

The Problem of “American Exceptionalism” Revisited

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In one of his many writings on the topic of “American exceptionalism,” Seymour Martin Lipset – perhaps the chief exponent of this notion since it was originated by Alexis de Tocqueville himself -- insisted that the concept was “double-edged.” Far from suggesting the “superiority” of the United States vis-à-vis other societies, as some critics of the notion of exceptionalism held, the idea merely pointed to the distinctiveness of American society compared to others.¹ Indeed, Lipset wrote, “we are the worst as well as the best, depending on which quality is being addressed” (Lipset 1996a: 18). To be sure, Lipset’s protestations of even-handedness sometimes seem belied by the comparatively congratulatory tone of his writings about the United States. He claimed to “believe that [he was drawing] scholarly conclusions” when he wrote, “[T]here can be little question that the hand of providence has been on a nation which finds a Washington, a Lincoln, or a Roosevelt when it needs him” (Lipset 1996a: 14). It is more than a little odd for a social scientist to claim to explain historical outcomes by invoking divine intervention. Nonetheless, having sought to mollify potential dissenters with an initial avowal of impartiality, Lipset proceeds to argue that the United States is “exceptional” in a variety of ways – political, religious, racial – that can be traced above all to its origins as “the first new nation,” the first modern colony (other than Iceland) to break away from its imperial overlord and begin the political world anew. Lipset assures us that the notion of

“exceptionalism” is simply a value-free, scientific usage that helps us make sense of the peculiar features of American life when compared to the folkways of other nations.

If it is merely a neutral characterization for “uniqueness” or “distinctiveness,” however, the question then arises why the notion of “exceptionalism” needs emphasizing at all. After all, it is a commonplace among historians, at least, that all processes and developments are in some sense “unique”; they have their own rhythms and particularities that can’t simply be shoe-horned into larger models. Lipset’s stress on the notion thus in part reflects disciplinary considerations; as a social scientist, he was more interested in patterns, and variations therefrom, than in “unique,” unrepeatable events or experiences. Only from an at least implicitly comparative perspective can one conclude that something is “exceptional.” It is perhaps worth noting here that, in the so-called *Historikerstreit* (“historians’ dispute”) in Germany in the latter half of the 1980s, the overriding fear among those challenging the comparison by Ernst Nolte and others of Nazi Germany with Stalin’s Soviet Union was that comparison might be seen as *equating* the two, and thus diminishing the evilness of the Nazis. The desire to see the Nazis as uniquely horrible implicitly entailed comparison, but this was not necessarily recognized by the protagonists of this perspective (see Maier 1997, esp. Ch. 3). In the context of *that* dispute, emphasizing the peculiar evil of the Nazi regime was the “liberal” position; in contrast, emphasizing the “exceptionalism” of the United States is often seen as a “conservative” view, foregrounding the positive aspects of the American experience and soft-pedaling the country’s less attractive features.

But not all exceptionalisms are the same; much of the discussion of “American exceptionalism” has, after all, revolved around Werner Sombart’s turn-of-the-century

question, “Why is there no socialism in the United States?”² What one might call the “bad” exceptionalist position thus revolves around the question why the United States has lacked the socialist movement or the more robust welfare state arrangements that have been characteristic of the countries of Western Europe. Rather than characterizing the notion of exceptionalism as “double-edged,” it might therefore be more useful to say that there are (at least) two “exceptionalist” theses: a “good” one that views the United States as singularly virtuous – democratic, egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, etc. – and a “bad” one that regards the United States as distinctively harsh and ungenerous – lacking the public policies that more “civilized” countries have adopted to protect their populations from the vagaries of fate, and inclined toward penal policies and practices that have uniquely uncivilized consequences, especially for the poor and non-white (see Whitman 2003). There are also more narrowly tailored versions of “American exceptionalism,” such as Michael Ignatieff’s (2005: 1-2) invocation of the notion to characterize the United States’ contradictory support for and tendency to ignore human rights treaties and conventions.

Despite their traditional commitment to chronicling the “unique,” historians have in recent years become increasingly interested in generalizing social theory (see Sewell 2005) and, correspondingly, uncomfortable with claims about the “uniqueness” of American life identified by comparative sociologists (and socialists) ever since Tocqueville. A good example of this discomfiture, which is generated to a considerable degree by the pervasive discourse of “globalization,” can be found in Thomas Bender’s tellingly titled, *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History*. Bender insists that American history has traditionally been taught as a story of the rise of an upstart isolate, a sort of hegemon-in-training that had little need of the rest of the world

and got the history it needed, so to speak. Bender is concerned that this sort of autistic historiography ill prepares Americans for the “globalized” world in which they now find themselves (see also Mennell 2007). He therefore thinks it urgent that the study of American history be placed firmly in a “global context.” The putatively self-aggrandizing idea of “exceptionalism” is inconsistent, in this view, with any understanding of history that takes seriously the unavoidable fact that any and all individual nations are also one among other nations. Thus, Bender (2006: 296-7) concludes, “On the spectrum of difference the United States is one of many, and there is no single norm from which it deviates – or that it establishes.”

Valuable though Bender’s critique of “exceptionalism” may be with regard to our understanding of American history, it tends to elide the reality that there are, in fact, peculiarities of American life relative to the West European countries from which the United States largely went forth that cannot be gainsaid. For example, it is a fact that the United States, alone among the countries with which it is normally compared (mainly in Western Europe, perhaps also Japan), has no national health insurance system. Its practice of the death penalty – including, in some cases, against minors – puts it in the company of some of the world’s most egregious violators of human rights. The United States has exceptionally high rates of interpersonal violence compared to those reference group societies, and has long been so (see Mennell 2007: 133ff.). Perhaps the notion of American exceptionalism makes some sense after all?

In the remainder of the paper, I address the problem of the usefulness of the notion of American exceptionalism by examining the views of a number of classical theorists concerning the peculiarities of American history, emphasizing particularly its

religious background. Ultimately, I follow Aristide Zolberg (1986) in arguing that there are as many “exceptionalisms” as there are cases under examination, and that the proper mode of studying these questions is unavoidably comparative and historical.

