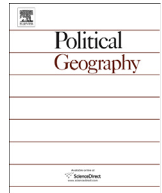
Political Geography xxx (2017) 1–9

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo



Deadly exceptionalisms, or, would you rather be crushed by a moral superpower or a military superpower?

David Jansson

Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Box 513, 75120 Uppsala, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 18 December 2017
Accepted 22 December 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Exceptionalism
Nationalism
Ideology
Racism
U.S.
Sweden

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I consider the ways in which nationalism in both the U.S. and Sweden relies on notions of exceptionalism, and I discuss what this means materially for their own populations and for the world. The analysis consists of two lines of attack against both these assumptions of exceptionalism – one focusing on psychological processes and the other political economy processes. I examine the historical development of the ideas of U.S. and Swedish exceptionalism, and consider the roles of ignorance, denial, and projection in maintaining these problematic ideas. Through the use of a materialist definition of racism, I show how the nationalist ideology of exceptionalism in these two cases harms the well-being of their own citizens as well as citizens of other states. I argue that a combination of the psychological and political economy approaches are necessary if we are to both understand the power and impact of exceptionalism as a nationalist ideology and to be able to effectively work against their tendency to "crush" marginalized groups.

© 2017 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Introduction

In this essay, I consider the ways in which nationalism in both the U.S. and Sweden relies on notions of exceptionalism, and I discuss what this means materially for their own populations and for the world. The analysis consists of two lines of attack against both these assumptions of exceptionalism, where I review the processes at work behind the production of exceptionalism, the Others which are involved in the construction of these national identities, and the material forms of racism that haunt both the U.S. and Sweden and betray their claims to exceptionalism. I argue that we need to combine a psychological analysis with a political economy analysis if we are to understand the power and impact of exceptionalism as a nationalist ideology.

While the majority of the academic literature on national exceptionalism focuses specifically on "American exceptionalism", in an important sense, assumptions of national exceptionalism are in fact an inherent element of the ideology of nationalism. As Tom Nairn (1981) argues, "nationalism" is composed of two elements: national*ism* and *national*ism, the former referring to the general ideology of the naturalness of nations and the ideal of the nation-state (where each nation has its own state), the latter emphasizing the uniqueness of each nation, the qualities that make each nation *special*. There is hardly a nation on Earth that doesn't think of itself as exceptional in some way. Indeed, when Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front in France, was recently caught plagiarizing a speech by one of her political rivals (Breeden, 2017), it was revealed that the sections that she plagiarized articulated specifically some of the ways in which she understands France as special or exceptional.

But while most nations can make a claim to being "exceptional" in some way, in the political geography and international relations literature, "exceptionalism" is primarily associated with the U.S. This is not inevitable; for example, K.J. Holsti (2011) considers exceptionalism to be a type of foreign policy, one that is both rare and not limited to the experience of the U.S. But "American exceptionalism" is the default "exceptionalism" in the academic literature, and it is with this version of exceptionalism that we begin.

"American exceptionalism" as a nationalist ideology

While the usage of the term "exceptional" as a characteristic of the U.S., as a set of governing institutions or as a people, was uncommon until the 1930s, the belief that "America" is exceptional in various ways has had "tremendous staying power" (Roberts & Di Cuirci, 2013: ix), emerging even before there was a United States and still thriving in the 21st century. Starting in the 20th century, "American exceptionalism" came to be understood as consisting of

E-mail address: dj28@cornell.edu.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.12.007
0962-6298/© 2017 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Please cite this article in press as: Jansson, D., Deadly exceptionalisms, or, would you rather be crushed by a moral superpower or a military superpower?, *Political Geography* (2017), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.12.007

ARTICLE IN PRESS

two elements, exemplary and missionary (Restad, 2015). The U.S. (I prefer to avoid using "America" as much as possible, since there are "Americas" beyond the U.S., and furthermore, my focus is on "America" as an idea or ideology) is thus exceptional as an example for others to follow (I would call this "passive exceptionalism"), or, *as* exceptional, it has a responsibility to reshape the world in its image (missionary or "aggressive exceptionalism"). Another common dichotomy in the literature relates to whether scholars conceptualize exceptionalism as simply an objective reference to difference (that is, what makes the U.S. different from other countries (e.g. Lipset, 1996; Lockhart, 2003)), or whether exceptionalism is meant to convey a normative claim of superiority (why the U.S. is *better* than other countries (see, e.g., Kattenburg, 1980; much of Samuel Huntington's work)). There is a symptomatic elision between these two perspectives, as Restad (2015: 17) points out: "the very idea of an objective – as opposed to ideational – definition of exceptionalism is nonsensical. Why use the term "exceptional" if one does not mean normatively superior? American exceptionalism cannot simply mean different, because all nations are different." The nonsensical nature of the conceptualization of "American exceptionalism" (and "exceptionalism" in general) is a hint that what is at work here is ideology – and in particular, the ideology of nationalism. Natalie Koch (2017: 145) is correct in seeing "the normatively-laden idea of American exceptionalism as a staple of the country's nationalist ideology". The literature on exceptionalism is impossible to understand without reference to both ideological nationalism and methodological nationalism – both of which contribute to a state-centric analysis and an inclination to "buy" the nationalist narrative of exceptionalism.

