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Theorizing American Exceptionalism

An Interdisciplinary Historiography and Intellectual History

by
Mugambi Jouet

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Theorizing American Exceptionalism
An Interdisciplinary Historiography and Intellectual History *

Mugambi Jouet **

'American exceptionalism' has become a ubiquitous concept in multiple fields of research. Complicating the picture, it has distinct definitions. To many scholars, 'exceptionalism' means that America is comparatively an 'exception'. This non-normative definition refers to attributes interpretable positively or negatively. Conversely, many other scholars and much of the public interpret 'American exceptionalism' as a faith in American superiority. However, the diverse lines of exceptionalism scholarship are organized into separate fields that are hardly in dialogue, from history to law, criminology, sociology, political science, economics, international relations, American Studies, and beyond. This article therefore offers an interdisciplinary historiography and intellectual history of American exceptionalism that connects the dots between different fields by pointing to interrelationships not always apparent at first glance. The latest research notably addresses the United States' distinctive evolution compared to other Western democracies or the wider world, including its growing polarization over numerous fundamental issues, such as abortion, health care, religion, race, criminal justice, guns, foreign policy, and authoritarianism. The article simultaneously explores the interplay between the comparative and ideological meanings of exceptionalism. In particular, scholars have suggested that the belief that America is 'exceptional' in the sense of exemplary has historically shaped distinctive behavior. Once placed in dialogue, separate fields each offer their own insights on American exceptionalism while helping nuance each other's conclusions, thereby offering a broader understanding of a multifaceted subject.

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** University of Southern California Gould School of Law (*mjouet @ law.usc.edu*).

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1. Introduction

American exceptionalism has captivated generations of scholars. A consensus on its nature nonetheless remains elusive. The subject has spawned a vast literature on issues as diverse as the American Revolution, national culture, religion, abortion, socioeconomic policy, race, criminal punishment, guns, and foreign affairs. If American exceptionalism scholarship theorizes the historical evolution of American society, the evolution of the extensive scholarship on American exceptionalism itself deserves theorizing.

Yet the historiography and intellectual history of American exceptionalism should not be limited to examining the perspectives of historians. Rather, charting the history of this idea also requires us to understand how scholars across disciplines have thought of American exceptionalism. Because experts tend to operate in separate fields, patterns of convergence or divergence in conceptualizing American exceptionalism are hardly apparent at first glance and should be brought to light. These considerations are indispensable to tracing the history of American exceptionalism since it is a subject found in multiple fields, including history, sociology, political science, law, economics, criminology, international relations, and American Studies.

This article therefore presents an interdisciplinary historiography and intellectual history of American exceptionalism. Although 'Exceptionalism Studies' might not be a bona fide academic field, American exceptionalism has been a wide area of research for decades. This development has been obscured by how scholars, siloed into their own fields, may not engage with peers whose research can appear distant and unrelated to their own. It is necessary to bring scholars into greater dialogue, as different fields can offer their own insights while helping nuance each other's conclusions, which would offer a fuller understanding of American exceptionalism.

Of course, the views of scholars are far from being the only relevant ones. In conducting an intellectual history, this article centers on how academics and other experts have approached the subject, whereas other works have engaged to a greater extent with how the general public has thought of American exceptionalism. Nor is the purpose of the article to present my own theory of American exceptionalism per se, but rather to theorize how scholars have analyzed the subject over time.

However, the historiography and intellectual history of American exceptionalism are complicated by its distinct definitions. Among scholars, "American exceptionalism" has mostly meant that America is an "exception" next to other Western democracies or industrialized nations, if not all countries.[1] This is especially so among comparatists who identify atypical facets of American society before theorizing their roots and ramifications.[2] This conception is not fundamentally normative because observers may agree that America is an exception in a given area, but differ on whether this is a positive or negative trait. That understanding may be described as the 'comparative definition' of American exceptionalism.

Diverse scholars have thus cautioned that, in the words of Seymour Martin Lipset, "exceptionalism (…) does not mean better".[3] While Lipset straddled the fields of sociology and political science, academics in other disciplines employed a similar definition as American exceptionalism became an interdisciplinary subject. Also writing in the late 20th century, the historian Michael Kammen concurred: "In my view that phrase [American exceptionalism] does not

[1] Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity From 1492 to 1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 4-7; Michael Kammen, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), x; Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 18; Charles Lockhart, *The Roots of American Exceptionalism: Institutions, Culture and Policies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, "Introduction", in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, ed. Molho and Wood (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), 4; Byron E. Shafer, "Preface", in *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, ed. Shafer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), v-ix.

[2] See, for example, Michael Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005); Kevin R. Reitz, ed., *American Exceptionalism in Crime and Punishment* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017); Carol S. Steiker and Jordan M. Steiker, "The Rise, Fall, and Afterlife of the Death Penalty in the United States", *Annual Review of Criminology* 3, no. 1 (2020): 299-313.

[3] Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 26.

mean superiority. It can and has implied, in a word, difference; but, above all, it has meant the *perception* that American culture is different".[1] Jack Greene, another leading historian, advanced a comparable definition,[2] mirroring how multiple legal scholars have approached exceptionalism as the study of whether America is objectively an exception.[3] This definition of American exceptionalism has not solely been used by U.S. scholars, but also by various foreign comparatists. Prominent Canadian criminologists notably stress that "few people would disagree with the characterization of American mass incarceration as 'exceptional'".[4]

By contrast, other scholars and the public often equate the term with the idea that America is 'exceptional' in the sense of 'magnificent' or 'superior', which I will refer to as the 'ideological definition' of exceptionalism. This usage became common during the Obama era, when references to "American exceptionalism" surged in the U.S. sociopolitical debate. Barack Obama's opponents then repeatedly used the phrase as a rhetorical weapon by accusing him of lacking faith in "American exceptionalism" and being unpatriotic.[5] American exceptionalism then also garnered growing interest from the U.S. media. As Peter Onuf observed, exceptionalism "is a loaded concept that only recently migrated from scholarly discourse into the popular political vernacular. As a term of art for social scientists and historians, the concept [previously] highlighted differences and anomalies in cross-national comparisons".[6] Even so, some scholars have long defined "American exceptionalism" primarily as greatness or superiority, alternatively praising America's character[7] or decrying national chauvinism.[8]

[1] Kammen, *In the Past Lane*, x (emphasis in original).

[2] Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, 4-7.

[3] See generally sources in fn. 1, page 3.

[4] Cheryl Marie Webster and Anthony N. Doob, "Penal Optimism", in Reitz, ed., *American Exceptionalism in Crime and Punishment*, 121.

[5] Mugambi Jouet, *Exceptional America: What Divides Americans from the World and from Each Other* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 20-27. On the condemnation and distortion of Obama's comments on American exceptionalism, see also Ian Tyrrell, "The Myth(s) That Will Not Die: American National Exceptionalism", in *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, ed. Gérard Bouchard (London: Routledge, 2013), 46-48.

[6] Peter S. Onuf, "American Exceptionalism and National Identity", *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 78.

[7] Molho and Wood, "Introduction", 9-11.

[8] See, for example, Christian J. Emden, "The Dangerous Political Theology of American Excep-

Differing with Kammen and Lipset, among others, the renowned sociologist Daniel Bell advanced that "'exceptionalism", as it has been used to describe American history and institutions, assumes not only that the United States has been unlike other nations, but that it is exceptional in the sense of being exemplary ('a city upon a hill')".[1] Joyce Appleby concurred: "Exceptional does not mean different", it "does more" in projecting "qualities that are envied".[2] After all, faith in America has played a constitutive role since the founding era.[3] A recent monograph emblematically frames the U.S. Civil War as a battle over rival conceptions of "American exceptionalism".[4] Overall, a vast body of scholarship has studied American exceptionalism as an ideology or national identity.[5]

This article's purpose is not to retrace the birth or genealogy of the phrase 'American exceptionalism' or the idea that America is 'exceptional'.[6] It instead analyzes the ever-expanding scholarship on exceptionalism. Discussing every publication is beyond the article's scope, although it identifies how the latest research intersects with prior studies. Debates about American exceptionalism

tionalism", *Telos* 93 (2020): 133-54; Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009).

[1] Daniel Bell, "The "Hegelian Secret': Civil Society and American Exceptionalism", in Shafer, ed., *Is America Different?*, 51.

[2] Joyce Appleby, "Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism", *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (1992): 419.

[3] Daniel Bell, "The End of American Exceptionalism", *National Affairs* 41 (1975): 193-224; Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 40-51.

[4] Andrew F. Lang, *A Contest of Civilizations: Exposing the Crisis of American Exceptionalism in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

[5] See, for example, Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, eds., *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2011); Brendon O'Connor et al., "The Ideology of American Exceptionalism: American Nationalism's Nom de Plume", *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2022): 1-22; Hilde Eliassen Restad, *American Exceptionalism: An Idea That Made a Nation and Remade the World* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[6] Various scholars have traced the idea of American exceptionalism to Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who visited the United States in the 1830s, and Jay Lovestone, who led the American Communist Party in the early 20th century, if not to prior generations. See generally James W. Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism", *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 4-9; Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, 4-7; Kammen, *In the Past Lane*, 174-78; Dorothy Ross, "American Exceptionalism", in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 22-23; Tyrrell, "The Myth(s) That Will Not Die", 54.

and its origins now exist in many fields, but this has not been immediately apparent because each field tends to be isolated. Interdisciplinarity is more celebrated than practiced. The analogous conversations occurring in separate disciplines call for a broader historiography and intellectual history of American exceptionalism. Naturally, one limitation of this project is omitting relevant sources, which is unavoidable since one cannot cover everything. Nevertheless, interdisciplinarity aims to remedy another limitation of research, namely over-specialization. Discussing the "ever increasing specialization" in various academic fields, Winfried Fluck illustratively describes "an increasing fragmentation of knowledge".[1] Specialization is undoubtedly necessary to deepen research, yet over-specialization arises when scholars analyzing the same subject operate in separate circles, perhaps even unaware of relevant research in related fields.