Comparative historical analysis is the only means of determining what is typical and what is distinctive (*not* “deviant,” the invocation of which concept would inappropriately imply some sort of “norm”). Here, however, I will in the main compare only implicitly, highlighting particular features of American historical development while suggesting how these differ from other relevant cases in an effort to make sense of how the United States can be at once a leading defender of human rights and a leading violator of such rights, as well as a vision of a prosperous future for many that at the same time is marked by striking and increasingly large inequalities of wealth and income.

These paradoxes, I argue, have their origins in what Tocqueville called the “point of departure of the Americans.” Yet those who argue that such ideas are “essentialist” or “ahistorical” are correct that the “point of departure” can’t explain everything. I want to suggest that there *is* a kind of “cultural genetic code” that shapes the broad contours of American life and sensibility, but – as in biology itself -- there always remains the possibility of unexpected mutations that lead in new directions. Making sense of particular outcomes in American society therefore also requires attention to more mundane, short-term political struggles rather than only to the deeper sources of American politics. While remaining identifiably consistent with its previous self, in other words, the American polity occasionally changes in ways that make it demonstrably different from what went before. In order to evaluate future possibilities, we need to sort out “how, and when...short-term processes override, deflect, or transform long-term

processes[, and how] long-term trends reassert themselves in situations where they seem to have been eclipsed by more pressing political processes” (Sewell 2005: 9). We need to determine when the genetic code is determining development, and when we are encountering mutations that may persist and endure. Lipset’s version of American exceptionalism stresses the country’s anti-statist traditions; these have certainly been very powerful. But the version adumbrated by Robert Bellah et al. in *Habits of the Heart*, which seeks to account for both the individualistic strains as well as the more communitarian ones, ultimately does a better job of making sense of the vicissitudes of American history and politics.

Tocqueville and the “Point of Departure” of American Life

Tocqueville claimed that the “point of departure” was of fundamental importance for understanding the way of life of any people, that one could see in the infant what one would see in the adult. But societies are not persons; why should the “point of departure” be so important? Supposedly its significance derived, according to Tocqueville, from the fact that “peoples always feel [the effects of] their origins. The circumstances that accompanied their birth and served to develop them influence the entire course of the rest of their lives.” These axioms, nominally about societies in general, seem to have been particularly pertinent to the American case. “[T]here is not one opinion, one habit, one law, I could say one event, that the point of departure [of the Americans] does not explain without difficulty.” Yet part of the reason that Tocqueville laid such stress on this factor in his analysis of *Democracy in America* seems to have been simply because there *appeared to have been* such a point of departure in Tocqueville’s reading of the

American trajectory; no such point could be so easily identified in the case of the European countries with which he was always implicitly comparing America. The latter is “the only country where... it has been possible to specify the influence exerted by the point of departure on the future of states” (Tocqueville 2000: 28-9) This hardly makes a convincing case for the enduring subsequent importance of the “point of departure.”

Part of the difficulty in finding persuasive Tocqueville’s thesis about American exceptionalism is his argument that (what became) the United States had peculiar features that could not possibly be replicated in any of the European societies with which he compares the U. S., for (among other things) they had had no obvious comparable point of departure. One might argue that this is actually different today, and that the end of the Second World War and particularly the preoccupation with remorse for the Holocaust constitute the “point of departure” for contemporary Europe (see Levy and Sznajder 2006). Much of the self-understanding of Western Europeans today can be attributed to those events, which are now understood as a decisive break in the onward march of civilization – but also as the basis for a new beginning, in which the European Union offers the institutional framework for overcoming centuries of Franco-German wars and of internecine European conflict more generally. One of the things that distinguishes contemporary American sensibilities from those of Europeans (and indeed much of the rest of the world) is that Americans have had so little experience of warfare in the past century and a half that they may therefore more readily resort to military force as a means of resolving international problems (Judt 2008; see also Habermas and Derrida 2005: 11-12).

Beyond the fact that it may no longer be true that there is no identifiable point of departure for the European comparison group, there is an interesting parallel here with Weber's "Protestant ethic" thesis and the critiques thereof. As various commentators have pointed out, the explanatory weight placed on Protestant doctrine in explaining the rise of "rational capitalism" is at odds with the discussion in Weber's "Prefatory Remarks" to the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*, of which the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was only the first installment. In those remarks, Weber notes that there are a variety of ways in which the West diverged from the East – in architecture, mathematics, science, art, law, and much else beside. It is therefore difficult to ascribe much significance to the religious factor, which on Weber's own account is not the only relevant variable (see Parkin 1982: 65-70). Tocqueville's emphasis on the point of departure seems similarly problematic, given that it was the only "point of departure" he could clearly identify and hence not necessarily as significant as he would suggest. There were also a number of other factors that made America different from Europe, such as the frontier experience or the relative laxity of English control over their colonies, but to some degree these were all bundled together into Tocqueville's notion of the "point of departure."

Be that as it may, Tocqueville (2000: 267) famously argued that he could see "the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on its shores." Here Tocqueville speaks to the oft-remarked influence of the Puritans on American character and life and their supposed dominance in determining its values. Yet critics such as Thomas Bender (2006: 44) would insist that, contrary to "the usual narrative of American history, which conventionally sees American development as a continuous process of

westering from the northeastern colonies,... [p]eople and influences arrived in [America] from all points of the compass and in every region.” This one might characterize as the multiculturalist theory of the origins of the United States; it is a view that harmonizes suspiciously with contemporary ideological fashions, though that hardly means that it is wrong.

One might also object that there are enduring and important regional peculiarities that cast doubt on any claim that the New England experience should predominate. Here the work of David Hackett Fischer (1989) is exemplary; Fischer shows in copious and convincing detail how the “folkways” established in different parts of the (later) United States by four different British settler groups have persistently shaped regional and national politics since their arrival. Fischer’s perspective, which emphasizes the durability since the 17th and 18th centuries of these regional cultures, is a sort of halfway house between Tocqueville’s stress on the point of departure and his insistence on the national level of analysis. In this connection, Bender (2006: 297) makes the important point that “exceptionalist claims about America tend to obscure... internal differentiation,” because they privilege the national over the regional level of analysis. It would indeed be a mistake to think that there are no significant regional differences in the United States (a fact to which Tocqueville himself called attention), and yet it may still be the case that the Puritans of New England imparted a decisive influence on the country’s long-term trajectory.

