A GREAT DIVIDE?
AMERICA BETWEEN EXCEPTIONALISM AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Conference at the Center for Advanced Studies, Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU), Munich, Germany, May 21-22, 2015. Co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute, the Thyssen Foundation, the Center for Advanced Studies (LMU) and the Catholic University of America. Conveners: Uwe Luebken (LMU), Michael Kimmage (Catholic University), Andrew Preston (Cambridge University) and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI). Participants: Casey Blake (Columbia University), Dirk Boenker (Duke University), Angus Burgin (Johns Hopkins University), Julio Decker (University of Darmstadt), Sarah Earnshaw (LMU), Michelle Engert (LMU), Daniel Geary (Trinity College, Dublin), Stefan Huebner (Bundeswehr University, Munich), Charlotte Lerg (LMU), Emily Levine (University of North Carolina, Greensboro), Laura McDonald (University of Portsmouth), Mary Nolan (New York University), Brendon O’Connor (University of Sidney), Helle Posdam (University of Copenhagen), Katharina Schmidt (Yale Law School), Matthew Sutton (Washington State University), Julius Wilm (University of Cologne), Samuel Zipp (Brown University).

“A Great Divide?” was an international gathering of historians who revisited the old problem of American exceptionalism. The conference was rooted in the following claims: that American exceptionalism has successfully been challenged in the past several decades by historians dedicated to transnationalism; that these historians have demonstrated the interconnectedness of American history, its stature as a nation among nations, in Thomas Bender’s phrase; that nevertheless the trope of American exceptionalism remains alive and well in American politics; and that it is worthwhile to explore the particularities and peculiarities of American history, not in hopes of proving some argument for the superiority of American institutions, but to grasp fully the complicated balance of the local and transnational, the unique and universal, in U.S. history. The conference was introduced by Michael Kimmage, who drew attention to the subject of American exceptionalism outside the United States, to the question of whether there can be a non-normative theory of American exceptionalism and to the strange dynamic whereby an academic generation did its utmost to kill the notion of American exceptionalism only to see this notion flourish in the rhetoric of American politicians, not least in the speeches of President Barack Obama.
The first panel examined foreign policy. Dirk Boenker took up the peculiarities of American history through a non-exceptionalist analytical lens, focusing on naval officers and their professional politics. He argued for the interlocking simultaneity of cross-national commonality, difference, and interconnection that shaped American navalism in the global age before the First World War, reclaiming the pre-war sense of mutual entanglement and convergence among contemporaneous U.S. and European observers of the advance of militarism before 1914 and directing attention to the particulars of U.S. involvement in military geopolitics and arms buildups. Next, Julio Decker examined German and American early-twentieth century colonial infrastructure projects, providing a comparative perspective on labor recruitment and management practices as well as on technology. He focused on the structural similarities of the policies applied in the colonies in hopes of normalizing, or even provincializing, the United States and the German Empire. Decker’s paper investigated the two nations’ histories from the margins, scrutinizing colonial conceptualizations and practices and the transformation of colonial policies in their transfer back to the metropole. His intent was to widen the global perspective and to retrace the patterns that made the United States and the German Empire regular empires. In his comment, Andrew Preston noted the “infrastructural power” of the U.S. in the first era of globalization, 1880–1920; he added the principle of civil religion to the international histories of globalization; and he emphasized the interdependency among empires at this time, especially the many ways in which Britain facilitated America’s rise to global power in the nineteenth century.

The second panel addressed academia and intellectual life. Emily Levine traced the contemporary university back to a competitive “knowledge race,” in which reformers posed new questions about the role of research in society. Levine argued that the university took a distinct path from other modern institutions: universities are exceptional in that they remain at least nominally dedicated to higher ideals, a dedication that explains their incomplete absorption into the global economy. An examination of the history of the research university from the perspective of the “knowledge race” between Germany and America forces us to rethink our standard histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Daniel Geary concentrated on Louis Hartz, whose influential *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) is often seen as a crucial text in American exceptionalism. Hartz’s comparative analysis belies the caricature of exceptionalists as solely focused on the United States, Geary explained. In Hartz’s often overlooked
The Founding of New Societies (1964), he claimed that ideological paralysis was a general feature of European settler societies. The paper also illustrated that critical exceptionalism remained a significant scholarly tradition among many scholars who came of age in the 1960s, though they are typically seen as rejecting exceptionalism. Finally, Geary distinguished American exceptionalism as a theory from American triumphalism as a political stance. In her comment, Charlotte Lerg synthesized the trans-Atlantic and especially the German-American valences of the arguments put forward by Levine and Geary.

The last panel on Thursday dealt with political economy. Samuel Zipp chronicled the life of Wendell Willkie and his recognition of a “one world” outlook. Americans, Willkie argued, had to forego both the “narrow nationalism” and the “international imperialism” practiced by the European powers. Positing Willkie’s transnationalism as the road not taken in the 1940s, Zipp investigated the emergence of an American power that was at once self-assured in the rightness of its vision for the world and yet sometimes unable to see itself as the world power it was coming to be. Brendon O’Connor analyzed the ideology of American exceptionalism, identifying it as a key element of American nationalism, a mythological and often dangerous ideology. It rests on the exceptionalism of birth, the exceptionalism of opportunity, and the exceptionalism of role. The essential problem, according to O’Connor, is that few academics have spent enough time defining the concept of American exceptionalism. He concluded that American exceptionalism is best understood as an ideology.