This article does not claim to offer the only possible understanding of the subject. To the contrary, it argues that exceptionalism scholarship is best understood complementarily and cumulatively. While readers may be tempted to consider whether a given scholar offers the 'right' theory of exceptionalism to the exclusion of all others, my article suggests that multidisciplinary and multifaceted scholarship enhances the understanding of the subject by expanding our perspectives.

This approach is analogous to the one adopted by Carol Steiker in her analysis of "American penal exceptionalism". Cautioning that literature on the subject "is broad and multidisciplinary—far too extensive and wide ranging to explore comprehensively here", Steiker discussed several works that "illustrate the wide range of explanatory accounts that have characterized the debate". Contrasting the authors' perspectives while offering her critical analysis, Steiker suggested that competing theories could ultimately offer their own insights: "As in the parable of the blind men describing an elephant based on their examination of a single part (the trunk, the ear, the tail, and so forth), each scholar sees a different creature depending on the nature of the chosen focal point".[2]

This article similarly suggests that the wide range of exceptionalism schol-

[1] Winfried Fluck, "The Americanization of Literary Studies", *REAL* 38, no. 1 (2023): 10-11.

[2] Carol S. Steiker, "Capital Punishment and Contingency", review of *Peculiar Institution*, by David Garland, *Harvard Law Review* 125, no. 3 (2012): 764.

arship is most insightful if understood holistically and contextually, as it addresses interrelated questions, albeit from different angles, frameworks, and methodologies. But that does not mean that all claims about American exceptionalism are accurate and compatible. Consider the question of guns in America, which now has by far the world's highest number of firearms per capita.[1] John Donohue, a leading expert, has described how gun control in America is extraordinarily limited by international standards, notwithstanding a high homicide rate and persistent mass shootings.[2] Once such facts are established, however, no theory could pretend to offer the all-encompassing truth on the factors behind America's distinctive evolution. Diverse perspectives may instead enhance our understanding, as much of the research can be understood cumulatively even though not all scholars use the concept of 'American exceptionalism'.[3] Yet some accounts stand in tension, as some scholars have contested the modern gun rights movement's claims about an unbridled, God-given constitutional right to bear arms existing since America's founding. Ignoring restraints on the right to bear arms in past generations, this narrative is tied to the ideological dimension of American exceptionalism—a conviction that God has made America freer and superior. Here, we see the interplay of the comparative and ideological definitions of exceptionalism, namely evidence that America is objectively an 'exception' and the belief that America is 'exceptional' in the sense of magnificent or exemplary. In other words, the belief may foster atypical behavior.

Guns further exemplify why scholarship on American exceptionalism is in-

[1] Aaron Karp, *Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2018), 4.

[2] John Donohue, "How US Gun Control Compares to the Rest of the World", *The Conversation*, June 24, 2015, https://theconversation.com/how-us-gun-control-compares-to-the-rest-of-the-world-43590.

[3] See, for example, Saul Cornell, *A Well-Regulated Militia* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006); Adam Winkler, *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2013); Mugambi Jouet, "Guns, Identity, and Nationhood", *Palgrave Communications* 5, no. 138 (2019): 1-8; Kerry Raissian et al., "Gun Violence and Gun Policy in the United States: Understanding American Exceptionalism", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 704, no. 1 (2022): 7-17; Amanda L. Robinson and Christopher D. Maxwell, "Typifying American Exceptionalism: Homicide in the USA", in *The Handbook of Homicide*, ed. Fiona Brookman, Edward R. Maguire, and Mike Maguire (Chichester: Wiley, 2017).

terdisciplinary. Should the evolution of the right to bear arms be understood as a historical, sociological, legal, political, or policy question? The answer seems to be 'all of the above', as scholars who explore this subject tend to draw upon sources from diverse fields. The same could be said about many other dimensions of American exceptionalism that have likewise been the object of interdisciplinary research.

Two lines of research therefore intersect, as shown in Figure 1. Some scholars have studied American exceptionalism as an ideology, whereas others have examined how America is an exception comparatively. Both approaches overlap as in a Venn diagram, because some research how ideological beliefs about American exceptionalism have shaped the nation's distinctive evolution. This article describes how, especially since the last decades of the 20th century, the scholarship has primarily aimed to analyze and understand American exceptionalism—not defend or advocate it, unlike certain politicians or pundits. Scholars have still identified numerous features of American society that observers may admire, yet the norms and methodologies in various academic disciplines have gravitated toward the study of American exceptionalism as an idea, concept or social phenomenon.

Over two decades ago, Kammen had explored the history of exceptionalism studies, finding it attracted academics from different fields: history, political science, sociology, economics, education, religion, American Studies, etc. Conclusions could differ across or within fields.[1] Kammen did not emphasize legal scholarship and omitted criminology, but this article will describe how they too have become major fields of exceptionalism research.

Today, American exceptionalism continues to be debated, rejected, or defended by a wide range of actors. Professors of U.S. history at universities around the world were interviewed about their teaching and some tellingly discussed how American exceptionalism is employed or questioned.[2] Their interview also captured how, to foreign audiences, from Australia to China and Mexico, American exceptionalism is sometimes reframed as anti-Americanism. As Julia Bowes of the University of Melbourne observed, "[t]he sticking points now, for my

[1] Kammen, *In the Past Lane*, 170, 174, 182, 195.

[2] Julia Bowes et al., "Q&A: Teaching U.S. History in the World", *Modern American History* 7, no. 1 (2024): 114-26.

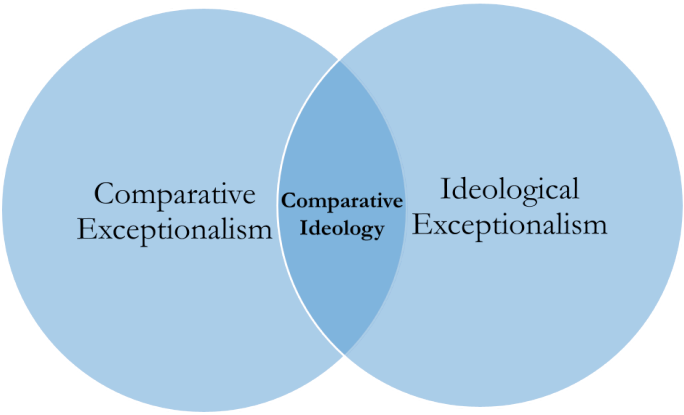

Figure 1: Mapping American Exceptionalism Research

students, are what I would categorize as negative American exceptionalism—to think of racism as a uniquely American problem, the rise of the far-right and white nationalism as distinctly American phenomena".[1] Bowes and other professors instead invite students to draw more nuanced comparisons, as racial discrimination and far-right movements also exist in other Western democracies. Indeed, it would be misleading to reduce America or any country to its history of discrimination and injustice, as such essentialism ignores the complex, multifaceted, and contradictory dynamics that shape human history.

This article's interdisciplinary historiography and intellectual history is structured as follows. First, it explains the emergence of debates over whether American exceptionalism is a myth or reality—a divide tracking its comparative and ideological definitions. Second, the article focuses on the latest research and its recurrent themes, especially societal polarization and historical reversals. The

[1] Ibid., 117. On negative exceptionalism, see also Volker Depkat, *American Exceptionalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 226-28.

article concludes by connecting the dots between the multiple fields addressing American exceptionalism while offering a perspective on how to conceptualize this growing body of scholarship.

2. Mapping Studies on American Exceptionalism

This section contrasts scholarship on American exceptionalism in the comparative sense and in the ideological sense. These separate definitions appear ingrained semantically since dictionaries specify that the adjective 'exceptional' can either refer to something that is an exception or something that is superior.[1] In other words, both usages of the term 'exceptionalism' are correct. Rather than focus on which use is 'right' or 'wrong', one way to understand the literature on American exceptionalism is to consider that scholars analyze "different phenomena".[2] Each approach may offer its own insights.

In fact, the two dimensions of American exceptionalism may mutually influence one another. An ideological conviction in the United States' specialness or superiority may affect social behavior and government institutions, just as this conviction may itself become an object of comparative research. Comparative scholarship on exceptionalism may also give credence to nationalistic beliefs, especially if it falls prey to cultural essentialism, ahistorical analysis, and unsubstantiated conclusions. Despite this interrelationship, scholars have diverged in adopting American exceptionalism as a concept in comparative research or

[1] See generally Oxford English Dictionary, "Exceptional", https://www.oed.com/dictionary/exceptional_adj; Cambridge Dictionary, "Exceptional", https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/exceptional; Merriam-Webster, "Exceptional", https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exceptional.

[2] Helge Dedek and Henry Coomes, "Exceptionalism", in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Comparative Law*, ed. Jan M. Smits et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2023), 2.

questioning its very existence, if not casting it as a "persistent myth".[1] As exceptionalism nonetheless remains a key subject in many fields, this section explores how the latest studies intersect with erstwhile debates.