Tocqueville argues that the reason it was the Puritans rather than other groups who ultimately set the tone for American life had to do with the “rigor of their principles,” which led them in search of a place sufficiently abandoned by others of their

kind that they could “live there in their manner and pray to God in freedom”; they went to New England, he said, “to make *an idea* triumph.” By contrast, the other colonies had been founded by “adventurers without family,” whereas “the emigrants of New England brought with them admirable elements of order and morality; they went to the wilderness accompanied by their wives and children” (Tocqueville 2000: 32). The contrast that Tocqueville draws between swash-buckling adventurers and God-fearing, sober-minded family men clearly parallels Max Weber’s distinction between “booty” capitalism, which was based on the prospects for profit deriving from opportunities to loot and pillage, and modern “rational” capitalism, which was based on the ascetic devotion to a calling. The predominance of the Puritans is reflected in the fact that the United States would eventually become the country most unwaveringly committed (rhetorically, if not necessarily in practice) to free-market capitalism, as well as a country with a tradition of religiously motivated social reform and moralistic foreign policies. The cultural genetic code of the United States is profoundly connected to the country’s religious underpinnings, but those foundations are of a very particular stripe, theologically speaking.

The religious background to the American experience is also one of the reasons why, as Hannah Arendt (1965: 56) once claimed, the American Revolution remained “an event of little more than local importance” by comparison to the world-historical significance of the French Revolution.³ In her comparative analysis of modern revolutions, Arendt was much influenced (though by no means always convinced) by Tocqueville. His insight about the differences between the democratic revolutions that ushered in the modern conception of citizenship was elaborated in his two classic studies

of the United States and France, respectively, namely *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. The basic difference between the two revolutions, Tocqueville argued, was that the Englishmen who first settled in North America had gone there in quest of a place to practice their religion in peace; in short, their religious and political aspirations overlapped. In France and elsewhere on the Continent, in contrast, the church had become a prop of the state, which was ruled by “divine right of kings.” The entanglement of the church in an earthly power grown oppressive made it an appealing target of reformers and revolutionaries. Yet this was not, according to Tocqueville, a product of the revolutionaries’ anti-religious views, but rather a by-product of the church’s deviation from its proper vocation as saver of souls. The result of this transgression was that, “among us [in France], ... the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom almost always move in contrary directions. Here [in the United States] I found them united intimately with one another: they reigned together on the same soil” (Tocqueville 2000: 282). The synergies between religion and liberty in the origins of “America” led to sharp differences between American self-understanding and that of Continental Europe. The British writer G. K. Chesterton put the matter succinctly, asserting that America was “the only nation in the world founded on a creed,” as a result of which the United States became a “nation with the soul of a church.”

The piety of Americans is a fact that is in certain respects unintelligible to Europeans, especially of the left, because they tend to have inherited the anti-clericalism of the Enlightenment and of Continental radical traditions. Even Max Weber, whose deep sensitivity to the cultural importance of religious ideas was a hallmark of his sociology and indeed of his understanding of American society, could comment in

response to his early twentieth-century travels in the United States that Americans' powerful religiosity was "an element which affects their life in a way that must seem to us grotesque and frequently repellent" (Weber 2002b: 204). In this regard, secular Europeans are increasingly out of step – and perhaps out of touch – with a world undergoing a wave of religious ferment (see Berger 1999). The image of an overwhelming secular (non-Muslim) Europe as an island in the global sea of faith has led to discussion of a new sort of exceptionalism -- "European exceptionalism" (Davie 2002).

Yet given the traditional affinities between European and American societies, the degree of dissonance between the two in recent years comes as more of a shock to Europeans than would likely be the case if they were considering a less developed, less seemingly comparable society. Even as he has come to speak of Europe as a "post-secular society," therefore, Jürgen Habermas (2004) has written increasingly of late about a "widening Atlantic" and a "divided West" (see also Kopstein and Steinmo 2008). For all its roots in the different religious trajectory of American society, the current sense of a pronounced rift between the two is quite recent, and would have been unthinkable during the Cold War era. One might suggest that the European-American relationship has been somewhat like a river that flows together for a time, then divides into parallel channels, then re-unites again further downstream. The character of the relationship varies over time as a function of a variety of factors, not least that of foreign affairs and international relations.

To be sure, the perception of deepening division in recent years has not a little to do with what some Europeans regard as the deviant religious proclivities of Americans. Yet the widely presumed gap in religious belief and practice between the two regions,

though real enough in certain respects (Davie 2002), tends to shrink somewhat on closer inspection. The religiosity of Americans tends to be over-stated, whereas that of Europeans is under-appreciated. For example, it has been found that, whereas roughly two in five Americans *tell* researchers that they went to church last week, a study of their *actual* attendance revealed a figure closer to only one in five (Hadaway et al. 1993). From the European side, despite the marked decline of church attendance especially since the 1960s, the religious scene can be understood to some degree in terms of a penchant for “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994). Meanwhile, the influx of substantial Muslim populations has both intensified religious pluralism and recalled Europe to its Christian roots, while relatively unfamiliar Protestant denominations are making new headway and the Pope is embarked on a major effort to revivify Catholic faith on the continent – though with what success remains to be seen.

Not content to posit a mere divergence in religious sensibilities between the United States and Europe, Tocqueville singled out the Puritans, as we have already noted, as having had a decisive impact on the character of American life. One important feature of that influence involved the Puritans’ special devotion to a Jewish-style “covenant” between themselves and God (see Weber 2002a: 112). Such covenants implied the believers’ obedience to God and the expectation that He would punish them for transgressions, at the same time that they could expect his favor as a reward for compliance with the terms of the covenant. It was in terms of such a mutually binding promise that the idea of America as a “City on a Hill,” a “New Jerusalem,” was adumbrated in John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon aboard the *Arbella*. The idea of the

covenant remained predominant in the thinking of New England Puritans until the mid-eighteenth century (Noll 2002: 39).

That the covenant has been broken time and again, and indeed from the very beginning (among other reasons because the “City on a Hill” was on “*somebody else’s hill!*” [Bellah 1998: 618]), does not nullify the importance of the Puritan idea of an agreement with God that undergirds much American thinking about the world. It is notable in this regard that much of the criticism of Islam in America comes from the Christian right wing, which tends to see the American destiny as strongly bound up with the sense of the United States as the earthly instrument of a specifically Christian God. These affinities between conservative Christian church and state came to the fore in the contretemps between Virginia Republican congressman Virgil Goode and Minnesota representative Keith Ellison, the first Muslim elected to Congress, in the aftermath of the 2006 mid-term vote. In a letter to a constituent, Goode inveighed that Americans needed to limit immigration in order to reduce the numbers of Muslims entering the country and thus to “preserve the values and beliefs traditional to the United States of America.”⁴ However broadly these are actually held, these “values and beliefs” are typically said to be those of the Puritans – obedience to God, devotion to family, commitment to the community.

