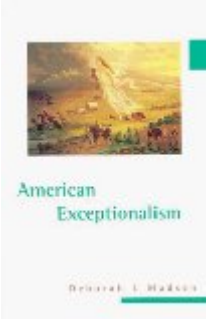
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah L. Madsen. *American Exceptionalism.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998. vii + 186 pp. $18.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-57806-108-2.



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Published on H-Pol (July, 1999)

In *American Exceptionalism*, Deborah L. Madsen provides a brief and provocative overview of a rather complex set of issues relating to the theme of America's sense of itself as a nation apart. The topic is of such great significance because the country's self-perception of its benign uniqueness and distinctiveness has played a tremendously important role in shaping and justifying national policy. Given the inherent complexities of the topic, readers will appreciate the author's clear, fast-paced, and mercifully jargon-lite prose. The book moves quickly from the Puritans to the present in six short chapters, providing coverage of Anglo-American theology, prose, poetry, and movies, as well as counter-exceptionalist ideologies expressed in the work of Native American, Chicano, and to a lesser degree African American writers. This mixing of the "mainstream" and the "margins" is one of the book's most important contributions. The tendency of most scholars of the topic has been to focus on the ideology of the European-American majority and, perhaps, its impact on peoples of color, but not on the intellectual responses of non-white populations to the nationalist exceptionalist mythology. The book's shortcomings are the sketchiness of the coverage, the disjointed structure of the narrative, and the author's avoidance of some of the complexities of the topic.

The Introduction and an opening chapter are devoted to the early Massachusetts Bay Colony Puritans and Roger Winthrop's notion of the colony as a "city upon a hill." Madsen provides clear analysis of Puritan theology in support of her argument that the Puritans were the first American exceptionalists. She also includes useful discussions of the Jeremiad form, the captivity narrative, and the writings of historians Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch. Clearly, as Madsen argues, the idea of New England as an exceptional place, a place chosen by God, was an important part of Puritan thinking in the New World.

However, it could certainly be argued that Puritan notions of exceptionalism had less to do with the distinctiveness of a geographic setting than with the New World Puritans' unique example. The English Puritans viewed New England as a New Eden, but their emphasis was more firmly on the religious experiment underway in the New

World than on the qualities of the place itself. Their outlook is a significant precursor of American exceptionalism, but may not be a full-fledged example. A nationalist ideology of exceptionalism, a more distinctly "American exceptionalism," arguably did not start to develop for a century and a half after the Puritans' arrival in the New World. It is notable that the Puritans did not think of themselves as Americans, and initially considered returning to England once the shining example of their experiment had had its transforming influence on the European Church.

Madsen's perception of the Puritans as the first American exceptionalists is certainly questionable. Yet the reader gets no sense from the narrative that there is any debate over the origins of American exceptionalism. And, if readers were to question Madsen on the matter of the Puritans as the first American exceptionalists, they might also contest her reading of the Antinomian controversy. Madsen states that the controversy centered on Anne Hutchinson's and Roger Williams's challenge to the "connection between the temporal and spiritual orders that was fundamental to exceptionalist ideology" (p. 22). Yet one wonders if that connection between the temporal and spiritual realms didn't have more to do with the needs of the theocratic Puritan hierarchy than with an ideology of exceptionalism. Did the Puritan church leaders feel threatened primarily because their sense of exceptionalism was questioned or because their authority as interpreters of God's will was challenged by Hutchinson and Williams?

Contrary to Madsen's interpretation, one could argue that it was the secularization of American thought in the mid- to late eighteenth century, the securing of independence from Great Britain, and the development of a republican system of government in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that shaped American exceptionalism. It was this later cultural context that gave rise to notions of the new United States as an exceptional place. Indeed, Americans could now contend that a new form of government had been born and had developed in a new land, not transplanted from somewhere else, as the Puritan faith had been. Thomas Jefferson and a host of others pointed out that in the New World, with its massive landed resources, the citizens of the new nation would not get "piled up upon one another in large cities," as was the case in the more heavily populated countries of Europe.[1] A combination of ahistoricism and a confidence underwritten by abundant natural resources gave American intellectuals the impression that their new republic might escape the cyclical pattern of nations, empires, or republics rising and declining, a pattern that most intellectuals had subscribed to. It was these kinds of notions that seemed to underpin America's exceptionalist ideology, at least according to historians such as Dorothy Ross.[2] Others, like Madsen, argue for the origins or foundations of an exceptionalist ideology in Puritan thought. The point is that there are disagreements over such matters and Madsen ought to have explored them.