These intellectual debates reflect the distinct methodologies existing within separate fields. Divergent understandings of American exceptionalism partly derive from the norms and standards of each discipline. We will see that some historians came to identify 'American exceptionalism' as a myth or national origin story, whereas to scholars of literature or culture it may be more of a trope. Contrariwise, in law and social science 'American exceptionalism' has often served as a concept to theorize empirical observations or phenomena. Accordingly, charting the historiography and intellectual history of American exceptionalism requires contextual analysis.

2.1. Between Myth and Reality

The colonial and founding eras are a fitting place to begin. Scholars have recounted how European colonists commonly viewed America as a special land with a divine purpose, which helped justify the takeover of Indigenous territory and the enslavement of Africans to cultivate it.[2] As the United States became a continent-size country in the 19th century, belief in its "Manifest Destiny" rationalized westward expansion overpowering Native American, Mexican, and European opponents.[3] Patriotism or nationalism became known as America's "civil religion".[4] Yet John Winthrop's Puritan sermon heralding the "city upon a hill" (1630) did not become a prominent national origin story before the Cold War and Reagan era, when it served various sociopolitical purposes after its

[1] Joyce E. Chaplin, "Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History", *Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (2003): 1432.

[2] See generally Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*; Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 1998).

[3] Bell, "The End of American Exceptionalism", 198-202; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995); Ian Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism: A New History of an Old Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), chap. 6.

[4] Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", 44-51.

quiet rediscovery in the 19th century.[1] As successive generations of Americans imagined and reimagined their idealized New World, American exceptionalism could fit into the study of utopian thought.[2]

Transcending Europe's failures, America had liberated itself from the "rules of history". Envisioned as a *tabula rasa* without Indigenous peoples, it was an empty land bestowed by God for a new destiny.[3] A recent book describes how settlers and artists' representations of nature echoed and shaped ideas about American exceptionalism.[4] Another recent work documents how this ideology did not merely construct images of the past, but also of a future with the world placed in America's hands.[5] In this sense, American exceptionalism may be understood as a discourse of legitimation.

Alongside the Founding Fathers, the Puritans' mission took a central place in America's origin story, even though its British colonies comprised other religious groups and countless settlers "with more earthly missions (exploration and profit)".[6] As Hilde Eliassen Restad argues, "the new American identity had to be constructed in explicit opposition to the British one" and "the ideology of American exceptionalism became the definition of 'American' rather than linguistic, ethnic, religious, and historical ties to Great Britain".[7]

Scholars researched how race, faith, and nationalism were interwoven, as the emergence of a white Anglo-Saxon national identity comprised a sense of election.[8] "Some of the more radical variants of the theory held that the Anglo-Saxons carried a desire for freedom in their veins", Eric Kauffman noted.[9] Such

[1] Daniel T. Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2018); Abram C. Van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2020).

[2] Carl Guarneri, "Utopias", in Wightman Fox and Kloppenberg, eds., *A Companion to American Thought*, 699-700.

[3] Patricia L. Dunmire, *The Great Nation of Futurity: The Discourse and Temporality of American National Identity* (New York: Oxford UP, 2023), 38-41.

[4] Depkat, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 1.

[5] Dunmire, *The Great Nation of Futurity*, 21, 45-49.

[6] Hilde Eliassen Restad, "American Exceptionalism", in *SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior*, ed. Fathali M. Moghaddam (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2017), 7.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 6.

[9] Eric Kaufmann, "American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Anglo-Saxon Ethnogenesis in the "Universal" Nation, 1776-1850", *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 3 (1999): 447.

notions of American identity actually did not make the United States unique but tied it to the United Kingdom and other settler colonies in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, which shared analogous convictions about civilizing frontier lands.[1] A chronic question in the historiography is indeed to what extent the Americans developed a new society or built upon, if not remodeled, British and continental European societies.[2]

'American exceptionalism' in the ideological sense may thus be an umbrella term for ideas about a God-chosen land of unparalleled possibilities, which are likewise captured in expressions like 'city upon a hill', 'Manifest Destiny', or 'the American Dream'. If 'American exceptionalism' is instead taken to mean 'patriotism' or 'nationalism', one may wonder what 'exceptionalism' would add to these terms. An extra challenge is that patriotic and nationalistic beliefs have shaped legions of societies besides America. Even if one understands 'American exceptionalism' as a distinctive patriotism or nationalism, ideas about divinely-bestowed superiority or specialness are hardly unique. Such ideas have existed in multiple societies throughout history, including among the British, French, Germans, and Russians in recent centuries.[3] 'American exceptionalism' in the ideological sense may therefore not be exceptional to America in the comparative sense. It must equally be noted that people can love or admire a country without finding it exceptional in either sense.

These circumstances illuminate why some scholars have recurrently critiqued American exceptionalism as ethnocentrism or national chauvinism. At the outset, the field of American History experienced a growing debate about the pitfalls of parochialism in the final decades of the 20th century.[4] The development of "Atlantic history" as a subfield, for example, partly sought to "transcend the parochial and exceptionalist assumptions" of the American Revolution's histo-

[1] See, for example, Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 94.

[2] Compare ibid., 46–48, 106, with Caroline Winterer, *American Enlightenments: Pursuing Happiness in the Age of Reason* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2016), 11-12.

[3] Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill*, 143, 257; Daniel T. Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited", *Raritan* 24, no. 2 (2004): 26-30.

[4] See generally Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Michael Kammen, "Clio, Columbia, and The Cosmopolitans: Beyond American Exceptionalism and the Nation-State", review of *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender, *History and Theory* 42, no. 1 (2003): 106-07.

riography.[1] Slavery and the cotton industry were among the subjects studied more transnationally by exploring shared experiences and histories, from the Black diaspora to European countries involved in the triangular trade.[2] Other cultural shifts plausibly contributed to this trend, such as the advent of multiculturalism and postcolonialism.

The rise of critical perspectives did not mean that all scholars in these currents or most scholars overall—in the United States or abroad—simply adopted an essentialist understanding of America as nothing more than a land of racism, inequality, and oppression. Illustratively, countless historians, political scientists, and legal scholars explored the American Revolution and creation of the U.S. Constitution in comparative light, offering nuanced assessments of their accomplishments and shortcomings, such as in contrast to the French Revolution.[3] But their approaches were not rooted in national chauvinism or parochialism, which most academics would identify as an impediment to the understanding of any country's history.

An effort was made to research and teach U.S. history, from high schools to universities, by studying events in American society in relation to shifts in other regions of the world.[4] Within the Organization of American Historians, "a movement to 'internationalize' the study of U.S. history" produced the *La Pietra Report* (2000) and *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (2002).[5] That

[1] Francis D. Cogliano, "Revisiting the American Revolution", *History Compass* 8, no. 8 (2010): 955.

[2] See generally Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008); Robert McGreevey et al., "Atlantic Crossings Revisited", *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 22, no. 4 (2023): 521-23.

[3] See generally Denis Lacorne, *L'invention de la république. Le modèle américain* (Paris: Hachette, 1991); Susan Dunn, *Sister Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1999); David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004); Mugambi Jouet, "Revolutionary Criminal Punishments: Treason, Mercy, and the American Revolution", *American Journal of Legal History* 61, no. 2 (2021): 139-76; Winterer, *American Enlightenments*.

[4] See generally Gary W. Reichard and Ted Dickson (Organization of American Historians), eds., *America on the World Stage: A Global Approach to U.S. History* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008) (essays intended for high-school and college instructors); Carl J. Guarneri, "American History as if the World Mattered (and Vice Versa)", in *The New World History: A Field Guide for Teachers and Researchers*, ed. Ross E. Dunn et al. (Oakland; University of California Press, 2016), 199-212. See also the following textbooks: Carl J. Guarneri, ed., *America Compared: American History in International Perspective*, vol. I, II, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

[5] Thomas Bender, "Introduction: The Revolt Against Enclosure: U.S. History Opens Out to the

being noted, these developments did not signify that past scholars had wholly ignored transnational dimensions of American history, as illustrated by W.E.B. Du Bois's analysis of the slave trade and international commerce in the 19th century.[1] Transnationalism had always been part of the United States' fabric, even when it had not been formally studied. Back in the 18th century, Thomas Paine (1737-1809) already personified transnationalism as an Englishman who moved to North America in 1774 at thirty-seven-years old, helped instigate the American Revolution, and later participated in the French Revolution.[2]

In the aftermath of World War Two, the rise of 'world history' in the United States still sought to transcend an overly nationalistic approach to teaching and researching history—if not the very idea that history should center on individual countries.[3] By the 1950s, a growing segment of scholars sought to "formulate large historical questions that could seriously be addressed only by breaching, at least in some measure, the borders of civilizations and nation-states".[4] They adopted "thematic narrative structures" to study history, "such as empire formation, belief systems, trade, wars, women and gender, or the social consequences of epidemic disease".[5]

World", in Reichard and Dickson, eds., *America on the World Stage*, xv. The publications mentioned in the sentence above are also cited elsewhere in this article and available in its bibliography.

[1] Ibid., xvii.

[2] See Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

[3] To Thomas Bender, the assumption that history should center on the nation-state is "the legacy of the founding moment of academic disciplines in the nineteenth century, which was, after all, the age of nation making. The newly established academic discipline of history was a collaborator in that process. Our job as historians—whether in universities, secondary schools, or museums and historical societies—was to contribute to the formation of national citizens" (Bender, "Introduction: The Revolt Against Enclosure", xiv).