The predominance of the Puritans in early colonial America was of special significance because of the distinctive nature of their spiritual outlook. As Tocqueville (2000: 35) described it, “One must not believe that the piety of the Puritans was only speculative or that it showed itself foreign to the course of human things. Puritanism... was almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine.” Tocqueville concurs here

with Weber's later argument that Puritanism was not "world-rejecting," except in the sense of "this-worldly (*innerweltliche*) asceticism" and its tendency to view the world as an arena in which to carry out God's divine plan for the world. And, according to Tocqueville (2000: 32), the political theory of which Puritanism partook "blended at several points with the most absolute democratic and republican theories." Among other things, this posture entailed a deep commitment to education, though generally of a more vocational and unphilosophical kind, so that the believer could nurture a direct, unmediated relationship with God through knowledge of the Bible. The result of this sympathetic attitude toward useful knowledge was the founding of numerous schools and institutions of higher learning, of which the most symbolically important remains Harvard. While those in the interior West of the United States may not genuflect before the cultural power of that august institution, the aura of the college at Cambridge continues to radiate brightly across the country and, indeed, across the oceans. Regional differences notwithstanding, no university in the American south can begin to rival Harvard in symbolic authority; even Stanford and Chicago, despite their great prestige within the academic world, lack the charisma of Cambridge in the eyes of the ordinary mortal.

As the example of Harvard may suggest, while the Puritans' political ideas may have been democratic in certain respects, they were deeply exclusionary in others. Here Weber's more searching analysis of the consequences of Protestantism supersedes Tocqueville's insights into the phenomenon. Weber (1946b: 332-3; see also Morgan 1966: 185-6) described the doctrinal situation as follows:

As a religion of virtuosos, Puritanism renounced the universalism of love, and rationally routinized all work in this world into serving God's will and testing

one's state of grace.... In this respect, Puritanism accepted the routinization of the economic cosmos, which, with the whole world, it devalued as creatural and depraved. This state of affairs appeared as God-willed, and as material given for fulfilling one's duty. In the last resort, this meant in principle to renounce salvation as a goal attainable by... everybody. It meant to renounce salvation in favor of the groundless and always only particularized grace. *In truth, this standpoint of unbrotherliness was no longer a genuine "religion of salvation."*

In Weber's view, in other words, the Puritans had abandoned to their fate those who failed the test of religious qualification, particularly as this is demonstrated by success in one's calling. If one regards wealth as a sign of merit, then poverty can only be seen as a sign of failure and hence of the lack of grace and of desert. Calvinist Protestantism made of poverty a *moral failing*, and it has been largely treated as such in the United States ever since – with the significant exception of the response to the Great Depression, the most dramatic challenge to the promise of the “American way of life” in history.

In a recent comment on the above passage from Weber, Robert Bellah (1999: 298; my emphasis) has written: “In thinking about the meaning of these words of Weber's in contemporary America, it would be well to remember that American Protestantism, and to some degree American religion generally, is the lineal descendant of that Puritanism that Weber describes as having so abandoned the ethic of brotherliness that it is no longer a religion of salvation. *Only in this way can religion and the capitalist economy be reconciled*” (see also Jordan 1967: 205). Bellah thus suggests that the niggardliness of the welfare state in the US, its lack of a national health care system, and its willingness to countenance increasingly inflated disparities between rich and poor have roots in American religious traditions as much as in a story one might tell about class and class struggles that might be more familiar to Europeans. Our policies concerning the poor have been in keeping with these traditions, as Philip Gorski has argued. Challenging the

comparative analysis of welfare states advanced by Gøsta Esping-Andersen, which stresses the origins of the different types in varying configurations of class and state, Gorski (2003: 163-4) notes that the stingy “liberal welfare states emerged only in areas heavily influenced by Reformed Protestantism,” whereas the welfare state in historically Lutheran or Catholic milieux has been comparatively more generous (Kahl 2007).

Despite their avowedly democratic commitments, Americans are prepared to accept sharply exclusionary tendencies as well, especially where these can be framed in terms of just deserts. Weber had commented on the exclusivism of American life in remarks on America penned after his return to Germany from a trip to the U. S. in 1904. The language of Weber’s observations seems remarkably Tocquevillean in nature: “Anyone who... imagines ‘democracy’ to be a mass of humanity ground down to atoms, is profoundly mistaken, at least as far as American democracy is concerned. It is bureaucratic rationalism, not democracy, which leads to this thoroughgoing ‘atomization’ The genuine American society – and we are talking here about the ‘middle’ and ‘lower’ strata of the population – has never simply been such a heap of sand. Neither has it ever been an edifice where anyone who comes along could expect to find open doors. It always was, and remains, riddled with all kinds of ‘exclusiveness’” (Weber 2002b: 213). In Weber’s view, the exclusivism of the Protestant sects – not the inclusiveness of a “church” – permeated the structures of American society as a whole. What made American society truly distinctive was its teeming religious pluralism, but these religious “conventicles” played midwife to a society characterized by intense in-group inclusivism combined with strongly exclusivistic elements. At the same time, Weber thought the country was being increasingly Europeanized and secularized, and

that this exclusivism was being carried forward in Weber's time by the many clubs he observed during his stay in the country (see Ringer 2004: 136-7).

And yet, despite their exclusionary tendencies, Weber (2002b: 212) noted, "it is only the sects that have succeeded in combining positive religiosity and political radicalism." This was especially true with regard to the deepest violation of Christian egalitarianism in American life, namely racial slavery. According to the historian Winthrop Jordan (1967: 300), "It was men deriving from a specifically *Puritan* religious tradition who advanced the equation of slavery and sin," and thus cast it beyond the pale of any truly righteous person. More broadly, Weber detected in the country's Puritan roots a deep "hostility to authority" that contrasted sharply with prevailing attitudes in Germany, but with a novel, communitarian twist. "The traditional American aversion against performing personal services is probably linked," Weber wrote, "to the... [Puritan emphasis upon] the 'public' welfare or 'the good of the many' as against the 'personal' or 'private' benefit of individuals, as well as to other weighty reasons that follow from 'democratic' sentiments.... [This is also true of] the relatively greater immunity of formerly Puritan peoples against Caesarism..." (quoted in Ringer 2004: 139-40). Clearly, the religiosity of the Puritans was, especially from our current perspective, quite complex, nurturing tendencies toward both individualism and community-mindedness at the same time. The cultivation of the individual conscience is a key mechanism underlying these elements of sectarian faith.

