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## Prison Area, Independence Valley

Rob Kroes

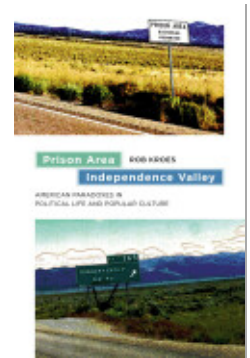
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## TAKING EXCEPTION

IN A NATIONALLY televised speech on Syria, on Tuesday night, September 10, 2013, Obama turned to American exceptionalism as a call to action for an endeavor in which his country stood isolated in the world. “America is not the world’s policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong,” Obama said. “But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act.” He added: “That’s what makes America different. That’s what makes us exceptional.” The concluding word must have brought a wry smile to some at least among his listeners. They must have recognized its use not as powerful rhetoric, to clinch the argument, but rather as formulaic, as a shibboleth granting safe passage to a man whose political credentials had never been fully accepted by a vengeful part of the American citizenry. The word “exceptional” had become the litmus test to those in the media and the political arena who were out to deconstruct and undermine the president from the moment he had entered office.

Obama may have quickly learned his lesson, paying tribute, if not lip service, to a word that was of relatively recent currency in American political discourse. The role it played, though, was like that of earlier passwords, such as “Americanism” and “anti-

communism,” as in the days of the Red Scare following World War I or in the early years of the Cold War with McCarthyism in the role of monitor and protector of the purity of the body politic. The monitoring gaze this time comes once again from the political right, embodied in its lunatic fringe of the Tea Party.

Yet it would be wrong to see Obama as merely paying lip service to the word “exceptionalism” and all it stands for in summary of a larger American creed. Many have been the occasions, from his early presidency on, where we can see Obama revisiting the concept, not just to pay tribute and be done with it, but to consider the options it gave him to be an educator of the nation, to bring a degree of subtlety, nuance, and complexity to a word that too often was used as a facile trope. The way Obama used the word was very much in the vein of what Sacvan Bercovitch has called the American Jeremiad, a particular use of public speech that reminds the audience of its high calling while pointing to the many ways in which it is still remiss, falling short.<sup>1</sup> Listen to Obama, in 2008:

We have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality, that, though imperfect, are exceptional.

Now, the fact that I am very proud of my country and I think that we’ve got a whole lot to offer the world does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries, or recognizing that we’re not always going to be right, or that other people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, all parties have to compromise and that includes us.

I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world toward peace and prosperity and recognizing that leadership is incumbent, depends

on, our ability to create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone.

In the eyes of the monitoring right, qualifying words like “though imperfect,” or the call for compromise, while acknowledging that other people may have good ideas, may already be far too subtle and nuanced. But what caused them to rise in howling anger were Obama’s opening words—often the only words quoted in the right’s indictment: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” As right-wing commentator Michael Barone thundered: “One cannot imagine Presidents Roosevelt, Truman or Kennedy, Eisenhower or Reagan, uttering such sentiments.”<sup>2</sup> Up against such odds, a man like Obama, politician and intellectual, has to tack to political winds while keeping an eye on the compass of his convictions. He has kept valiantly trying to add a touch of realism and relativism to the idea of American exceptionalism, much as that very endeavor is an abomination in the eyes of the Tea Party watch dogs. To those with a historian’s memory, however, it may even appear as if Obama has been trying to add an almost European sense of the fallibility and frailty of human exploits to counter the more impetuous uses of exceptionalism in American political discourse. I for one could not help being reminded of C. Vann Woodward’s reading of the historical experience of the American post-Civil War South as the only region in the United States to have experienced defeat and loss and to have developed a quasi-European sense of the tragic.<sup>3</sup> Some of that sobering sense, I feel, is what Obama is struggling to convey to a larger American public.

There is a further irony here. If my reading of the gist of Obama’s revisits of the concept of exceptionalism is correct, it would highlight a resemblance between his aims and current trends in the academic study of the United States. What C. Vann Woodward had still to call a counterpoint to the prevailing mainstream reading of American history in his day has now become

a widespread inspiration in the fields of American history and American Studies. The urge began to be felt from the 1990s onward to break out of a conceptual view of America as *sui generis*, as exceptional, as different in its historical experience and destiny than any other country in the world. For one thing, this sense could inspire an exploration of the many ways in which the United States had proved different than other countries, though not exceptional. The best encyclopedic treatment is Seymour Martin Lipset's *American Exceptionalism*.<sup>4</sup> A comparativist, Lipset looked at a number of areas in political and social life where the United States traditionally had been seen as forming an exception to rules prevalent in Europe. Thus he revisited Tocqueville's aperçus concerning the lasting effects of America's special historical genesis and development, and the German early-twentieth-century historian and sociologist Werner Sombart's classic study on the question of why there is no socialism in the United States. They are all areas where America can be seen to offer counterpoints to European history while in other areas it moved in step with European history. Thus America could be woven into a larger narrative of forces of social change and modernization as these affected nations on both sides of the Atlantic, each with its own peculiar quirks and twists. Yet it has taken more than a little pushing to shatter the hold of exceptionalism on American historiography.