[4] Ross E. Dunn et al., "Introduction", in Dunn et al., eds., *The New World History*, 4.

[5] Ibid., 5. Daniel Rodgers, whose research has also focused on American exceptionalism, described the aspiration to transcend the nation-state in a seminal book on transnational social politics: "Focused on questions of national difference, historical scholarship bends to the task of specifying each nation's distinctive culture, its peculiar history, its *Sonderweg*, its exceptionalism. Since every nation's history is—in fact and by definition—distinct, the move is not without reason. At its worst, however, the result is to produce histories lopped off at precisely those junctures where the nation-state's permeability might be brought into view, where the transnational forces do their most important work". Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998), 2.

This evolution within America, which encompassed contributions by U.S.-based international scholars or dual citizens, was part of a wider trend given the relative rise of world history as a field in other countries in the same period.[1] By moving away from the nation-state as the object of study, the trend did not merely call American exceptionalism into question, but also the apparently more recent rise in references to the 'exceptionalism of certain other countries—a trend influenced by the rise of 'American exceptionalism as a concept.[2] Some exceptionalisms may well have evolved independently from the American concept, but modern scholars have subjected them to critical scrutiny too. For instance, some French academics have questioned the existence of *l'exception française* when analyzing the French Revolution[3] or modern France's approach to human rights.[4] "By giving the label of exceptional to the history of diverse nations, there is a risk of un-differentiation: the exception becomes the rule", Annie Jourdan concluded when examining the French Revolution's legacy. The French government and French historians had promoted *l'exception française* as a "myth to foster national identity and unity, if not nationalism,[5] she argued in a passage reminiscent of American exceptionalism's critics.

Historians were not the only scholars to move in this direction, as experts in various fields now study subjects that transcend any particular country, such as democracy, populism, authoritarianism, information technologies, epidemics, climatology, commerce, war, or globalization itself. Their methodologies address trends, issues, or phenomena involving multiple countries or regions, at times the entire world. From this angle, a narrow focus on a single country and its specialness would come across as myopic navel-gazing.

The growing value of world history among U.S. academics in this period should not be taken to mean that the subject gained significant weight in Amer-

[1] Craig A. Lockard, "The Rise of World History Scholarship", in Dunn et al., eds., *The New World History*, 22-32.

[2] See generally Dedek and Coomes, "Exceptionalism".

[3] Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution, une exception française?* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

[4] Marthe Fatin-Rouge Stéfanini and Guy Scoffoni, eds., *Existe-t-il une exception française en matière de droits fondamentaux?* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2013).

[5] Jourdan, *La Révolution*, 373-74 (my translation). See also Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein, eds., *Scripting Revolution: A Historical Approach to the Study of Religions* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015).

ican education or among the general public. Certain scholars have depicted the atypical paradox of America being a highly influential country on the world stage, despite its citizens' general unfamiliarity with the outside world, which can foster an ambivalence between insularity and global leadership. In 1985, for example, a geostrategic atlas on the strengths and weaknesses of countries in international affairs stated that "lack of knowledge of the outside world" affected U.S. foreign policy, notwithstanding America's strengths in other areas.[1] Some U.S. academics have long sought to remedy this problem, such as by expanding the teaching of world history, yet an obstacle has been concern that the already-limited time devoted to teaching history in American classrooms should concentrate on U.S. history.[2]

"[F]rom the standpoint of world history", Carl Guarneri explained, the United States did not emerge spontaneously but as "an offshoot of European civilization", since those who settled in America brought European conceptions of religion, the family, and economic prosperity. In due course, "the colonists declared independence from Britain [though] they justified it with natural rights theories developed in the European Enlightenment", among other ideas. At this vantage point, the United States may be viewed "as Europe's frontier".[3] However, Guarneri underscored that this was no settled debate:

> Which side is right, then: those who view the United States as exceptional, or those who interpret it as an extension of Europe? It should be clear that the evidence is mixed and that neither position can encompass all the facts of American history. Large-scale changes common to Western society were played out in both Europe and the United States. Yet in each place distinctive conditions led to different outcomes. Exceptionalists must acknowledge European inheritances and influences, but those who view the United States as part of the West must also factor in its unique environment, including its Native American and African populations. Only by analyzing specific features of American history carefully in internationally comparative terms can we measure the mix of outside forces and local conditions that created the nation's life.[4]

[1] Gérard Chaliand and Jean-Pierre Rageau, *A Strategic Atlas: Comparative Geopolitics of the World's Powers*, trans. Tony Berrett, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 78.
[2] Bender, "Introduction: The Revolt Against Enclosure", xviii-xx.
[3] Guarneri, "American History as If the World Mattered (and Vice Versa)", 210.
[4] Ibid., 211-12.

Over time, some historians nonetheless became convinced that the study of American exceptionalism has often been a scholarly version of the age-old ideology casting America as a unique land.[1] Daniel Rodgers recounted how the likes of George Bancroft and Frederick Jackson Turner had initially sought to depict the distinctive nature of the American Revolution and the frontier.[2] The "exceptionalist historians" had their minds fixed on the French Revolution, Third Reich, and Soviet Union—a "selective history of Europe" meant to prove America's historical stability as "an exemption from the rule".[3] On the other hand, Jack Greene found it was possible to parse what makes America objectively exceptional from misconceptions reflecting "parochialism or chauvinism".[4] Greene distanced himself from "antiexceptionalist" scholarship, which advanced that American colonists were "far more European" than it seemed and that "over time the New World became more like the Old".[5]

The comparative and ideological definitions of American exceptionalism are similarly identifiable within American Studies. According to Sophia McClennen, "[i]t would be safe to say that American exceptionalism has been at the heart of American studies scholarship—either as desideratum or object of critique".[6] Critics long charged that the field was founded on misconceptions about U.S. history, government, and culture.[7] Donald Pease especially argued that "[t]he fantasy of American exceptionalism" has distorted American Studies given its excessive focus on "whether the nation was a variation upon or a deviation from European models". To Pease, these circumstances were not benign, as "the vast majority of the scholars working within the field of American studies cooperated with policymakers and the press in constructing a mythology" serv-

[1] See, for example, Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History", *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991): 1031.

[2] Daniel T. Rodgers, "Exceptionalism", in Molho and Wood, eds., *Imagined Histories*, 25.

[3] Ibid., 29. See also Nicolas Barreyre and Claire Lemercier, "The Unexceptional State: Rethinking the State in the Nineteenth Century (France, United States)", *American Historical Review* 126, no. 2 (2021): 481-503.

[4] Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, 4.

[5] Ibid., 204-05.

[6] Sophia A. McClennen, review of *The New American Exceptionalism*, by Donald E. Pease, *symplokē* 18, no. 1-2 (2010): 411-13.

[7] Michael Denning, "'The Special American Conditions': Marxism and American Studies", *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 360.

ing geopolitical goals during the Cold War and War on Terror.[1] Analogously to the step toward transnational and Atlantic history within American History, American Studies shifted toward transnationalism in part to remedy its nationalistic dimensions.[2]

An analogous debate can again be found in the field of American Literature. "Exceptionalism is an organizing myth for American culture", as Elizabeth Duquette observed.[3] More generally, the promotion of an idealized exceptionalism over generations has been depicted as an effort to defend American culture against those Europeans who regarded it as inferior.[4]

This overview shows how, in a twist of irony, myths about American exceptionalism once partly structured several fields that came to question these very myths and attempted to chart new paths. These circumstances ultimately contributed to two ideological uses of the phrase 'American exceptionalism': one referring to an idealized America and another reflecting the inverse image of America as a superpower born of colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and other forms of oppression. Joyce Chaplin offered a critical lens on this dual definition when arguing that American exceptionalism was an unhelpful concept:

> In its old form, [exceptionalism] stressed the positive achievements of white residents of North America and shunned whatever might have been tragic and ambiguous about their handiwork. Newer forms of exceptionalism look beyond the white population; one new variant examines the multicultural bases of American society (told as a story of positive achievement) and another stresses the uniquely negative character of American culture, as in the paradoxical relationship between slavery and freedom. All versions of exceptionalism ignore how the colonies and United States shared histories (including reprehensible histories) with other societies and peoples.[5]

Nowadays, one could see an illustration of Chapin's dual, positive-negative

[1] Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 11-12.

[2] See generally Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Evan Rhodes, "Beyond the Exceptionalist Thesis, a Global American Studies 2.0", *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2012): 900.

[3] Elizabeth Duquette, "Re-Thinking American Exceptionalism", *Literature Compass* 10, no. 6 (2013): 473.

[4] Winfried Fluck, "Narratives about American Democratic Culture", *REAL* 38, no. 1 (2023): 427-28.

[5] Chaplin, "Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History", 1432-33.

definition of American exceptionalism in a book by John Wilsey, a professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.[1] Wilsey offers an insightful perspective from an evangelical institution by marshaling a critique of "closed" versus "open" exceptionalism. To Wilsey, nationalistic and bigoted ideas of the United States reflect "closed exceptionalism". In addition to a theological analysis equating the veneration of the United States with "idolatry", Wilsey draws significantly upon W.E.B. Du Bois to argue that racial discrimination has shaped narrow conceptions of American nationhood. In contrast, Wilsey uses the concept of "open exceptionalism" to describe American patriotic ideals, albeit with nuances diverging from portrayals of "exceptionalist" discourse as narrowly Manichean and chauvinistic.

