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VISUAL INTERTEXTUALITY AND TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

Revisiting American exceptionalism

Rob Kroes

Introduction

From the 1990s onwards, the urge began to be felt to break out of a conceptual view of America as *sui generis*, as “exceptional,” as different in its historical experience and destiny than any other country or nation in the world. Surely, the sense of American difference had been around for much longer, and had in fact inspired explorations of the many ways in which America had proved different than other countries, though not exceptional. The best encyclopedic treatment is Seymour Martin Lipset’s *American Exceptionalism* (Lipset 1997). A comparativist, Lipset looked at a number of areas in political and social life where America traditionally had been seen as forming an exception to rules prevalent in Europe. Thus he revisited Tocqueville’s aperçus concerning the lasting effects of America’s special historical genesis and development, and the German early twentieth-century historian and sociologist Werner Sombart’s (1906) classic study *Why is There no Socialism in the United States?* on the question of why there is no socialism in the United States. They are all areas where America can be seen to offer counterpoints to European history while in other areas it moved in step with European history. Thus America could be woven into a larger narrative of forces of social change and modernization as these affected nations on both sides of the Atlantic, each with its own peculiar quirks and twists. Yet exceptionalism—in its more demanding, exclusivist reading—is a different animal and it has taken more than a little pushing to shatter its hold on American historiography and on the American sense of identity.

In an influential essay, entitled “Exceptionalism,” Daniel Rodgers (1998) made the point that from the early modern era to the postcolonial present, the cultivation of sentiments of difference and superiority has been at the heart of the project of nation-state formation. Within these common terms, however, there has run a thread, which, if not wholly distinct to the American complex, carries a peculiarly striking weight. That is the idea of exceptionalism. Rodgers then makes the following simple, but crucial point: Exceptionalism differs from difference. Difference requires contrast; exceptionalism requires a rule. Exceptionalism
claims pin one’s own nation’s distinctiveness to every other people’s sameness—to general laws and conditions governing everything but the special case at hand. When difference is put in exceptionalist terms, the exception becomes an exemption, an exemption from the universal tendencies of history, the “normal” fate of nations, the laws of historical mechanics itself (Rodgers 1998, 22–23).

It is implications like these, where a nation can claim to be above the general rule, if not above the law, that have inspired America’s political action as much as its self-reflection. Listen to Obama, in 2008:

We have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality, that, though imperfect, are exceptional.

Now, the fact that I am very proud of my country and I think that we’ve got a whole lot to offer the world does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries, or recognizing that we’re not always going to be right, or that other people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, all parties have to compromise and that includes us.

I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships because we can’t solve these problems alone.

_(quoted in Sullivan 2010)_

In the monitoring eyes of the Right, qualifying words like “though imperfect,” or the call for compromise, while acknowledging that “other people may have good ideas,” may already be far too subtle and nuanced. But what caused it to rise in howling anger were Obama’s opening words – often the only words quoted in the Right’s indictment: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” As right-wing commentator Michael Barone thundered: “One cannot imagine Presidents Roosevelt, Truman or Kennedy, Eisenhower or Reagan, uttering such sentiments” (quoted in Sullivan 2010). Up against such odds, a man like Obama, politician and intellectual, had to tack to the political winds while keeping an eye on the compass of his convictions. He has kept valiantly trying to add a touch of realism and relativism to the idea of American exceptionalism, much as that very endeavor is an abomination in the eyes of the Tea Party or Alt-Right watchdogs. To those with a historian’s memory, however, it may even appear as if Obama was trying to add an almost European sense of the fallibility and frailty of human exploits to counter the more impetuous uses of exceptionalism in American political discourse. I for one could not help being reminded of C. Vann Woodward’s reading of the historical experience of the American post-Civil War South as the only region in the United States to have experienced defeat and loss and to have developed a quasi-European sense of the tragic (Woodward 1993, 1964). Some of that sobering sense, I feel, is what President Obama struggled to convey to a larger American public.

Obama may have quickly learned his lesson, paying tribute, if not lip service, to a word that only relatively recently had gained currency in American political discourse. The role it played, though, was like that of earlier passwords like Americanism and anti-Communism, as in the days of the Red Scare following World War I, or in the early years of the Cold War with McCarthyism in the role of monitor and protector of the purity of the body politic.
The monitoring gaze today comes once again from the political Right, embodied in its lunatic fringe of the Tea Party.