Angus Burgin, grounding his comments in the dilemmas of political economy, aligned Willkie’s theses with “liberal developmentalism,” detecting a shift in the ideology of American exceptionalism and in this ideology’s history, from theological to social-science narratives.

In her keynote address, Mary Nolan offered a portrait and a critique of American exceptionalism. In the 1940s, the United States was a center of economic production; it has since replaced economic production with finance. Diverging from the social democracies of Western Europe in the 1970s, the United States used the cloak of normative exceptionalism and the loudly proclaimed faith in its own virtue to justify its unilateral action, its market fundamentalism and its use of human rights as a tool of power politics. The fall of communism in 1991 provided a triumphalist gloss to the exceptionalist project, leading us to the ominous state of affairs since the Iraq War and the presidency of George W. Bush.
Friday’s first panel was dedicated to law. Katherina Schmidt detailed the contention that modern American legal culture is qualitatively different from the legal cultures found in other places and, furthermore, that this difference is the result of America’s singular standing and experience among the nations of the world. She argued that there were periods of extreme jurisprudential contingency during which countries like France or Germany could have gone down a path similar to that of the United States; that early twentieth-century American jurists were heavily influenced by pre-existing European attempts at creating a more “realistic” jurisprudence; and that the reasons for the divergences that occurred in spite of these conceptual and ideological commonalities are more complex than proponents of the “American Jurisprudential Exceptionalism” paradigm have tended to acknowledge. Helle Porsdam traced related themes, illustrating that the American legal discourse has now become a global legal discourse: what used to be an American “rights talk” has become a global “human rights talk.” Corporate law and the tendency to treat corporations more and more as people used to be uniquely American. Now it underpins the global acknowledgement of cultural rights, an area of human-rights law that is the new human-rights frontier. In her comment, Michelle Engert asked a series of ethical questions about the nature of American law in those areas where it tends to diverge from the European legal tradition.

Culture was the theme of the next panel. Laura McDonald discussed postwar productions of musicals in Germany, Austria, Japan, Korea and the Philippines, exploring how their citizens practiced American values and national pride through song and dance. McDonald interpreted the the musical as an American form that represents an interaction between (non-American) domestic and American theater industries. Learning and practicing American values and ideals through the translation and performance of musicals has contributed to nation building and developed new skills and confidence in growing domestic industries. Sarah Earnshaw investigated the increasing militarization of American exceptionalist discourses in U.S. foreign policy from the 1960s onwards. A messianic streak in American foreign policy, built on binaries of self and other, led to the unilateralist and interventionist Bush Doctrine. American exceptionalism thus serves as an ideological cover for the depredations of American foreign policy. In his comment, Casey Blake asked about the affect (as opposed) to the ideology of American musicals, and their felt experience; he added the more self-doubting, ironic and worried
voices of George Kennan and Reinhold Niebuhr to the roster of assertive exceptionalists in Earnshaw’s paper.

Political culture was the topic of the conference’s final panel. Stefan Huebner investigated the staging of regional Asian sports events during the Cold War. Approaching American exceptionalism from the “periphery” reveals the United States’ role as an extremely important strategic partner. His paper focused on the Asian Games from 1951 to the present. What began as an American missionary and imperial venture in Asia later acquired the trappings of post-American Asian-ness. Huebner connected the transnational relations between American and Asian actors to American and Asian Cold War propaganda, to development policy, and to the rise and demise of “modernization theory.” Julius Wilm focused on notions of “free land” and, in particular, on the Homestead Act, starting in the 1830s. In their adoption of “free land” as a legislative agenda, Americans drew (selectively) on Mexican precedent, which, as Wilms pointed out, did not prevent both “free land” and the Homestead Act from becoming signifiers to Americans of American political and economic selfhood. In his comment, Matthew Sutton delved into the missionary history that illuminates Huebner’s subject, and he expanded on the translational logic implicit in Wilm’s paradoxical example of American exceptionalism.

The concluding discussion outlined several gaps in the conference. It was agreed that crucial additions, were one to handle American exceptionalism in a comprehensive fashion, would need to include religion, race, gender and the study of “comparative exceptionalisms,” from the “chosen people” of the Old Testament to the messianic energies of Putin’s Russia. It was observed that the papers could be divided into two categories: those that addressed difference or peculiarity — the many ways, comparatively speaking, that U.S. history is unique, unusual, strange and particular; and those papers that looked specifically at American exceptionalism as a phrase or as a doctrine — the idea that America was founded in liberty, unlike any other country, and has a unique mission to give, spread or impose its vision of liberty on the world around it. While the prospect of an edited volume was met with enthusiasm, such a project would have to fill in the gaps identified at the conference to make the scholarly grade, and it would have to navigate the two varieties of American exceptionalism on display at the conference — exceptionalism as peculiarity versus “doctrinal exceptionalism,” an exceptionalism of belief or conviction.

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