Other academics have proposed instructive definitions, too. Volker Depkat, a German scholar, approaches American exceptionalism "not as an objective fact", but as "a highly malleable system of meaning (…) serving different purposes and functions" throughout U.S. history.[2] Further, the Norwegian scholar Hilde Eliassen Restad identified components of American exceptionalism as national identity:

> First is the idea that the United States is distinct from the Old World; second, that it has a special and unique role to play in world history; and third, that the United States will resist the laws of history (meaning that it will rise to great power status yet it will not fall, as all previous republics have).[3]

Similarly to various scholars mentioned above, she focuses on American exceptionalism as a "subjective self-understanding" and is skeptical of the concept's use by comparatists researching an "objective truth".[4] "Trying to design social science studies based on the assumption that the United States is somehow *more* different than other countries is itself an exceptionalist undertaking", Restad cautions.[5]

[1] John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015).
[2] Depkat, *American Exceptionalism*, xvii.
[3] Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, 3.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 17 (emphasis in original).

Additional considerations help explain the anti-exceptionalist current. The belief in American exceptionalism in the idealized sense has a built-in limitation since one of its premises is that God chose America to lead the world. Foreigners are likely to immediately reject this belief, even if they otherwise admire the United States and do not hold anti-American views. Unlike other American ideals, this belief will plausibly have no appeal outside U.S. borders. Even within America, we saw that numerous scholars have dismissed this belief as nationalistic hubris. Moreover, since this conception of American exceptionalism is premised on the existence of a god or divine providence, atheists, agnostics, religious skeptics, or believers wary of political uses of religion will also reject it out of hand. The relative decline of religion in the modern Western world and its minimal influence in academic circles that analyze social phenomena, including in the United States, are therefore relevant to understanding why faith in American exceptionalism has been widely questioned.

Some responded that the anti-exceptionalist current had gone too far in undermining comparatism and denying any distinctive feature to America. In 1991, Michael McGerr wrote that "it is difficult these days to find any historian who will" employ the concept of "American exceptionalism" uncritically or chauvinistically, as he found this critique either outdated or a strawman.[1] "Without indulging in national chauvinism or sacrificing the virtues of transnationalism", he added, "we can still consider questions of national difference, still confront the particular problem of the United States in world history, still deal with facts and evidence".[2] A decade later, Ron Robin concurred on "the insistent flogging of American exceptionalism", casting it as "a long-dead conceptual horse" since virtually no scholars still employed it to proclaim "American superiority".[3] More recently, Jeffrey Lawrence argued that the anti-exceptionalist turn in certain fields, especially American History and American Studies, undermined comparatism due to concern that theorizing the United States' distinctiveness would only perpetuate misconceptions. However, Lawrence noted that "[f]ew scholars truly doubt the central role that the US has played in world

[1] Michael McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History'", *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991): 1057.
[2] Ibid., 1067.
[3] Ron Robin, "The Exhaustion and Enclosures: A Critique of Internationalization", in Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 304.

history over the past 200 years". Despite acknowledging that "[t]he strong critique of American exceptionalism is a healthy corrective to earlier consensus theories of US history and culture", Lawrence called for a "return to the question of US distinctiveness with a more perspicacious eye, asking not how the US differs in the abstract from other countries but how particular US economic, political, and social differences have been created and maintained over time".[1] In fact, we will now see that a growing body of research has moved in this direction.

2.2. Exceptionalism and Comparatism

Whether America is an exception or outlier is an enduring debate in multiple fields, including law,[2] political science,[3] sociology,[4] economics,[5] criminology,[6] and international relations.[7] Even though not all scholars employ the phrase

[1] Jeffrey Lawrence, "Exceptionalism and Difference in American (Literary) Studies", *American Literary History* 35, no. 1 (2023): 413.

[2] See generally William B. Ewald, "What's So Special About American Law?", *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 26, no. 3 (2001): 1083-1101; Amalia Kessler, *Inventing American Exceptionalism: The Origins of American Adversarial Legal Culture, 1800–1877* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2017); Stephen Gardbaum, "The Myth and the Reality of American Constitutional Exceptionalism", *Michigan Law Review* 107, no. 3 (2008): 391-466; Mila Versteeg and Emily Zackin, "American Constitutional Exceptionalism Revisited", *University of Chicago Law Review* 81, no. 4 (2014): 1641-1707.

[3] See generally Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism"; Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*; Shafer, ed., *Is America Different?*

[4] See generally Jerome Karabel and Daniel Laurison, "An Exceptional Nation? American Political Values in Comparative Perspective", Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, 2012, `https://irle.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/An-Exceptional-Nation.pdf`.

[5] See generally Robert C. Allen, "American Exceptionalism as a Problem in Global History", *Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 2 (2014): 309-50; Joseph P. Ferrie, "The End of American Exceptionalism? Mobility in the United States Since 1850", *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 3 (2005): 199-215; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2017), 617.

[6] See generally Reitz, ed., *American Exceptionalism in Crime and Punishment*; Robinson and Maxwell, "Typifying American Exceptionalism".

[7] See generally Taesuh Cha, "American Exceptionalism at the Crossroads: Three Responses", *Political Studies Review* 13, no. 3 (2015): 351-62; Jeffrey D. Sachs, *A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2018).

'American exceptionalism', many find the United States atypical, such as in its government institutions, public policies, rights discourse, or racial divides.

Nevertheless, theoretical perspectives have diverged among scholars who define exceptionalism as 'exception'. Lipset illustratively proposed that American exceptionalism was a "double-edged sword" because its "positive" and "negative" dimensions "are frequently opposite sides of the same coin". He listed contradictions of American society, from its economic prosperity to various social ills ("it has the most people locked up in jail", it is "the least egalitarian among developed nations with respect to income distribution", etc.)[1] that still garner extensive scholarly attention today. Following on the path of Lipset, Kammen, Greene, and other influential figures like Richard Hofstadter,[2] scholars in the second half of the 20th century regularly turned to history and interdisciplinarity to analyze America's distinctive evolution.

Over the last two decades, many scholars have kept writing about American exceptionalism in the comparative sense, as the next section will describe when surveying the latest scholarship. While research on American exceptionalism may not represent a "school" of study given its heterogeneity and competing conclusions, its approach recalls the Annales School's aspiration to complement historical analysis with "comparatism and interdisciplinarity, to arrive at a more general reflection on the development of societies".[3] This holistic analysis does not necessarily lead to a finding of exceptionalism. Some posit that the singularity of American society is overstated or a myth.[4]

The ever-expanding body of comparative research ultimately shows that numerous scholars have found American exceptionalism a useful analytical concept—provided that relevant historical, societal and contingent factors are taken into account. Academics in diverse fields seem to have independently converged toward an aspiration presented in a report to the Organization of American His-

[1] Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 26.

[2] Hofstadter did not emphasize the concept of exceptionalism but explored distinctive dimensions of American history and society in works like *The American Political Tradition* (1948), *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), and *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1963).

[3] André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009), 7-8.

[4] See generally Peter Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences: How America and Europe Are Alike* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009).

torians at the turn of the century: "By contextualizing the nation and comparing it with other nations, one may better appraise the nature of its particular, even exceptional qualities, while avoiding simplistic assertions of American exceptionalism".[1]

In a book published in 2017, Amalia Kessler thus cautioned against "appeals to presumably innate American qualities" when assessing the United States' legal exceptionalism.[2] Her historical research questions the notion that U.S. legal culture has always embodied the "competitive individualism" of a "distinctively anti-statist, market-based society", unlike the allegedly "despotic", government-driven, inquisitorial legal systems found in continental Europe.[3] In reality, the United States experimented with quasi-inquisitorial approaches until the mid-19th century. It has now gravitated toward a more adversarial system that leaves Americans with less access to justice than the citizens of other industrialized democracies.[4] As the law does not exist in a vacuum but can be understood as a microcosm of society, such scholarship intersects with wider debates about the roots of American culture, government, and inequality.

A recent entry in the *Elgar Encyclopedia of Comparative Law* explores the concept of exceptionalism in an interdisciplinary fashion. While debates about the "exceptionalism" of countries beyond America have apparently increased,[5] the concept largely stems from "American exceptionalism", which remains the most significant research area.[6] In this encyclopedia contribution, Helge Dedek and Henry Coomes observe that the "various significations" of exceptionalism "often are not clearly distinguished in the literature", although they identify both ideological and comparative uses. "None of these are 'erroneous definitions'; rather, they are references to different phenomena" that scholars have analyzed with distinct methodologies.[7] These findings further suggest that the

[1] Thomas Bender, "The La Pietra Report: A Report to the Profession", Organization of American Historians, September 1, 2000, https://www.oah.org/2000/09/01/the-lapietra-report-a-report-to-the-profession/.

[2] Kessler, *Inventing American Exceptionalism*, 7.

[3] Ibid., 7, 324, 342.

[4] Ibid., 338.

[5] See, for example, Miles Fairburn, "Is There a Good Case for New Zealand Exceptionalism?", *Thesis Eleven* 92, no. 1 (2008): 29-49.

[6] Dedek and Coomes, "Exceptionalism".

[7] Ibid., 2.

wide-ranging scholarship on American exceptionalism is best understood holistically and in the context of each discipline where the concept is employed.