This is the secret underlying much American progressive and radical thought and activism; it flows out of the churches, rather than being opposed to them, as has been more common in the case of Western European countries (see McLeod 1997: Ch. 7).

This is the aspect of American life that feeds its most successful reformist impulses; Martin Luther King, Jr. is undoubtedly its chief modern exemplar, but abolitionism, which was originally advanced most vigorously by the Quakers, was an important case of religiously inspired reform as well. The story of opposition to the Vietnam War would similarly be unthinkable without the contribution of the Berrigan brothers, William Sloane Coffin, and a host of other Christian and Jewish clerics.

The many sects (and other religions) that abounded in American life from almost the beginning were free to develop without a state church overshadowing them (although early colonial Massachusetts had some of the rudiments of such a system and established churches existed at the state level into the nineteenth century). In this institutional context, and as a result of the importance of religious liberty from the early days of the colonies, American political culture came to be suffused with religiosity, but of a non-denominational (though strongly Protestant) sort. That is, the strongly held notion of a constitutional “separation of church and state” notwithstanding, Americans tend to tolerate and even to expect a good deal of “God talk” in the public sphere. In his well-known discussion of the quasi-religious characteristics of American presidents’ inaugural addresses, Bellah thus wrote of the (small-u) “unitarian” God of the American civil religion, who was meant to be inclusive of all believers in God without preferring any faith in particular. Bellah (1970: 175) also noted, however, that the God invoked as the ultimate source of sovereignty in American life was “also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love.” Such a judgment strongly echoes Weber’s characterization of Puritanism as having “objectified everything and

transformed it into rational enterprise, dissolved everything into the pure business relation, and substituted rational law and agreement for tradition.” (Weber 1951: 241).

Here it is necessary to delve more deeply into the “Protestant ethic,” and especially that of the Calvinists, in order to make sense of their distinctive and enduring impact on American society. In attempting to establish the role played by religious ideas in the rise of rational capitalism, Weber was struck above all by the historically novel and peculiar nature of the idea of predestination. With this theological innovation, Calvin and his followers had devised a system of religious salvation that left the individual completely bereft and without assistance in his aim to insure the fate of his eternal soul. As a result, the follower of Calvinism – a doctrine of “pitiful inhumanity,” in Weber’s view -- experienced “a feeling of unprecedented inner *loneliness*” (Weber 2002a: 73; translation slightly revised). The effect of this “inner loneliness” was to produce a highly disciplined seeker after salvation, precisely because salvation could never be assured. Yet it also encouraged a joylessness and disdain for sensual pleasure, which was deemed irrelevant to the goal of salvation. The result was the “sober and pessimistically colored individualism” that persists in the “national character” of countries with a Puritan past (Weber 2002a: 74; translation slightly revised).

Combined with the centrality of the frontier experience in American history, the American national character – in contrast to the English (or other British-influenced post-colonial societies, such as Canada and Australia) -- has been marked by the violence of the moralistic, avenging loner. In the American case, the frontier becomes the edge beyond which godlessness prevails and must be overcome or subdued. Presumably it is these features of American life that prompted D. H. Lawrence (1977: 68) to assert that

“the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted”

Characteristically, Lawrence offered these remarks in a discussion of Cooper’s *The Deerslayer*. Later, with the closing of the frontier, the cities come to be regarded as bastions of the impure and impious. One could hardly fail to recall here Martin Scorsese’s classic film, *Taxi Driver*, whose main character, the warped avenger Travis Bickle, is a quintessentially American figure nearly unimaginable in any other culture – the small-town guy who goes off to the big city to make his way, only to find that it is inhabited by filth and human scum that need to be “cleaned up” -- by eliminating them, if necessary. Finally, it should be recalled here that officers in the Vietnam War referred to the areas outside the control of the Government of (South) Viet Nam as “Indian country,” thus framing the war as a battle against disorder, impurity, and evil (Fitzgerald 1972: 491-2).

Clearly, this is the dark side of the Puritan inheritance. But of course, the tradition is more complicated than this bleak prognosis would suggest. Despite Bellah’s frequent and severe criticisms of American society, he has also written that “the meaning of the American experience will remain forever opaque to those who, once they see through the most simple-minded version of American idealism, can find only violence and self-interest in its stead” (Bellah 1975: 49). Bellah’s complexly critical stance toward the American tradition and its fruits suggests that we must attend to the “brotherly” as well as the “unbrotherly” characteristics of American civil religion. We need to recall that figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King have invoked a prophetic mode of brotherly religiosity that has spoken to Americans as much as the unbrotherly mode that led them to countenance the extermination of the Indians,

the enslavement and oppression of blacks, and the meagerness of their social safety net. Both modes, however, have been undergirded by the sense that the United States and its people constitute an entity apart from the rest of the world and from previous historical experience.

King's biblical cadences ("I've *been* to the mountain-top! I've seen the promised land!") and the analogies he drew between the situation of his people and the captive Jews of ancient Egypt are perhaps too well-known to require rehearsing here. But it may be worth recalling Lincoln's religious sensibilities and their connection to his vision of the nation's future. Perhaps the leading example of these sensibilities can be found in his Second Inaugural Address, near the end of his life and of the Civil War. There Lincoln indicated that he understood the war in fundamentally religious terms, as the retribution of a just God wreaked on a sinful people – just the punishment the Puritans would have expected for breaking their covenant with the Lord. And the sin in question was clearly that of slavery. Here was the language of Scripture, applied to the "sins" of a political community:

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God will that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Lincoln 1967: 316).

Saturated with the imperatives of judgment, Lincoln's oratory is closer to the Jonathan Edwards of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" than it is to the cheerful prophets of

uplift and prosperity more typical of our own day. There was a debt of sin to be paid, Lincoln was saying, and it would be paid with the nation's blood. The rhetoric of divine sanction was here mobilized to wipe away the sins of the American past, not to justify iniquity or the egoistical pursuit of Mammon. Despite its highly apologetic quality, one would search the oratory of official European atonement for the Holocaust or colonialism in vain for such language.