In a nationally televised speech on Syria, on Tuesday night, September 10, 2013, Obama turned to American exceptionalism as a rallying cry in his endeavor to unite his country behind him. “America is not the world’s policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong,” Obama said. “But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act.” He added: “That’s what makes America different. That’s what makes us exceptional.” The concluding word must have brought a wry smile to some at least among his listeners. They must have recognized its use not as powerful rhetoric, to clinch the argument, but rather as formulaic, as a shibboleth granting safe passage to a man whose political credentials had never been fully accepted by a vengeful part of the American citizenry. The word exceptional had become the litmus test to those in the media and the political arena who were out to de-construct and undermine the president from the moment he had entered office.

Yet it would be wrong to see Obama as merely paying lip service to the word exceptionalism and all it stands for in summary of a larger American creed. Many have been the occasions, from his early presidency on, where we can see Obama revisiting the concept, not just to pay tribute and be done with it, but to consider the options it gave him to be an educator of the nation, to bring a degree of subtlety, nuance, and complexity to a word that too often was used as a facile trope. The way Obama used the word was very much in the vein of what Sacvan Bercovitch has called the American Jeremiad, a use of public speech that reminds the audience of its high calling while pointing to the many ways in which it is still remiss, falling short. It does so, rhetorically, by contrasting an image of exceptional destiny with the many sordid faces of every-day reality. It argues, so to speak, through a technique of visual counterpoint, moving back and forth between images as these pop up before our inner eyes through a process of association while measuring them by a visual yard-stick of the normal or proper.

My discussion of American exceptionalism brings out this process more clearly. Letting ourselves be guided by the flow of mental intertexts an alleged American exceptionalism gives way to transnationalism, in much the same way that in palimpsests surface texts and images cover what went before, yet never quite erasing what lies submerged beneath them.

**Intertextuality and transnationalism**

My recent book, *Prison Area, Independence Valley: American Paradoxes in Political Life and Popular Culture* (Kroes 2015), revisits the concept of exceptionalism and argues on behalf of a version of methodological transnationalism. It does so by revisiting the process that had unconsciously guided my hand when I wrote the book, a process that one might call mental intertextuality: whatever the precise topic, be it the history of the freak show and public spectacle, or the trajectory of atrocity photographs, such as Holocaust images, in my mind one image under discussion evoked related images, thematically related yet originating in different geographical and historical settings. Thus, through mental intertextuality, an argument could evolve that naturally transcended geographic, historical, and cultural borders, freely ranging in a trans-Atlantic space. The outcome was unintentional, yet undeniably transnational. In my life as an academic active in American Studies at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, one continuing theme has been my study of the many ways in which American and European cultures have cross-pollinated and the ways in which cultural
influences were received or resisted. Part of my interest was in issues of Americanization of European cultures or of European anti-Americanism, on either political or cultural grounds. Some chapters in my latest book clearly reflect that interest, while also critically revisiting it. If issues of empire and imperial sway show up in my writing there, it is clearly in response to wider intellectual concerns in the post-9/11 study of America. Issues of politics and power have forced themselves upon my mind most directly in the opening and concluding chapters of the book, on the George W. Bush administration first, on the Obama administration later. In my earlier writing on American popular culture in particular I tried to answer questions as to what accounts for the lure and appeal of American popular culture, at home and abroad. In my new book, though, I found that my interest had moved to the darker side of popular culture and forms of spectacle and entertainment, even in such gruesome varieties as lynchings.

I also found, more clearly than ever before, that there are forms of transnationalism inherent to the train of thought of the human mind. Addressing spectacles and parades as forms of public entertainment, I noticed my mind wandering from circus and side-show artists parading through American small town Main Streets, to dignified Jewish citizens being forcibly paraded through German cities on the day following Kristallnacht (the night of the shattered glass) to the merriment of German onlookers, and back from there to the many photographs of public lynchings in the American South, with jolly and grimacing bystanders posing for the camera. The most notorious among this latter corpus are photographs to do with the Ku Klux Klan. After a long spell of quiescence, it re-emerged into national prominence in the 1920s, reaching an all-time peak membership in 1924—a year, incidentally, that saw the dedication of various Confederate memorials, including the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, whose planned removal was the pretext for the “Unite the Right” —also: “They will not replace us” rally there in August 2017. It brought American fascists back in the streets, marching under the banner of a virulent nativism, of a vicious fear of being removed from the pedestal of their proper place in society. It also brought to the minds of people watching these images on TV older visual repertoires dating back to Nazi-Germany, fascist Italy, and similar racist clashes elsewhere. In such a stream of consciousness, such a chain of visual recollections, national settings—American or otherwise—are transcended. The wandering—and wondering—mind of the observer moves in a space naturally transnational.