The conceptual utility of 'American exceptionalism' remains a matter of debate. In a book published a few years ago, Ian Tyrrell called into question the comparative study of American exceptionalism, suggesting that it "characterizes particular manifestations of behavior as expressions of a deeper value system that is itself beyond empirical measurement". "Individual comparisons may show the United States to be different from another country in particular patterns of behavior or belief", Tyrrell notes, "but Lipsetian research does not make the United States exceptional, only different".[1]

The debate over whether the concept of 'difference' would be preferable to 'exceptionalism' is a recurrent one.[2] While some scholars suggest that 'exceptionalism' inherently conveys superiority or specialness, it is important to keep in mind that semantically the adjective 'exceptional' can either refer to something that is an exception or something that is superior.[3] This distinction is at the heart of the divergence between scholarship focusing on either the comparative or ideological understanding of American exceptionalism. Tyrrell remains correct that "exceptionalism" can carry a deeper meaning than "difference", as he reminds us in his magisterial history of American exceptionalism. At the same time, conceding that the United States may be "different from another country" but rejecting the notion that it is "exceptional" may overstate the distinction. When employing the concept of "American exceptionalism" most comparatists have meant that the United States has different or distinctive characteristics, not that it is somehow superior. Perhaps more fundamentally, to Tyrrell exceptionalism is an artificial construct "because the United States has been arbitrarily made the fixed point of reference for comparative research".[4] Yet the study of exceptionalism does not necessarily entail an arbitrary analysis or point of comparison. For example, one can set out to study the number of guns per capita or incarceration rate in countries around the world without

[1] Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 14.

[2] Kammen, *In the Past Lane*, 197; McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History'", 1061; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, 19; Shafer, ed., *Is America Different?*.

[3] See the dictionary definitions at page 10, fn. 1.

[4] Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 14.

thinking of the United States—and find that it has led the world in these areas.[1] An international study can likewise research health-care spending or the infant mortality rate and find that America is an outlier among industrialized countries without making pre-determined conclusions.[2] Scholars can then propose theories to try and explain American exceptionalism in these areas, although any theory entails more subjective analysis because it a scholar's interpretation of objective evidence that may be interpreted in more than one way. For this reason, this article has suggested that theories of American exceptionalism are best understood complementarily and cumulatively since none could offer an all-encompassing explanation of complex social phenomena.

2.3. Benchmarks of Comparative Exceptionalism

My research suggests that comparatists have tended to employ two definitions of 'exceptionalism' in practice, even though few have broken down this aspect of their analysis. First, American exceptionalism may refer to a feature that *exists* in America but *does not exist* in countries used for comparison. For example, the death penalty exists in the United States today, although it has been abolished in other Western democracies. Second, American exceptionalism may refer to a feature that exists in all countries used for comparison, but that exists to a much *greater or lesser degree* in America. For instance, prisons exist in essentially all modern countries worldwide, but the U.S. incarceration rate is extraordinarily high comparatively. We will see in the next section that these examples should be nuanced. For starters, American exceptionalism in these areas has not always existed and partly reflects relatively recent shifts both in the United States and other Western democracies.[3] Moreover, when thinking of

[1] Karp, *Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers*, 4; World Prison Brief, *World Prison Population List*, 13th ed. (2021), 2, https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_13th_edition.pdf.

[2] OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), 28, 79.

[3] See generally Mugambi Jouet, "Death Penalty Abolitionism from the Enlightenment to Modernity", *American Journal of Comparative Law* 71, no. 1 (2023): 46-97; Carol S. Steiker and Jordan M. Steiker, "Global Abolition of Capital Punishment", in *Comparative Capital Punishment*, ed. Steiker and Steiker (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019), 399-404; William J. Stuntz, *The Collapse of American Criminal Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011).

the death penalty as a feature of American exceptionalism nowadays one must consider that merely 2% of counties within the United States are responsible for most death sentences and executions.[1] Still, these examples capture two major ways in which comparatists have identified America as an exception, namely by assessing whether something exists altogether or the degree to which it exists.

As the study of exceptionalism requires a benchmark to assess divergence or convergence, another key question is the choice of countries used for comparison. When exploring American exceptionalism, comparatists have tended to focus on whether the United States is an outlier in contrast to i) other Western democracies,[2] which have been the primary bases of comparison;[3] ii) other industrialized nations; or iii) all countries. These three categories are not the only possible benchmarks. For example, some studies also identify the United States as an outlier among OECD member states.[4]

Diverse examples illustrate these various benchmarks. Within the West, we saw that America is the only Western democracy to retain capital punishment, as European nations, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are all abolitionists.[5] Above and beyond the West, all wealthy industrialized countries except the United States have universal health care, as shown by adding Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore.[6] Although universal health care systems are hardly

[1] Death Penalty Information Center, *The 2% Death Penalty: How a Minority of Counties Produce Most Death Cases at Enormous Costs to All* (Washington, DC, 2013).

[2] This article defines Western democracies as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and European nations—except for Russia and states aligned with Russia like Belarus. Comparisons may differ if one includes Latin America in the definition. The understanding of the "West" has evolved historically and mapping its malleable boundaries is intricate, for reasons beyond this article's scope. See generally Benjamin Herborth and Gunther Hellmann, eds., *Uses of the West: Security and the Politics of Order* (Cambridge: Cambridgee UP, 2017).

[3] As one academic observed, "insofar as scholars of American politics were willing to consider other countries, the usual suspects were other developed (or even postindustrial) countries with liberal democracies, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, most of Western Europe, and Australia and New Zealand". Graham G. Dodds, "Assessing Exceptionalism: More but Different Cross-National Comparisons", *Studies in American Political Development* 36, no. 2 (2022): 140.

[4] Various OECD reports are cited in this article.

[5] Several non-Western democracies like India and Japan are retentionist. Before its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia also had a moratorium on capital punishment and its last official execution in peacetime was in 1999. Belarus is retentionist, too. Amnesty International, *Death Sentences and Executions 2024* (London, 2025).

[6] See, for example, Ito Peng and James Tiessen, *An Asian Flavour for Medicare: Learning from Ex-*

identical, the United States is an outlier in lacking universal coverage.[1] Finally, the United States has led the entire world on multiple indicators, such as guns per capita, imprisonment levels, or military spending.[2] Again, this comparative definition of American exceptionalism is not normative. Americans are divided on whether their nation's approach to criminal punishment, the right to bear arms, health care, and military policy is desirable.[3]

While American exceptionalism has several bases of comparison, contrasts with Western democracies or industrialized countries are particularly influential. The methodological reasons for this approach are inferable. First, it seems relevant to compare democracies among themselves. Because authoritarian regimes lack elementary political freedoms, they offer less useful contrasts on myriad questions of government. It is more instructive that America stands alone among liberal democracies in refusing to recognize a given right, for instance, than in comparison to regimes that recognize virtually no rights and reject democracy in principle. Second, it appears logical to compare wealthy industrialized nations on certain questions. Illustratively, the absence of universal health care may be less revealing for an impoverished country that may lack the means to institute it than for the United States. None of this means that comparisons with non-Western or developing countries would be uninstructive or are not taking place. For example, a recent book compares U.S. sociopolitical polarization to Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Poland, and Turkey, before concluding that the nature of U.S. polarization is distinctive.[4]

Table 1 lists features of American exceptionalism documented by comparative research. It equally specifies the primary benchmarks found in the literature, which does not mean that no studies employ other bases of comparison. A fuller discussion of the features indicated in the table can be found in the next section of this article.

periments in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan (Ottawa: Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2015).

[1] See generally OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023*, 24; Uwe E. Reinhardt, *Priced Out: The Economic and Ethical Costs of American Health Care* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2019).

[2] See Table 1.

[3] See generally Jouet, *Exceptional America*.

[4] Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, "Comparative Experiences and Insights", in *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, ed. Carothers and O'Donohue (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 271-72.

Table 1: Comparative Research on American Exceptionalism[1]

FEATURE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM	BENCHMARK OF COMPARISON
U.S. Constitution (i.e., oldest written constitution, stronger separation of powers / checks and balances, super-majority amendment procedures, Electoral College, influence of originalism as method of interpretation, etc.)	All countries. (The atypicality of certain features is a matter of degree.)[2]
Societal polarization	West. (Polarization may have different definitions and quantitative or qualitative elements.)[3]
Treaty ratification requiring super-majority (i.e., two-thirds of U.S. Senate)	All countries. (Only five others—Algeria, Burundi, Iraq, Micronesia, and the Philippines—had similar feature according to 2008 study.)[4]
Non-ratification of international treaties, non-adherence to international law or international courts	All countries or West, depending on treaty or area of international law.[5]

[1] The literature presents nuances, which are omitted in the table but discussed in cited sources. This table employs the definition of modern Western democracies provided at page 27, fn. 2.

[2] See generally John W. Kingdon, *America the Unusual* (New York: Worth, 1999); Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 163, 205-06; Jamal Greene, "On the Origins of Originalism", *Texas Law Review* 88, no. 1 (2009): 18-61; Sanford Levinson, *Our Undemocratic Constitution* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), 29-30, 69.

[3] See generally Levi Boxell et al., "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization", *Review of Economics and Statistics* 106, no. 2 (2024): 557; Carothers and O'Donohue, "Comparative Experiences and Insights", 271-72; Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, "America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Public Divide", Pew Research Center, November 13, 2020, `https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/`; Jouet, *Exceptional America*, chap. 1.