A major element of "American exceptionalism" has always had to do with the notion that the United States was the "New Jerusalem," a "promised land" that was home to a "chosen people" (although one could find similar rhetoric in South Africa and, of course, in Israel itself). "Europe is Egypt," Bellah (1970: 175) has noted, "America, the promised land." The sense of "election" has fueled a considerable degree of messianism in foreign affairs, the notion that it is the mission of the United States to go forth and set things right in the world. This mentality has come to be known as "Wilsonianism," as a result of Wilson's dictum that we needed to "make the world safe for democracy." But in fact this outlook underlies many impulses in American foreign policy from across the political spectrum including, at least to some degree, the grandiose neo-conservative bid to democratize the Middle East, beginning with Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

One response to the messianic impulse underlying the notion of America as the redeemer of the world came from a New York Presbyterian minister, Henry Van Dyke, who responded to bluster about America's "mission" in the Philippines a century ago as follows: "If that were true, our whole duty would not be done... until we had annexed the misgoverned Spaniards of Spain also.... Does the ... treatment of the Indians in... the United States give us a comfortable sense of pride?... Is our success in treating the

Chinese problem and the Negro problem so notorious that we must attempt to repeat it on a magnified scale eight thousand miles away?" Instead, Van Dyke recommended that we should return to "our unsolved problems staring us in the face, our cities misgoverned and our territories neglected...." (quoted in Bellah 1975: 59) As Van Dyke's remarks suggest, many Americans recognize the inadequacy of American realities relative to American ideals; they have no need of foreigners to point them out for them. The tendency of outsider critics to speak of the misdeeds of "the Americans" therefore often misses the boat, and only reinforces the intransigence of those already ill-disposed toward such criticisms. After all, as Tocqueville (2000: 585) noted long ago, "Americans, in their relations with foreigners, appear impatient at the least censure and insatiable for praise."

The flip side of the "chosen people" image is that of the "pariah people." For Weber, of course, the prototypical pariah people was the Jews. Despite the fact that pariah status typically meant that the group in question was at least metaphorically "beyond the pale," Weber wrote, "by virtue of their economic indispensability, they are tolerated, indeed, frequently privileged" (Weber 1946a: 189). One might argue that this is, paradoxically, the situation in which the United States finds itself. Anson Rabinbach (1997) has shown in the case of postwar Germany that there is no contradiction in thinking that the perpetrator can become pariah. More powerful than all the rest, and enormously wealthy to boot, the oft-remarked devotion of the Americans to the pursuit of wealth makes them easy to caricature and dismiss as uncultivated money-grubbers. And yet the United States is the "modern" country that most clearly retains religious sensibilities in its public life; Western Europe, at least, grows more and more secular and

“disenchanted” as the time passes, putting it in this respect increasingly out of step with developments elsewhere in the world.

At the same time, Western Europe in the postwar period developed a welfare state that was the envy of the world and is now increasingly subject to being down-sized and dismantled. Such moves have brought thousands onto the street in defense of their social insurance programs, as for instance recently in France. While the Bush administration’s attempt to hollow out Social Security met with a remarkably cold shoulder from the American populace, social obligations accumulated by both the government and the private sector over the past half-century and more are clearly being challenged in the current period. On both sides of the Atlantic, the trend is toward greater “contributivity” in health care and pension systems (see Palier and Martin 2007).

These developments raise a Tocquevillean question that applies not only to America, but to “democracy” in general. In a little-noted portion of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville considered the possible return of “aristocracy” under democratic conditions. In particular, he contrasted the “territorial aristocracy” of old, with its notions of *noblesse oblige* toward its subjects, with the new aristocracy arising from industry. “[T]he manufacturing aristocracy of our day, after having impoverished and brutalized the men whom it uses, leaves them to be nourished by public charity in times of crisis.” Although he regards this new manufacturing aristocracy as “one of the most restrained and least dangerous” of its kind, he warns that “the friends of democracy ought constantly to turn their regard with anxiety in this direction; for if ever permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy are introduced anew into the world, one can predict that they will enter by this door” (Tocqueville 2000: 532). While the

manufacturing aristocracy to which Tocqueville points has since been largely supplanted by a financial elite, recent developments suggest that we have tended toward that “unbrotherly aristocracy” foreshadowed both in Weber’s writings on the Puritans and in Tocqueville’s on the danger of a return of “permanent inequality.”

But this is hardly an American problem alone, even if the U. S. leads the way in this direction. In the United States, the situation of young, undereducated black men begins to appear increasingly like a state of “permanent inequality” in which they are more or less completely disconnected from the “mainstream” society. Yet in Europe, the immigrant underclass of the *banlieus* and the housing projects may be in a comparable position. There is every reason to give due analytic regard to the differences between the societies on either side of the Atlantic, but it also seems important to concentrate on the similarities and on ways in which the “exceptionalist” thesis may mislead us into thinking that the U. S. can never develop a more comprehensive social safety net. The way the United States goes about addressing social problems will likely have a more prominent private dimension than will be the case in Europe. The question is whether or not the response will be characterized by a more “brotherly” or a more “unbrotherly” quality – in other words, whether it will reflect the judgmental exclusiveness of the “undeserving” bequeathed to us by the Puritans or be inflected more by the prophetic inclusiveness of a Martin Luther King, Jr.

Exceptionalism and Social Policy: Between Cultural Genetic Code and Everyday Politics

The foregoing discussion raises the question: under what conditions is a more “brotherly” social policy conceivable in the United States? Lipset argued that, after the

anomalous interregnum of the New Deal and the Great Society, “the prolonged postwar prosperity... refurbish[ed] the classic American laissez-faire, anti-statist, market-oriented, meritocratic, individualistic values” (Lipset 1996a: 98). In other words, the antipathy we have observed since the mid-1970s with regard to state provision of social welfare benefits is simply a “return to baseline,” so to speak; according to this view, the foregoing era of government interventionism was a deviation from bedrock American proclivities that is now being rectified. These values are often seen as the core of what makes America “exceptional”; indeed, Lipset bundles them together into a putative “American creed.” If Lipset is correct, the prospects of movement toward more social-democratic policies that might bring the United States in line with other wealthy democracies on issues such as national health insurance are dim indeed.