In an influential essay, entitled "Exceptionalism," Daniel Rodgers made the point that from the early modern era to the post-colonial present, the cultivation of sentiments of difference and superiority has been at the heart of the project of nation-state formation. Within these common terms, however, there has run a thread that, if not wholly distinct to the American complex, carries there a peculiarly striking weight. That is the idea of exceptionalism. Rodgers then makes the following simple but crucial point: exceptionalism differs from difference. Difference requires contrast; exceptionalism requires a rule. Exceptionalist claims pin one's own nation's distinctiveness to every other

people's sameness—to general laws and conditions governing everything but the special case at hand. When difference is put in exceptionalist terms, the exception becomes an exemption, an exemption from the universal tendencies of history, the “normal” fate of nations, the laws of historical mechanics itself.<sup>5</sup>

It is implications like these, where a nation can claim to be above the general rule, if not above the law, that have inspired America's political action as much as its self-reflection. If other nations have agreed to set up an International Criminal Court, America is no party to it, refusing to abide by rules that others have subjected themselves to. Yet among American academics strong movements have occurred to do away with exceptionalism in their understanding of the driving forces behind American history. Programs aiming at “transnationalizing” or globalizing the intellectual paradigms of American history and American Studies found wide support in the main professional organizations. Daniel Rodgers published a pioneering study, entitled *Atlantic Crossings*, that illustrated the gains to be had from internationalizing the frame of interpretation. *Atlantic Crossings* is the first major account of the vibrant international network that American reformers, Progressives, and, later, New Dealers constructed and of its profound impact on the United States from the 1870s through 1945, a story so often obscured by notions of American exceptionalism.<sup>6</sup> At about the same time two collections of essays were published with the broad support of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), edited respectively by David Thelen and Thomas Bender.<sup>7</sup> Both publishing projects broadly aimed at questioning the nation-centered focus of American history, as Thelen has it, or as Bender puts it: “To historicize the nation is to relate its dominant narrative, its national narrative, to other narratives that refer to both smaller histories and larger ones. That means understanding the historical production of the nation and locating it in a context larger than itself.”<sup>8</sup>

Words like “the historical production of the nation” betray an

affinity and intellectual exchange with yet another community of students of America, those active in the intellectual domain of a self-styled American Studies. Always more open to intellectual perspectives current among cultural studies scholars, more willing to use a language that emphasizes the constructionist elements of reality, of reality as imagined and agreed on through social interactions, American Studies people set upon the “deconstruction” of their own academic field with a vengeance. At times it showed a vehemence as if the issue was a matter of exorcism, of driving out all the evil connotations of the word “America,” in an act of linguistic voluntarism, as if changing the language one used would change the world. It led one outsider to scathingly speak of Anti-American Studies, in a facetious review in the *New Republic* of three examples of the new postexceptionalist American Studies.<sup>9</sup>

It was not long, though, before sobering second thoughts came to some of the leading “New Americanists.” In a piece entitled “Re-thinking ‘American Studies after U.S. Exceptionalism,’” Donald Pease acknowledged the resistance to change of large swaths of reality. “Transnational American Studies aspired to remediate the discourse of U.S. exceptionalism by transnationalizing the core values of American civil society. But global civil society has neither transcended the era of the nation-state nor entered into the utopian realm of a cosmopolitan democracy. Have not scholars in transnational American Studies overestimated the ways in which global civil society can mobilize the political energies needed to remedy the economic inequalities that globalization has engendered? Has not post-exceptionalist American Studies also ignored the U.S. state’s power to describe the U.S. as a permanent state of exception?”<sup>10</sup> There is a remarkable return here, linked undoubtedly to the aftermath of 9/11 and the American display of what is known among military people as “full spectrum dominance,” to age-old concepts like the state and the state’s power, or for that matter the nation-state and its attendant nationalism. The permanent state of exception

ironically is presented here as a product of the state's power, as the outcome of the state's power to manipulate reality for its citizenry. We mentioned linguistic voluntarism before, but if one needs proof of it happening, here it is.

Clearly the work of “re-mapping the trans-national”—the name of the series in which this book appears—is a work in progress. How do I see the place of my book in the larger project? For one thing, for much of my life as an academic active in American Studies at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, one continuing theme has been my study of the many ways in which American and European cultures have cross-pollinated and the ways in which cultural influences were received or resisted. Part of my interest there was in issues of Americanization of European cultures or of European anti-Americanism, on either political or cultural grounds. Some chapters in this book clearly reflect that interest, while also critically revisiting it, particularly the chapter on “Cool Hand Luck.” If issues of empire and imperial sway show up in my writing there, it is clearly in response to wider intellectual concerns in the post-9/11 study of America. Issues of politics and power have forced themselves upon my mind most directly in the opening and concluding chapters of the book, on the George W. Bush administration first, on the Obama administration later. The chapters were written against the backdrop of general mood-swings, both in the United States and in Europe. There is one more general aspect of transnationalism, though, that I only became aware of while writing the book. In my earlier writing on American popular culture in particular I tried to answer questions as to what accounts for the lure and appeal of American popular culture, at home and abroad. In this book, though, I found that my interest had moved to the darker side of popular culture and forms of entertainment, even in such gruesome varieties as lynchings. I also found, more clearly than ever before, that there are forms of transnationalism inherent to the train of thought of the human mind. Writing about freaks



in 1930s America, and the Lilliput town on Long Island that housed them, styled after the German medieval city of Nurnberg, brought images to my mind of Nazi Germany and its persecution of freaks. Images of the Nazi holocaust called up pictures in my mind of photographs as they had circulated in the United States. What I am trying to say, is that the transnationalism that one can see happening here is almost like a chimera, one image shimmering through another one, as if in a palimpsest. History does form palimpsests, covering one layer of images with later ones, as if on the wall of an old house with one painted advertisement not quite covering a preceding one. It is an uncanny experience if, by looking intently at one image, another one shows up, shimmering through, taking one from one locale and time to another. It is also exhilarating.