[4] Oona Hathaway, "Treaties' End", *Yale Law Journal* 117, no. 7 (2008): 1271-72.

[5] See generally Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*.

Withdrawal from 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change	All countries. (Virtually every country joined the treaty but, under President Trump, America became the only one to withdraw, although it had rejoined under President Biden.)[1]
Military spending	All countries. (In 2023, U.S. military spending exceeded the next nine countries combined.)[2]
Guns per capita	All countries. (U.S. civilians have by far the world's highest number of guns per capita.)[3]
Homicide rate	West. (The U.S. homicide rate ranges from approximately two to six times higher than in other Western democracies.)[4]
Incarceration rate	All countries. (In 2025, America had the world's fifth highest incarceration rate after ranking first until approximately 2022.)[5]

[1] "The Paris Agreement", Council on Foreign Relations, July 25, 2023, https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/paris-agreement.

[2] Nan Tian et al., *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2023* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2024), 2-3.

[3] Karp, *Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers*, 4.

[4] OECD, *How's Life? 2020: Measuring Well-Being* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), 151; OECD, *How Was Life? Global Well-Being Since 1820*, ed. Jan Luiten van Zanden et al. (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2014), 146-47, 150; "Homicide Country Data", U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, last accessed May 31, 2025, https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims; Robinson and Maxwell, "Typifying American Exceptionalism".

[5] The U.S. incarceration rate has dipped below El Salvador, Cuba, Rwanda, and Turkmenistan, yet remains extremely high by international standards. World Prison Brief, *World Prison Population List*, 2; "Prison Population Rate", World Prison Brief, last accessed April 26, 2025, https://perma.cc/D285-NWYA.

Retention of the death penalty	West. (While all other Western democracies have abolished the death penalty, twenty-three American states have done so, and execution levels are near historic lows.)[1]
Proportion of racial and ethnic minorities	West. (Evidence suggests that America has historically had the highest proportion of racial and ethnic minorities among Western countries and still does.)[2]
Economic prosperity	All countries. (America has the world's highest GDP and is often depicted as the world's strongest economy, but conclusions can differ under other indicators.)[3]
Degree of income inequality	West and industrialized countries.[4]
Absence of universal health care	West and industrialized countries. ("The U.S. is the only high-income country where a substantial portion of the population lacks any form of health insurance".)[5]

[1] "Abolitionist and Retentionist Countries as of December 2024", Amnesty International, April 7, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/9240/2025/en/; Death Penalty Information Center, *The Death Penalty in 2024* (Washington, DC, 2024).

[2] See the census data discussed below at page 44, fn. 4, and the accompanying paragraph.

[3] A detailed comparison of GDP, GDP per capita, median income, unemployment, economic growth, socioeconomic equality, and other indicators is beyond this article's scope. Part of the debate is over which indicators to employ. For instance, the World Happiness Report ranks the United States 24th among 157 countries studied—a comparatively good position but not an outlier. World Happiness Report, "Rankings (2024)", last accessed April 27, 2025, https://perma.cc/L252-ZKYY.

[4] OECD, *How's Life? 2020*, 64-69; OECD, *Economic Surveys: United States 2024* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), 93.

[5] "U.S. Health Care from a Global Perspective, 2022: Accelerating Spending, Worsening Outcomes", Commonwealth Fund, January 31, 2023, https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2023/jan/us-health-care-global-perspective-2022. See also OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023*, 24; Jouet, *Exceptional America*, chap. 5; Reinhardt, *Priced Out*.

Health-care spending	All countries. (America spends considerably more than other countries per capita or as a share of GDP.)[1]
Maternal and infant mortality	West and industrialized countries.[2]
Influence of evangelicalism, Biblical literalism, creationism, skepticism of theory of evolution	West. (Comparison based on diverse quantitative or qualitative elements.)[3]
Recriminalization of abortion after its legalization	All countries and West. (While abortion remains penalized in various parts of the world, a study found only eleven countries where the right to abortion had significantly regressed in the last three decades.[4] The trend in the West has also been significantly toward liberalization and decriminalization.)[5]

[1] OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023*, 28.
[2] Ibid., 79. See also "U.S. Health Care from a Global Perspective, 2022" (Commonwealth Fund report).
[3] Jouet, *Exceptional America*, chap. 3, 4.
[4] Foreign Policy Staff, "Roe Abolition Makes U.S. a Global Outlier", *Foreign Policy*, June 24, 2022, `https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/24/roe-v-wade-overturned-global-abortion-laws/`.
[5] Mugambi Jouet, "Abortion and American Exceptionalism", *Criminal Justice Law Review* (forthcoming 2025), `https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4977441`.

Once comparatists identify America as an outlier based on quantitative or qualitative evidence, a question remains as to why that is the case. Multiple scholars have theorized the circumstances that led America in a given direction. This historical path could have been different. Indeed, no society has inherent characteristics, which would suppose cultural essentialism.[1] The nature of American exceptionalism in the comparative sense cannot be immutable because American society is malleable and always in flux.

Scholars in heterogeneous fields have seen comparatism as a means of broadening analytical perspectives. A century ago, Marc Bloch noted that comparatists aimed to "identify similarities and differences and, inasmuch as possible, explain each one of them".[2] Bloch wrote that in his age comparatists were caricatured as depicting all countries alike, leading him to stress that comparatism held "an especially keen interest in the perception of differences" and that "comparative history must convey the 'originality' of different societies".[3] These concerns diverged from those of the modern anti-exceptionalist current discussed above, which has questioned a focus on national distinctiveness.

Methodological differences are relevant to understanding why some scholars who have critically analyzed American exceptionalism in the ideological sense have been suspicious of the concept's use by comparatists. In particular, one aspect of the ideological definition of American exceptionalism is that America is an exception to 'rules of history'.[4] This raises questions about whether American exceptionalism in the comparative sense is measurable and falsifiable, as 'rules or laws of history' come across as a nebulous benchmark, if not a metaphysical order to human events. Yet few comparatists nowadays seem to believe in 'rules or laws of history', as this notion is scarcely found in modern literature assessing American exceptionalism in the comparative sense.

The literature instead suggests that comparatists' analysis of American ex-

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Gisele Shapiro (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 4.

[2] Marc Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes", *Revue de synthèse historique* 46: 17 (1928) (my translation).

[3] Ibid., 31. See also William Sewell, "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History", *History and Theory* 6, no. 2 (1967): 208-18.

[4] Dunmire, *The Great Nation of Futurity*, 41-42; Rodgers, "Exceptionalism", 22, 30; Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited", 24-25.

ceptionalism is potentially falsifiable since it rests upon quantitative or qualitative evidence. Up until 2005, for instance, America stood out internationally in retaining the death penalty for juveniles. The Supreme Court abolished it in a controversial 5-4 decision acknowledging that "the United States is the only country in the world that continues to give official sanction to the juvenile death penalty".[1] From then on, this no longer was a feature of American exceptionalism in the comparative sense. To comparatists, these events do not seem to suggest a deviation from 'rules or laws of history', but from international law or norms at a given point in time.[2] Conceptual differences across fields may also foster divergent understandings of 'rules of history', as to jurists a 'rule' evokes positive law or a binding rule.

Still, scholars may discuss 'rules of history' in a non-metaphysical and non-deterministic sense to refer to historical trends, currents or patterns. In an engaging book, Daniel Rodgers identified three historical periods when America was an outlier or exception comparatively. First,

> [t]he American Revolution's point of departure from the rules of history was that, in a world where nations without monarchs and established social hierarchies were assumed to be inherently unstable, the nascent United States managed to survive intact for most of a century as a republican outlier in a world of monarchs, revolutionary violence, and recurrent civil wars.

Second, "the United States was a highly visible outlier" in the mid-19th century as it

> was virtually alone not only in preserving a system of plantation slavery that was vitally important in its national economy but in the ambitions of those who dominated American political life to expand it. (…) Wage labor or contract service had become the rule; slavery in the United States, so firmly entrenched that only an appallingly costly war could ultimately destroy its legal foundations, was the exception.

Third, Rodgers argues that "[t]he great leap to world power status between 1865 and World War I might seem a third era in which the nation broke out of history's rules".[3]

[1] *Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S. 551, 575 (2005).
[2] See generally Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*.
[3] Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill*, 258-59.

Rodgers has nonetheless been a leading voice in questioning the concept of American exceptionalism in the ideological sense. This mindset was shaped by "a powerful combination of religious and nationalist impulses", Rodgers explains, although "[e]xceptionalist schemes of history are something that Americans share with many other peoples in the world". Rodgers has described how this ideology rests on the belief that "American history defies the rules that govern 'elsewhere'", and that "America embodies history's universal laws and reason".[1] The "rules and laws of history" embedded in this ideology come across as metaphysical and deterministic. In this regard, they differ from Rodgers's reference to historical rules in his analysis of three periods when America was an exception comparatively. This discussion ultimately captures how scholars can offer insight into both the comparative and ideological meanings of American exceptionalism.

3. The Evolving Theorization of American Exceptionalism

This section explores the growing body of research on American exceptionalism, including the interplay between its comparative and ideological understandings. As explained in the introduction, this article suggests that studies on American exceptionalism are usually best understood complementarily and cumulatively. Different theories can be seen as in dialogue. This section therefore connects the dots between different works, pointing to interrelationships that are not always apparent due to the tendency for scholars to be siloed in their own disciplines. Despite its heterogeneity, this expanding scholarship can be understood through two lenses of analysis: societal polarization and historical reversals. While these are obviously not the only possible organizing principles to think about the subject, they are abiding themes.

