems to be eroding. One example: net neutrality. (The FCC ignored the effects on libraries and higher education in its decision to eliminate the 2015 internet rules.)
4. The U.S. could ultimately become inhibited in its intellectual growth if it persists in restricting immigration, which has been a primary engine for creativity and collaboration.
5. Colleagues of mine who have worked in the U.S. and abroad have observed that our current mode of research funding in the U.S. does not promote collaboration and sustainability as it does in the EU.
WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

• “In the EU, successful funding bids must demonstrate that proposed research builds on previous work and involves partners from several EU countries,” and

• "Some of the advantages of the EU system of funding is that big projects across national borders are possible and encouraged. One component of the EU funding that can make it difficult is that teams need to engage the private sector which can be a challenge if you’re in the social sciences and humanities."

6. Our federal granting agencies are sometimes negatively impacted during periods of political realism, and international grants may be disallowed.
OTHER DIFFERENCES

1. More diverse types of partnerships may occur in other places. For example, we tend to organize library associations by type or size: public libraries, academic libraries, special libraries; ARL libraries, ACRL libraries, Oberlin Group libraries.

2. LIBER has 420 members including universities, national archives (Surrey, UK), governmental libraries (Statistics Netherlands), special libraries (Wellcome Collection), library associations, Casalini Libri, etc. Academic departments in universities (SOAS), Proquest, OCLC, Ubiquity Press, and so on. Are we missing the collaborative boat?
LESS EXCEPTIONAL, MORE COSMOPOLITAN

• In order to remain innovative, perhaps we need to be less exceptional and more cosmopolitan. As researchers and librarians, we are citizens of the world, and not just a nation-state. Our collaborative and innovative work can form a foundation for a world far more harmonious than it is today.
REFERENCES


• Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*, chapter 135, Ahab’s eulogy for the sinking *Pequod*. 
REFERENCES


De Tocqueville writes about America’s poor record-keeping practices in several places.


“The only historical record in the United States is the newspapers. If an issue is missing, the chain of time is broken, and the present severed from the past. ... I have no doubt that fifty years from now it will be more difficult to obtain authentic documents about the details of social life in America today than about the administration of France in the Middle Ages” (p. 237). He ascribes this to administrative instability. “No archives are assembled.” ... “In America, society seems to live from day to day, like an army in the field. Yet surely the art of administration is a science, and any science, in order to progress, needs to accumulate discoveries generation after generation” (p. 237).
NOTES (DE TOCQUEVILLE)

• De Tocqueville’s notes, pp. 842-50, on historical records in the states.

• “Exceptional.” In the Library of America edition, the quote is: “Thus the situation of the Americans is entirely exceptional, and there is reason to believe that no other democratic people will ever enjoy anything like it. Their wholly Puritan origin; their markedly commercial habits; the very country they inhabit, which seems to discourage study of science, literature, and the arts; the proximity of Europe, which allows them not to study these things without lapsing into barbarism; and a thousand more specific causes, of which I have been able to discuss only the most important—all of these things must have concentrated the American mind in a singular way on purely material concerns. ... Only religion causes them to cast a fleeting and distracted glance heavenward from time to time” pp. 517-18.
He concludes:

“It is not true, therefore, to say that men who live in democratic centuries are by nature indifferent to science, literature, and the arts. It must be acknowledged, however, that they cultivate these fields in their own way and bring to the endeavor their own qualities and deficiencies” (p. 521).