But is there really an “American *exceptionalism*” that it is our fate as a nation constantly to re-enact? Many have doubted that this is the case. Even with regard to perhaps the main arrow in the “exceptionalist” quiver – the old problem, initially raised by Werner Sombart, of “why no socialism in the United States” – Aristide Zolberg (1986) has argued that the whole problematic has been misplaced. In a detailed comparative analysis of working class mobilization and political action in several European countries and the United States, Zolberg shows that the literature on the success of socialist movements has overemphasized the unusually successful German case, as a result of which all the other cases – but especially the American – seem to fail to measure up. Concluding that there are as many exceptionalisms “as there are cases under consideration,” he urges us to discard the “exceptionalist” preoccupation entirely in favor of comparative historical macroanalysis.

In a recent study of the death penalty, for example, Carol Steiker (2005) has noted that until approximately 30 years ago, any notion of “exceptionalism” would have gone in the other direction, so to speak, for at that time it was the United States, not Europe, which was in the vanguard of the movement to abolish capital punishment. Indeed, such punishment was briefly invalidated with the Supreme Court’s 1972 decision in *Furman v. Georgia*. While the American position on this issue now stands in stark and unflattering contrast to the European, Steiker contends that this outcome was contingent, depending more on the myriad pressures facing the Supreme Court at a particular historical moment than on any timeless American commitment to capital punishment. Moreover, the elimination of the death penalty in Europe had little to do with popular opinion on the matter, for substantial majorities of the population of Britain, France, and Germany supported the death penalty at the time of its abolition in each country. Rather, she argues, this outcome was predicated upon the greater power of government bureaucrats to realize their preferences than would be possible in the U. S. David Garland (2005) has argued even more forcefully that American practice with regard to the death penalty has been out of line with that of its usual reference group societies for only the past 30 years, and that any efforts to attribute its current anomalous stance to some deeply American cultural traits is therefore misguided. Indeed, the situation today (at least outside of Texas) is much as Tocqueville indicated in *Democracy in America* (2000: 38): “one never saw the death penalty laid down more profusely in the laws, or applied to fewer of the guilty.”

Other important recent work has also called into question the notion of American exceptionalism, with its potentially quietistic political implications. In her examination

of the reasons for the lack of national health insurance in the United States, Quadagno (2005) has argued that the anti-statism supposedly at the heart of American political self-understanding cannot account for those cases in which Americans *have* embraced state intervention, such as Social Security and Medicare. On the basis of her evaluation of this version of the exceptionalist thesis, as well as of several other possible explanations for why the United States has no national health insurance, she argues that it has been the organizational power of particular special interest groups – chiefly doctors, unions, employers, and insurers, in that chronological order – that has stymied efforts at different times to achieve universal health care coverage, not any cultural genetic code that predisposes Americans to accept a health insurance system decidedly contrary to their own interests. Against this background, the exceptionalist thesis seems a counsel of despair, suggesting that certain outcomes are simply impossible (or inevitable). Arguing against this position, she writes (2005: 203), “Antistatist themes help to dramatize the issues, limit the potential range of options considered legitimate choices, and justify inaction. But alternative values of community and social responsibility can also be invoked to support government intervention.”

Similarly, in his history of voting rights in the United States, Alexander Keyssar (2000) argues that, contrary to Tocqueville’s assumption that voting rights would inevitably spread until they had become universal, the story is hardly a straight-line, “onward and upward” story. Rather, whereas voting rights for adult American citizens have now become nearly universal, various groups have been excluded at different times for reasons of property, race, gender, age, residency, and prior felony conviction, and the history of the franchise is characterized by many starts and stops. Despite the salience of

these other bases of exclusion, Keyssar posits that “class tensions” play a central role in understanding the history of contestation over enfranchisement, and that war and its impact are crucial to understanding how the right to vote comes to be acquired by excluded groups. Attacks on the voting rights of the poor and disadvantaged minorities have taken place in recent years by way of insistence on various forms of voter identification, allegedly to address a problem of voter fraud that has never been substantiated.

The work of such scholars as Steiker, Quadagno, and Keyssar leads us away from the more unidirectional or essentialist emphases of the “exceptionalist” thesis, and toward the question “under what conditions do various outcomes occur?” A good example of this kind of scholarship is offered by Klinkner and Smith (1999) in their study of “the rise and decline of racial equality in America.” Based on an examination of the entire history of the United States since the founding, Klinkner and Smith argue that the situation of blacks has improved in contexts in which the United States has participated in wars with avowedly democratic and inclusive aims, blacks join the fight for those causes, and they mobilize on their own behalf in demanding improved standing in American society as well. As in Keyssar’s work, again we find the stress on war as a pivot on which turns the fate of democratic inclusion.

Meanwhile, the economist Benjamin Friedman has recently argued that the *conditio sine qua non* of tolerance and progressive social policy is economic growth; the Great Depression was, he says, the “great exception” that proved the rule. Friedman shows that Reconstruction, early twentieth-century Progressivism, and the Great Society were the political concomitants of periods of economic growth, whereas an intolerant

Populism, the national origins-based immigration restriction of the 1920s, and the retrenchments of the 1970s and 1980s were responses to economic contraction. “As in the 1880s and again in the 1920s,” Friedman (2005: 205) writes, “public expression of racial, ethnic, and religious intolerance increased sharply in the two decades of stagnant incomes following 1973.”

Friedman’s work reminds us that, contrary to the “exceptionalist” thesis, varying conditions produce different perspectives on the shape of society and the role of government in achieving desired aims. Affirming that anti-statism has been a consistent feature of American politics, Jill Quadagno nonetheless points out that a constant cannot explain varying outcomes and that there are other values present in the society that can be and have been used to justify a role for government involvement. Quadagno wishes to awaken the slumbering and galvanize them for action on behalf of a more rational and satisfactory system of medical coverage. Her analysis, however, seems to dismiss the very possibility of the kind of “cultural genetic code” that I have attempted to delineate in favor of an essentially voluntarist recipe for achieving a national health care policy: “The public is willing. The time to act is now” (Quadagno 2005: 213). But there is no obvious sociological reason why this should be the case, other than the fact that there are substantial groups of people who would benefit from a change in policy. That in itself is nothing new, however, and has previously failed to produce the necessary mobilization.

