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Epochs and Evocations of Exceptionalism: Review of Godfrey Hodgson, The Myth of American Exceptionalism

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It is impossible to read or listen to much extended commentary on politics in the United States these days without frequently coming across the term “American exceptionalism.” After paying close attention to the context in which it is used, I have come to realize that there is a great chasm of difference in its meaning, or at least what it connotes, among different commentators. When I saw that Godfrey Hodgson had written this book,¹ I was eager to see what he did with it. It is a very thoughtful treatise, which covers just about every angle except the one in which I was most interested, so I will address what he does with it, and then take the liberty of explaining what I would have liked for him to have added.

Godfrey Hodgson has spent decades as an astute observer of American politics, if at times from across the pond. His work here has been with newspapers and independent writing projects, and he has spent four decades rubbing shoulders with the power brokers and policy makers of the modern American experiment in representative democracy. Though he seems to tend toward the liberal himself, he wrote a very widely appreciated television special on the Reagan years that was shown in many countries—and he was personally congratulated for his work by both Reagan and Nixon.

All the key idea of his book—exceptionalism—should denote is a sense that a given case implies one or more exceptions to a usual rule. Hodgson points out that in the United States exceptionalism has tended to imply a way of justifying our actions and beliefs through a reconsidered narrative. But it is a narrative behind which there is truth: he quite properly states that “[America’s] principles have protected the United States from many of the worst political catastrophes that have plagued other great nations. They have frustrated bad men and women and motivated wise and courageous conduct.” (xvi)²

As a classicist who works with biography, I have no trouble with this idea. Belief in principles, and the stories that illustrate them, convey a deeper significance than a dry, factual account can easily present. Indeed, the Romans based their view of themselves in Livy's narrative of early Rome ("From the Founding of the City"), little of which actually happened in the way Livy portrays it. It was their pious legend through which they understood their traditionalism. These were good examples to emulate and bad ones to avoid. If Hodgson is right that "it is not good...for individuals or nations to believe things that are not quite true," (xvii) it is mainly in the sense by which he limits the statement—we should not pat ourselves on the back too much simply for being born in the same land as the founders of those principles.

The question is whether this exceptional view of the past is benign; why is this sort of exceptionalism "not good"? Hodgson, we saw, asserts that there is something wrong with believing things that are untrue. I suspect he paints with too broad a brush, but he does point out in the "Other Exceptionalism" chapter many ways in which this confidence has started to work against us: the majority of us believe things about our present-day foreign policy, health care and economy that are not true, and we believe them based on our understanding of our past and who it has made us. Arguably, the Romans' willingness to continue to believe they were holding up their old values under the iron hand of the Principate had the same effect. However, they also had our ability to critique from within—Tacitus' critique of the fascist tactics of Domitian was as direct, if not as timely, as the United States' responses to McCarthyism or Watergate.

It is worth noting that our view of our own past imports a number of ideas that suggest an understanding quite different from the likely reality. Hodgson points out some of the lesser-known realities of the Europeans who came to the New World and why; he shows how similar many world-wide phenomena were during the nineteenth century; he reminds us that our development as a nation took many turns that did not seem so easily cast as a "manifest destiny" (51) at the time, but often simply a concatenation of world events.

Hodgson's thesis is artfully carried out by the organization of his book. It is in this organization that the "epochs" in my title is founded.³ He nicely explains the proper context in which to understand the events of the pre-Revolutionary period in "A City Set upon a Hill" and "Myth vs. Reality." While he does not support the radically dismissive view of our founders presented in Howard Zinn, he is clear to make the case that neither was this entirely a people's revolt.

Hodgson is careful to explain that the period of the early nineteenth century was the most exceptional time of our history. Equality and popular sovereignty were at their peak, though the epoch was deeply scarred by continuing slavery, a scourge that we cannot claim to be the earliest or the most effective at wiping out. He primarily addresses our prosperity as he travels from the Civil to the Cold War, and explains how the fact of being rich, along with important roles—but also lucky ones—in the wars produced a growing sense of the special place of America.

The twentieth century has seen the United States go from the model for progressive governments to the model for conservative governments. Though it is reasonable to suggest that this change may simply be the result of the maturing of a superpower, Hodgson saves his greatest concern for the period of the last thirty years, in which he claims to see the corruption of the best. America is now too frequently led by people who believe what America does is right because America did it, a belief he chillingly compares to the Athenians at Melos in 416 B.C. In the Melian Dialogue Thucydides has the Athenians make the argument that justice is no more than the strong doing what they will and the weak doing what they must. I would have had him add that Euripides seems to respond to this event with the suspended lament called the *Trojan Women*.

Several European countries have more social mobility than us and have surpassed us in standard of living. This new development makes it even more surprising that exceptionalism has become a more common way of talking and thinking in this very epoch. The psychologists might be able to say something about cognitive dissonance at work in us. One of my favorite

current juxtapositions that I hear from “exceptionalists” is the dire (and properly Christian) understanding of the dark aspects of human nature, and yet a willingness in virtually the same breath to say that unregulated capitalism is an ideal economic system.