At the close of the first chapter Madsen moves from the Puritans straight to Benjamin Franklin, skipping over the first half of the eighteenth century, a chronological short cut that perhaps illuminates the difficulty of tracking American exceptionalism in that period. But the expected discussion of the development of an exceptionalist ideology in the Revolutionary and Early National periods does not really develop. Instead, Madsen turns to the theme of "Dispossession: Native American Responses to the Ideology of Exceptionalism." This is a vitally important topic, but the reader has not yet been told much about the exceptionalist ideology that nurtured and legitimated the process of dispossession. What is more, the chronology is a little weak in places. For example, in her discussion of the Cherokee Elias Boudinot's "An Address to the Whites" (1826), Madsen notes that "the progress of the nation's Manifest Destiny is inextricably bound up with that of the native people in Boudinot's argument" (p. 53). But the

phrase Manifest Destiny was not used for almost two decades after Boudinot's speech. Certainly an ideology was forming in the 1820s that can be considered an important precursor to Manifest Destiny. However, the full-blown concept of Manifest Destiny, drawing on a particular mix of notions of geographic determinism, divine providence, democratic superiority, Romantic Nationalism, and racialist assumptions, was a product of the 1840s, a time of tensions between the U.S. and Great Britain and conflict with Mexico. Manifest Destiny and exceptionalism are fundamentally interrelated concepts, but they cannot be used interchangeably.

In the chapter on Native American responses, Madsen provides useful analysis of Native American literature, including works by Charles Eastman, Luther Standing Bear, D'Arcy McNickle, Vine Deloria, Jr., James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko. Her treatments of individual works are concise and informative. However, the reader is left wondering whether these writers are really responding to America's "exceptionalist mythology," or more directly to the acts of greed and racist aggression that seem more hypocritical in light of America's exceptionalist ideology. Perhaps this is a minor point, yet it is one that speaks to larger issues concerning the all-encompassing nature of American exceptionalism in Madsen's treatment. Works that relate to elements of the nation's exceptionalist outlook are viewed by the author as examples or manifestations of exceptionalism, and those who respond to or criticize American expansion are treated as conscious proponents or articulators of a full-blown counter-exceptionalist ideology. The term "American exceptionalism" takes on an elastic quality in Madsen's analysis. Perhaps this is only appropriate, given how vital the theme of exceptionalism is to understanding American thought and action.

However, in the book's next chapter on "Exceptionalism in the Nineteenth Century" the framework of exceptionalism becomes even more fluid. Madsen provides coverage of the key writers of the American Renaissance--Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman--the Leatherstocking novels of James Fenimore Cooper, the rhetoric of abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, and the paintings that illustrated the theme of Manifest Destiny. It is a little too much for one chapter. The end result is more a cataloguing of mid-nineteenth century expressions pertinent to the ideology of exceptionalism than a coherent analysis of a cultural context. It needs to be emphasized that Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were transcendentalists first, perhaps Romantic Nationalists second, and American exceptionalists third. Such distinctions are worth remembering if we are to see the tremendous variety and disorderliness of American thought, as opposed to seeing those diverse strands as neatly woven parts of a coherent exceptionalist fabric.

The next chapter, on "Chicano Responses to the Ideology of American Exceptionalism," begins with coverage of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the expansionism of the 1840s and moves quickly to "El Plan Espiritual de Aztln" (1969) and the writings of Rudolfo Anaya, Francisco Lomel, Gloria Anzalda, and others. The linkage is obvious, since these works are reactions to the loss of a cultural homeland, and that loss was a consequence of military endeavors motivated by and later justified by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Yet Madsen misses an opportunity to discuss America's fin de siecle expansion and the utilization of exceptionalist rhetoric to justify the acquisition of non-contiguous territories in the wake of the victory over Spain.

The book's fifth chapter, "Westerns and Westward Expansion," starts with an overview of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). Madsen then discusses how Turner's notion of the frontier as a meeting ground of savagery and civilization became a mainstay of west-

ern novels and movies. Her discussions of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) and Zane Grey's *The Last of the Plainsmen* (1908) and *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) are concise and readable, though not strikingly new. Similarly, the chapter's discussion of John Ford's western movies, *Stagecoach* (1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Rio Grande* (1950), and *The Searchers* (1956), while fast paced and insightful, do not add much to the more extended analyses offered in other places, such as Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the West in Twentieth-Century America* (1992) and John G. Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique* (1973).

The book's final chapter analyzes "Contemporary Interpretations of Exceptionalism" and begins with "Larry McMurtry's post-modern deconstruction of the myth of the West and the exceptionalist assumptions upon which it is based" (p. 146). One suspects that McMurtry would be surprised to find himself labeled a post-modern deconstructionist; what is more, McMurtry might well argue that illuminating aspects of western mythology does not necessarily render one a counter-exceptionalist. Still, Madsen's coverage of his major novels, including *Lonesome Dove* (1985), *Anything for Billy* (1988), and *Buffalo Girls* (1990), is quite effective. Also useful are her treatments of Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992) and of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying Lot of 49* (1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and *Mason & Dixon* (1997). However, it is not always crystal clear how the plots and meanings of these novels constitute commentaries on or critiques of a national exceptionalist mythology. In a similar vein, the book's final section, "Resurrecting the Myth: Representing the Vietnam Conflict," which echoes the thesis of Slotkin (first articulated in *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* [1973] and later in *Gunfighter Nation*) may overstate the significance of Sylvester Stallone's Rambo movies to the theme of American exceptionalism. Madsen could have explored more fully the connections between the Cold War rhetoric of the post-World War Two decades and the rhetoric of exceptionalism, and would have found more important examples of the linkage in the speeches of Ronald Reagan than in Stallone's dialogue.