While these varied ripostes to the exceptionalist thesis make good sense, they fail to draw on the resources present in American traditions to which the exceptionalist thesis properly calls attention: namely, the features of the American civil religion outlined by Robert Bellah in a number of his writings on American society. Bellah (1992: 180) has

argued that “every movement to make America more fully realize its professed values has grown out of some form of public theology [aka civil religion], from the abolitionists to the social gospel and the early socialist party to the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King and the farm workers’ movement under Caesar [sic] Chavez. But so has every expansionist war and every form of oppression of racial minorities and immigrant groups.” Clearly, this “public theology” is a protean and often contradictory matter, capable of being pushed in different directions on the basis of a variety of factors.

Given the centrality of the civil religion theme to the exceptionalist thesis, the lack of attention to the conditions under which American “public theology” produces different outcomes is odd and perplexing. How could the most distinctive feature of American life relative to its usual European comparison countries – its civil religion -- fail to play an important role in explanations of popular attitudes and policy outcomes? I believe this lacuna is the legacy of a misguided incorporation into American social scientific thinking of the anti-clericalism of Continental progressivism. As Tocqueville explained, religion was deeply bound up with the *ancien regime* in Europe, whereas in America religion and liberty marched hand-in-hand – with enduring consequences. The result was that religion became “the first of our political institutions.” A great deal in American politics depends, therefore, on the way in which the civil religion is interpreted. However that may be, its centrality to our politics cannot be ignored.

In this regard, James Morone has argued that, largely as a result of the decision to legalize abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, progressives ceded to the right the conservative moral fervor that has invigorated American politics for the past thirty years. Having based support for abortion rights on claims about liberal privacy rights, the left ceded “moral

values” to the right. The embrace of rights-based liberalism unwittingly led the left to march in tandem with an emerging neo-liberal politics of economic freedom. The outcome was a retreat from a bold, egalitarian politics, a retreat that was only reinforced by the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union in the early 1990s: “Liberalism protects our people from dangerous impulses, from discrimination and hate crimes. But it does not rouse people to win new rights, wider justice, and greater social equity. It does not dream big dreams about a better society” (Morone 2002: 492).

Morone’s assessment of the current political situation has much to commend it. Yet it would not seem to be able to explain why Americans appear, at least so far, to want to defend Social Security, the old-age insurance program that has been the most important reversal of “anti-statist values” and the most successful anti-poverty program ever undertaken in the United States. Medicare, the health insurance analog of Social Security, is similarly undergoing expansion, despite all the attacks on it and claims of its impending insolvency. Meanwhile, the state of Massachusetts has adopted a program designed to reduce dramatically the number of its inhabitants who lack medical insurance, and California and other states have indicated a desire to follow in its footsteps. These developments suggest that Quadagno may be right, and that there are limits – or, under certain circumstances, alternatives -- to Americans’ anti-statism.

Conclusion

The notion of American exceptionalism has come to be seen over time as a kind of “iron law of American politics,” according to which Lipset’s “American creed” of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire comprise the limits of

the conceivable in social policy in ordinary times. But what if, in five years' time, the financing of Social Security and Medicare has been put on a firmer footing, and some version of national health insurance (not, in all likelihood, a "single-payer" system) were in place? The United States would no longer look so exceptional, especially as the Europeans are themselves in the process of scaling back their own social welfare commitments. Might one then say that the Great Depression was more than merely the beginning of a temporary deviation from the rock-ribbed anti-statism thought to be so central to "American exceptionalism," and that the Depression constituted a new "point of departure" for American society? If so, those who regard FDR as a sort of "Great Satan" for introducing policies they regarded as tantamount to socialism might turn out not to have been entirely wrong to see things as they did.

To be sure, the American civil religion has been interpreted most expansively in war, depression, and the responses to them – that is, during Reconstruction, the New Deal, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Great Society (the latter two being responses to the Cold War as much as anything else). These findings are consistent with much scholarship emphasizing the relationship between citizenship rights and warfare (e.g., Mann 1987). Yet these findings lead one to ask whether it is only disasters that bring forth "brotherliness" in American life. The New Jerusalem, notably adept at the capitalist spirit and covetous of Mammon in a way that the "Protestant ethic" had never intended, has succeeded so well that it has become the New Rome (see Maier 2006). Its first steps down the road to global empire have become stuck in the mud of Mesopotamia, and little in the way of sacrifice has been asked of the populace in the midst of the supposed "battle of the century" – the "war on terror." If past history is any guide, there is little

brotherliness likely to issue from a struggle that asks so little of the nation. The cultural genetic code may simply endure as an “iron law” dictating outcomes in social policy. Still, there are signs that significant change may be afoot; one might see in the slow rousing of the “religious left” a re-run of the reformist Progressive movement of a century ago. Whether substantial change in American social policies comes to pass will depend on whether “short-term processes override, deflect, or transform long-term processes” and the alternative, “brotherly” strands of American civil religion bring about another genetic mutation in the body politic.

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NOTES

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¹ There is an intriguing parallel between critiques of the “triumphalism” of the notion of American exceptionalism and critiques of Weber’s analysis of rationalization in the West. Weber’s account of the rise of capitalism in the modern period is often pilloried as “Euro-centric” and as denigrating the achievements of non-Western countries and civilizations. Whether this accurately captures Weber’s anguish about the trajectory of “rationalization” is doubtful, though Weber clearly approves of the principled modern *Berufsmensch* born of sectarian Protestantism and finds bureaucratic administration preferable to its rivals on grounds of administrative efficiency. Lipset, at least, sees many of the negative aspects of American life – particularly in the area of race – but still writes as a “proud American.”

² The irony here is that it was precisely this question that propelled a young Trotskyist named Seymour Martin Lipset into the study of history and the social sciences at City College in the late 1930s, rescuing him from the career as a dentist that his parents had wanted him to pursue. See the obituary in the *New York Times*, January 4, 2007; see also Lipset 1996b.

³ I believe Arendt would have been forced to revise this judgment had she lived until 1989, at which point the American constitution came to be a model, and American constitutional advisers were in great demand, in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. David Martin (2005) speaks correctly of the shift since the end of the Cold War from the “trajectory of 1789” to that of 1776.

⁴ Available at: <http://www.wonkette.com/politics/virgil-goode/congressman-assures-constituent-i-will-deport-keith-ellison-223197.php>