Nor is it always only a matter—and I wish to emphasize this—of a process of visual associations forcing itself upon my mind. Following the same logic, the train of associations can also be linguistic, where an argument applying to one historical situation calls forth similar arguments applying to different situations. Thus, following my exploration of associated visual images of the American South and 1930s’ Nazi Germany, a book came to my mind—which I had read as a student and had been deeply impressed by—written by Kurt Baschwitz (1938), a German Jew who had fled from Nazi Germany to the Netherlands. From his new refuge he became aware of the historical parallels between mob behavior in Germany and the American South and the logic behind it. In what would become a classic study in mass psychology, published in exile in Amsterdam, the author saw his analysis of processes of mob behavior confirmed in both settings, in an amazing act of creating intellectual distance to current events even as they had such immediate dramatic relevance to his own life (Baschwitz 1938, Chapter 18).

What I am trying to convey, is that the transnationalism that one can see happening here, is almost like a chimera, with one image shimmering through another one, as if in a palimpsest. History does form palimpsests, covering one layer of images with later ones, as if
on the wall of an old house with one painted advertisement not quite covering a preceding one. It is an uncanny experience when, by looking intently at one image, another one shows up in one’s mind, shimmering through, taking you from one locale and time to another. It is also an exhilarating experience, a sense of being literally transported in an exercise of transnationalism.

**Cultural and transnational turns**

American Studies scholars had begun to move in new directions following what was commonly referred to as “the cultural turn.” It was just one of the fashionable turns their intellectual community had collectively taken in recent years, turns such as the linguistic turn, the visual turn, the transnational turn. It had left some people wandering how many turns it takes before the wheel is reinvented. For indeed, what seemed like a paradigm shift under the banner of the cultural turn, from a larger intellectual perspective may well be seen not as a new turn, but a return to the wisdoms of the old Chicago School in the social sciences, and its revolutionary sense of “the social construction of reality,” to quote a book title that managed to sum up the entire intellectual program underlying what we now know as “constructivism” (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Whatever the case, adherents of the New American Studies set upon the “de-construction” of their own academic field with a vengeance. At times their efforts showed a vehemence as if the issue was a matter of exorcism, of driving out all the evil connotations of the word “America,” in an act of linguistic voluntarism, as if changing the language one used would change the world. It led one outsider to scathingly speak of Anti-American Studies, in a facetious review in the *New Republic* of three examples of the new post-exceptionalist American Studies.¹

It was not long, though, before sobering second thoughts came to some of the leading “New Americanists.” In a piece, entitled “Re-thinking ‘American Studies after US Exceptionalism,’” Donald Pease acknowledged the resistance to change of large swathes of reality.

Transnational American Studies aspired to remediate the discourse of US exceptionalism by transnationalizing the core values of American civil society. But global civil society has neither transcended the era of the nation-state nor entered into the utopian realm of a cosmopolitan democracy. Have not scholars in transnational American studies overestimated the ways in which global civil society can mobilize the political energies needed to remedy the economic inequalities that globalization has engendered? Has not post-exceptionalist American studies also ignored the US state’s power to describe the US as a permanent state of exception? (Pease 2009, 22)

There is a remarkable return here, linked undoubtedly to the aftermath of 9/11 and the American display of what is known among military people as “full spectrum dominance,” to age-old concepts like the state and the state’s power, or for that matter the nation-state and its attendant nationalism.

If the point is to confront transnationalism and exceptionalism, one obvious first step would be to zoom out from any particular instance of exceptionalism and to see it as just one case among many others. This is precisely what Obama did, conceiving of American exceptionalism as a specific case within the larger category—the larger *genus*—of national exceptionalisms. Hovering above the fray, in the manner of the true transnational mind, he
showed American exceptionalism its place. The vehemence of the reaction to this perspective clearly affirmed the alternative reading of American exceptionalism as purely *sui generis*, as being one of a kind. This is what Rodgers made clear in his revisit of the concept of exceptionalism. In this extreme version American exceptionalism stands in logical opposition to transnationalism. It turns from an analytic and relativistic perspective into a national ideology, no longer open to disinterested discussion and intellectual debate. It becomes a password—a shibboleth—in the heated national debate setting insiders apart from outsiders. As such it is only the latest stage in a national pastime as old as the American nation, at whatever stage of its historical formation.

Transnationalism, then, sketched here as an introspective thought process, as a flow of images associating, appears as an unlikely contender for national self-reflection in the United States at its present, insurgent stage. It is too relativistic, too ironic, to sustain and reflect the current national mood. For the time being it may well have to pull back inside the walls of academia. It may be a while before the United States finds a president as open-minded, as cosmopolitan, as the one who so recently served two full terms in the White House, from 2008–2016.

Note


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