So how can we work around these problems of ideology and methodology? Restad, for example, productively focuses on exceptionalism as a belief system. She considers the belief in American exceptionalism to be a foundational element of the (dominant) national identity in the U.S. This identity consists of three main ideas: first, the U.S. is distinct from the Old World, not only different but *better*, and this superiority is crucial because it underpins the second idea, which is that the U.S. has a special and unique role to play in world history. The third idea is that the U.S. will resist the laws of history by remaining a superpower indefinitely, in contrast to the ultimate downfall of all previous world powers. These three ideas are interconnected, and the last idea suggests that there may be an underlying anxiety surrounding the maintenance of the U.S.'s superpower status, as a future decline of the U.S. would undermine all three elements of the belief in its exceptionalism. We can fruitfully connect Restad's analysis with Holsti's (2011) typology of exceptionalism as a type of foreign policy, in particular with regard to Holsti's claim that exceptionalist states understand the world as hostile to their interests, indeed that such states *need* external enemies, even if they have to be fabricated. These ideas support the argument that a psychological perspective on the idea of "American exceptionalism" (and exceptionalisms in general) is critical to understanding the function of this nationalist ideology. So in the next section I will show how a psychological analysis can be applied.

The psychology of exceptionalism

The importance of the psychological approach is actually hinted at from the beginning of the idea of "American exceptionalism", which is typically traced back to John Winthrop's characterization of the Massachusetts Bay colony in the early 1600s as a "city upon a hill". The reference is to Jesus's call for his people to be a light in the darkness in the New Testament (Matthew 5:14). The verse actually reads: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set upon a hill *cannot be hid*" (Di Cuirci, 2013: vii, my emphasis). As Di Cuirci points out, this is a double-edged message: the city on the hill is, because of its geographical position, both a beacon *to* the world and vulnerable to hostile agents *from* this world. Thus, at the heart of this particular notion of U.S. exceptionalism lies a fundamental psychological tension: this new nation serves as a beacon of hope, a superior people working on behalf of God, but that beacon is vulnerable to attempts to both hinder its message and topple its physical embodiment. I would argue that this sense of threat to the security of the nation is intimately bound to the sense of exceptionalist superiority that is part of the ideology of U.S. exceptionalism. The idea is that "we" are always under threat *precisely because* we are exceptional. As Holsti (2011: 384) puts it, exceptionalist states "portray themselves as innocent victims. They are never the sources of international insecurity, but only the targets of malign forces ….They are exceptional, in part, because they are morally clean as the objects of others' hatreds", and it is this moral cleanliness that is insufferable for the malign forces that would destroy the city upon a hill.

This perceived vulnerability generates fear, but interestingly in the U.S. case, it is not only (or perhaps even primarily) external malign forces that frightened the citizens of the North American colonies; it was internal forces that dramatically affected the collective psyche of the European settlers. Robert Parkinson (2016a), for example, argues that the writers of the Declaration of Independence were motivated more by "racial fear and exclusion" than by concern for "inalienable rights". In Parkinson's analysis of the era of independence, the European settlers felt severely threatened by the possibility of uprisings of the enslaved as well as attacks by the Native American nations. These fears were immortalized in the language of the Declaration, which cited the twin threats of "domestic insurrections" and "merciless Indian savages" (Parkinson, 2016b). One can simply not ignore the psychological dynamics that were present during the origination of the idea of "America" and the founding of the "exceptionalist" U.S. state.

So while I clearly argue for the relevance of a psychological understanding of exceptionalism, I would part with Restad when she gives causal power to U.S. national identity (and by extension the belief in exceptionalism) to shape U.S. foreign policy. The psychological approach is particularly important with regard to the public consumption of the narrative of exceptionalism, but I wish to refrain from giving these dynamics too much credit for the determination of foreign policy. Instead, I think we need to complement the psychological approach with a political economy perspective if we want to be able to evaluate the material drivers of U.S. foreign policy. For help here we can turn to an analysis by John Agnew in this journal from 1983.

The political economy of exceptionalism

Giving causal explanatory force to the ideology of American exceptionalism on U.S. foreign policy is, for Agnew (1983: 164), to accept the transcendental idealism of the exceptionalists, "to abandon any pretense at history and instead engage in a propaganda exercise". In other words, it is to mistake the rhetoric for the reality. Doing history instead of propaganda means taking a political economy perspective. But Agnew certainly does not ignore the discursive aspects of U.S. exceptionalism, as one of the first questions that he takes up is that of the origins of the assumptions of exceptionalism. According to Jack Greene (1993), there was a rather widespread hope in the 17th and 18th centuries that "America" would represent the regeneration of European civilization, a reference to the exemplary or passive form of exceptionalism, where "America" constitutes a model for the world to follow. What made it possible for the idea of "America" to hold this position was its *newness*; as James Robertson (1980: 26), describing one of the major nationalist myths, puts it: "Americans are a new people,

Please cite this article in press as: Jansson, D., Deadly exceptionalisms, or, would you rather be crushed by a moral superpower or a military superpower?, *Political Geography* (2017), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.12.007

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7492673

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/7492673

Daneshyari.com