In pondering Hodgson’s case, I find myself asking: would exceptionalist thinking consider it necessary to acknowledge genocide; would it be unusually fair to its citizens? If there are not these sorts of realities in practice, then what does it really mean? A student presenting her Fresno Pacific senior-thesis work on the Armenian genocide pointed out that a public acknowledgement by our government would have real meaning—malefactors might start to think twice. Yet as we watch the events in Syria unfold now, and recall Darfur, Rwanda, Cambodia, etc., back to the Holocaust and beyond, we probably have to realize we do not really mean “never again.” However, we can try to be better, and the U.S. has been a beacon for that impulse—not when we are self-congratulatory, but when we hold ourselves to the standards to which the amazing polity handed down to us allows us to aspire.

At the beginning of this piece, I did mention that I had a specific question I would have liked answered, though since I do not know Godfrey Hodgson, I was unable to ask him to write that book. I am deeply invested in the problem of what people mean in the current political climate when they refer to exceptionalism. I think I am so motivated to investigate this question because I believe it is a microcosm of many modern communication shortcomings. If we are not talking about the same thing, how can we come to an understanding? And of course the answer starts with education: are we reflective enough to tease apart what we mean?

It is clear that some use the term to mean we are unique in history; therefore, we have to be understood as working by different rules and should not be questioned by the rest of the world. If we say the Geneva Conventions are quaint, then they are. This understanding motivated the outrage when President Obama said he believed in American exceptionalism. “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British

exceptionalism, and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.”⁴ I believe critics should note that he picked two nations that have, in the development of the rule of law and in governing by the people, very significant places and the right to be considered exceptional. From the root meaning of the word, should exceptional countries be “taken out” of having to answer to the international community, or should they be considered unusually excellent examples of that community?

Thus, there is another meaning connoted by exceptionalism that affirms the notion that the United States has set up the best governing system in the world, and its practice over these centuries has shown it to be capable of adapting for the better and allowing positive influence on the larger world. This exceptionalism does not simply imply that America or Americans are better, but that we have been fortunate enough to have a system that brings out the best in talented people and groups (and frustrates the worst).

I think there is huge value in our cleaving to this latter definition. Christians know that we humans are fallen people—we cannot choose the right ourselves. For many of us, life in Christ, the new Adam, allows a better path. However, for a whole nation, we have a system of consent of the governed and regulation and transparency that allows the best functioning of a large polity.

What we do is not right because we are Americans, any more than what Nixon did was legal because he was President. Both assumptions miss the key wisdom and greatness of our Constitution and government—when we go astray we have ways of correcting ourselves, and we represent a very successful chapter in the extremely short history of democracy, broadly defined.

The idea of democracy started with the hoplites in certain Greek *poleis* (city-states), but it really only gained much traction in the last few centuries and the logical extent of the franchise has only taken shape in the last century. We have grown into an admirable system of government through certain essentials that helped create a national ideology containing exceptionalist “elements” from the beginning of our nation. Hodgson explains: these are “such values as liberty, the political sovereignty of the people, equality before the law, and the

paramount rule of constitutional law”(181). There is nothing wrong with belief in the universalism of such concepts—it is only the blind application of them in our interaction with the world, or the unexamined belief in our connection to them, that leads most readily to the problems inherent in the concept of an exceptionalism of uniqueness. A belief in our unique role without its context of the system in which it has come to function not only diminishes the understanding of why we are exceptional, it also diminishes the hard work that great Americans have done to make this dynamic system quite probably the best the world has seen.

NOTES

- 1 Thanks to Hope Nisly at FPU’s Hiebert Library for sending out electronic lists of new acquisitions.
- 2 Because it will be important to my epilogue, I will enumerate that he sees the principles as “the sovereignty of the people, the rule of law, the subordination of political conflict to constitutional jurisprudence and the protection of rights.”
- 3 This sense of periods and to what extent they were exceptional, as well as how exceptionalism was viewed at the time, make the book an excellent consideration for our issue on time. It also shows a key difference between his interest and mine: he is treating the subject diachronically; my personal note is focused on the synchronic.
- 4 Jay Haug, in a special to *Virtueonline*, wrote that he (Haug) sees this statement as revealing that Obama either “does not understand American Exceptionalism, or believes it is false.” I would beg to differ: I think it shows that Obama defines it differently. President Obama made this comment in response to a reporter’s question in Strasbourg in April 2009.
- 5 This unexamined approach to our exceptionalism also creates a movement toward theologizing rather than understanding the ideology of the American experiment (95). It causes us to take our polity for granted—perhaps why we have some of the lowest voter turnout in the developed world. As Roger Cohen says in his *Times* review of this book: “The phrase has an odd history. As Princeton history professor Sean Wilentz reminds me, American exceptionalism once applied to the hostility that the American worker — virtually alone in the industrialized world — had toward socialism. Now, though, it is infused with religious meaning, which makes it impervious to analysis. Once you say God likes something, who can quibble?”