Madsen concludes the book with a bold statement: "Exceptionalism was the legacy of the Old World for the New, but exceptionalism is now the legacy of the United States for us all" (p. 166). Both halves of the statement are questionable. American exceptionalism may be less the product of Old World influence and more the consequence of the natural advantages of the New World setting and the republican form of government that developed there. And, American exceptionalism may, after all, be a particular national variant of an ideology that has been more universally subscribed to. One is hard pressed to identify a nation that has not developed an exceptionalist ideology, much less a powerful empire that has not had a sense of itself as unique. Madsen's analysis raises the question "is America's exceptionalism really exceptional?" She could have done more to answer that question. Still, it is only bold works such as Madsen's that raise such important issues.

There are some notable omissions from the book's bibliography. Madsen includes Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence*, but not the two subsequent volumes in his trilogy, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation*. *Gunfighter Nation* includes an extended analysis of the John Ford westerns, and particularly detailed and interesting coverage of *The Searchers*, one of the movies that Madsen chooses to examine at length. There is also no mention in the bibliography of Lee Clark Mitchell's book *Westerns* (1996), or of Patricia Nelson Limerick's seminal study *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987).[3]

Also absent from the bibliography and the narrative coverage are the theoretical writings of the last decade on American exceptionalism, in-

cluding essays by Michael Kammen and Ian Tyrrell (part of an important Forum in the *American Historical Review*), and books by Seymour Martin Lipsett and Byron Shafer.[4] Madsen also overlooks the rich historical literature on the concept of Manifest Destiny, beginning with the writings of Julius Pratt and Albert Weinberg in the 1930s, Edward McNall Burns in the 1950s, Frederick Merk in the 1960s, Thomas Hietala in the 1980s and 1990s, and, most recently, Anders Stephanson.[5]

Now, given the breadth of Madsen's coverage and the brevity of the narrative, one ought not to expect the work to be comprehensive. Indeed, much of the book consists of textual analysis of novels and movies, with less attention focused on historical context. But the conspicuous gaps in the bibliography speak to one of the book's major shortcomings. Madsen, in analyzing so many literary sources, highlights some of the expressions of exceptionalist thinking in America but does not provide effective reconstructions of the historical context at different points in time. The narrative wanders from analysis of Puritan texts to analysis of recent Native American and Chicano writers. The reader is moved from Winthrop and the Mathers, whose theological sermons are analyzed in historical context, to James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Rudolfo Anaya, and a host of other contemporary writers who are reflecting back on the past. These various primary and secondary works are very different kinds of sources, and they warrant different kinds of analysis. In short, some of the texts examined are manifestations of exceptionalism, others are commentaries on the consequences and contradictions of exceptionalism.

Tighter organization and greater attention to historical context and to the rich historiographic literature on the topic would have strengthened *American Exceptionalism*. Yet, Madsen is to be commended for taking on such a massive and complex topic and raising so many important issues. In the last analysis, a small and accessible work on such a vital topic may be more useful to the general reader than a large and comprehensive work on a less significant topic.

Notes

[1]. Thomas Jefferson's quotation is from H. A. Washington, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 2 vols (Washington, D.C., 1854), 2: 332. See also Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904), 41, 43-44.

[2]. Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review*, 89 (October 1984), 909-928, 912. Anders Stephanson, in *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), like Madsen, begins his examination with the Puritans.

[3]. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the West in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992). Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).

[4]. Michael Kammen, "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration," *American Quarterly*, 45 (March 1993), 1-43; Michael McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History,'" pp. 1056-1067, in AHR Forum, *American Historical Review*, 96 (October 1991), 1031-1055; Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review*, 96 (October 1991), 1031-1055. See also, Tyrell's rejoinder to McGerr's response (cited above), in ibid., 1068-1072; Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different: A New Look at American Ex-*

ceptionalism (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1991) and Seymour Martin Lipsett, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996).

[5]. Julius Pratt, "The Ideology of American Expansion," in Avery Craven, ed., Essays in Honor of William E. Dodd (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1935), 335-353; Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935; paper ed., Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1963); Edward McNall Burns, *The American Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Purpose and Destiny* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957); Frederick Merk, with Lois Bannister Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Random House, 1963, 1966); Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*; Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris, eds., *Manifest Destiny and Empire: Antebellum American Expansionism* (College Station: Published for the University of Texas at Arlington by Texas A & M University Press, 1997).

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

Citation: David M. Wrobel. Review of Madsen, Deborah L. *American Exceptionalism.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

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