First, diverse scholars have described how modern America's polarization diverges in nature or intensity from polarization in other Western democracies, as we will see with debates over abortion, health care, religion, race, criminal justice, guns, constitutional gridlock, and authoritarianism. Notwithstanding convergence on some questions, such as immigration and anti-establishment

[1] Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited", 24-25.

populism,[1] the literature suggests that America has more sources and forces of polarization than peer Western democracies.[2] But scholars may widely differ on the nature and causes of America's polarization, such as whether polarization exists among the public or is mainly limited to politicians, activists, elites, and the media.[3]

Another question is the role of history as an explanatory factor, as some scholars trace societal polarization to longstanding root causes and others to modern developments, whereas still others discuss the interplay of long- and short-term factors. This section does not aim to resolve this matter once and for all, but to describe how polarization is enmeshed in debates about American exceptionalism.

Second, historical reversals are a recurrent theme in the literature. This section will notably explore research documenting how America went from having a comparably more equal economic system and less punitive justice system (at least among white persons), to experiencing the sharpest wealth inequality and punitiveness in the West nowadays. None of this means that continuity is not a theme in American history, from the enduring role of race to the nation's belief in chosenness. By bringing different fields together and surveying the latest research, this section will enhance the historiography and intellectual history of American exceptionalism.

Throughout the section we will further see multiple illustrations of the comparative benchmarks outlined in Table 1 above. Modern American exceptionalism should not merely be understood as divergence from Europe, but also from the rest of the modern Western world, namely Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Yet it may at times be understood as divergence from the entire world, depending on the issues scholars have studied.

[1] Richard H. Pildes, "The Age of Political Fragmentation", *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 146-59.

[2] See generally Jouet, *Exceptional America*.

[3] See generally Alan Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2018); Morris Fiorina, *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting, and Political Stalemate* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2017); Shanto Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States", *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 129-46; Nolan McCarty, *Polarization* (New York: Oxford UP, 2019); Nathaniel Persily, "Introduction", in *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, ed. Persily (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015), 3-14.

3.1. From Polarization to Authoritarianism

Americans are now starkly divided on innumerable fundamental issues. A study published before Donald Trump's first election in 2016 found that partisan polarization in Congress had reached its highest levels since Reconstruction following the Civil War.[1] In the 21st century, the presidencies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, and Donald Trump each were marked by gridlock and irreconcilable divides that generated a large literature seeking to explain this polarization, which seemed to only intensify with each successive presidency.[2] The rise of Trumpism and the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021 fueled additional debates about American exceptionalism.

Jeffrey Sachs, a prominent economist and internationalist, wrote that "Donald Trump's vision of America First is a racist and populist variant of traditional American exceptionalism", thereby adopting its ideological definition.[3] Others claim that Trump's presidency marked the end of American exceptionalism because American government proved not immune to authoritarian, nativist populism found abroad.[4] A variant is the warning that faith in exceptionalism could blind Americans to existential threats facing their democracy.[5] These voices recall Daniel Bell's words on waning exceptionalism during the Vietnam War: "We have not been immune to the corruption of power. We have not been the exception. (…) Our mortality now lies before us".[6] Conversely, Trump's rise may be understood as the fruit of longstanding features of American exceptionalism in the comparative sense, especially peculiar mindsets concentrated in conservative America: anti-intellectualism, Christian fundamentalism, a visceral sus-

[1] Nolan McCarty et al., *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 26-27.

[2] For multifaceted perspectives on this evolution, see generally the sources cited at page 36, fn. 3, and those below.

[3] Sachs, *A New Foreign Policy*, 2.

[4] Ginsburg and Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*, 4-5, 245; Nadia Urbinati, "On Trumpism, or the End of American Exceptionalism", *Teoria politica* 9 (2019): 215. See also John Torpey, "The End of the World as We Know It?: American Exceptionalism in an Age of Disruption", *Sociological Forum* 32, no. 4 (2017): 701-25.

[5] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 204.

[6] Bell, "The End of American Exceptionalism", 205.

picion of government, and racial resentment.[1] One question historians will face is whether these developments should be understood as a break with or continuation of America's historical path.

Before Trump's eventful second term, studies had already found that the magnitude of America's polarization was exceptional. A Pew report concluded that "America is exceptional in the nature of its political divide" based on comparative polling and analysis. "Much of this American exceptionalism preceded the coronavirus", it underlined.[2] Several empirical studies reached an analogous conclusion. One ranking seventeen democracies by degree of polarization placed America at the top.[3] Another comparative project declared: "we confirm the notion that affective polarization has indeed grown strongest in the United States".[4] A comparative historical study concluded that America "is the only advanced Western democracy that has suffered such high levels of polarization for such an extended period"; and that its polarization "is more akin to the experi¬ences of younger, less wealthy, and severely divided democracies and electoral autocracies".[5] An additional study of twelve OECD countries found that America "experienced the largest increase in polarization" over the past four decades.[6] One of its authors stated that "the trend in the U.S. is indeed exceptional".[7] However, some studies reached different conclusions, especially on affective polarization, a concept referring to negative feelings toward other political parties or social groups. As several scholars noted, various studies found "American non-exceptionalism in comparative perspective".[8]

[1] Jouet, *Exceptional America*.

[2] Dimock and Wike, "America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Public Divide".

[3] Mirko Draca and Carlo Schwarz, "How Polarised Are Citizens? Measuring Ideology from the Ground Up", *Economic Journal* 134, no. 661 (2024): 1979.

[4] Diego Garzia, Frederico Ferreira da Silva, and Simon Maye, "Affective Polarization in Comparative and Longitudinal Perspective", *Public Opinion Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2023): 224.

[5] Jennifer McCoy et al., *Reducing Pernicious Polarization: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Depolarization* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), 11, 24.

[6] Boxell et al., "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization", 557.

[7] "U.S. Is Polarizing Faster than Other Democracies, Study Finds", Brown University, January 21, 2020, `https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization`.

[8] Noam Gidron et al., *American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020), 25. See also Yunus Emre Orhan, "The Relationship Between Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding: Comparative Evidence", *Democratization* 29, no. 4 (2022): 722.

The substantive nature of U.S. polarization is likewise atypical according to more studies. As Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue observe, "whereas in most other highly polarized countries a single identity-based cleavage involving religion, race, or ideology divides the society, in the United States all three of these divisions compound one another".[1] Other scholars have suggested that competing conceptions of American exceptionalism among U.S. conservatives and liberals have contributed to polarization.[2]

At the time of writing, legal experts were debating whether President Trump's second term had created a "constitutional crisis" by moving toward authoritarianism, disregarding the rule of law, and obliterating the independence of federal institutions or empowering Elon Musk to eviscerate them overnight through his control of DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency).[3]Although these events were unparalleled in American history, some experts suggest that Trump's movement is not exceptional to America insofar as it shares features with populist, illiberal, or authoritarian movements or regimes, such as Vladimir Putin's Russia and Viktor Orbán's Hungary.[4] A contrary thesis is that shifts in America and Europe mark the revival of traditional conservative values due to the endemic failures of liberalism and globalization.[5]

While experts may disagree on the nature of modern America's polarization,[6] many have long observed that the United States' atypical institutions have made it a harder country to govern than most, if not all, Western democracies. Sample reasons in the literature over the past decades include a stronger separation of powers, extensive checks and balances, two practically coequal parliamentary chambers, a powerful Supreme Court, super-majority constitutional amendment procedures, mechanisms such as the filibuster that enable obstructionism by a minority of senators, and an Electoral College allowing the

[1] Carothers and O'Donohue, "Introduction", in *Democracies Divided*, 10.

[2] Depkat, *American Exceptionalism*, 228-36; Jouet, *Exceptional America*, *passim*.

[3] Adam Liptak, "Trump's Actions Have Created a Constitutional Crisis, Scholars Say", *N.Y. Times*, February 10, 2025.

[4] See, for example, Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* (New York: Random House, 2024); Yves Charles Zarka, "Le plus terrible cauchemar mondial", *Cités* 101 (2025): 4.

[5] Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2019). See also Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Picador, 2022).

[6] See generally sources cited at page 36, fn. 3.

election of a president who lost the popular vote.[1] These peculiarities are compounded by the weight of lobbying and moneyed interests over American government, low voter turnout, and voter suppression disproportionality targeting minorities. Arend Lijphart, a reputable Dutch-American political scientist, underscores: "Republicans have been trying to improve their electoral fortunes by suppressing the right to vote. I do not know of any other instance of such efforts at voter suppression in advanced industrial democracies".[2] Scholars who tackle the aforesaid questions may not use the concept of 'American exceptionalism', but they commonly employ comparative approaches and find America an outlier.

If the U.S. Constitution stood out for being innovative when it was adopted in the late 18th century, experts now debate whether it is antiquated, anachronistic, and ill-equipped to resolve the challenges of modernity. Exemplifying these concerns, Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq observe that the U.S. Constitution "is the world's oldest operative, organic document", one "largely bereft of learning from other constitutions and subsequent political developments".[3] Put otherwise, the U.S. Constitution is now an exception by international standards, as it was in the founding era, albeit for different reasons. This marks a historical reversal regarding the place of the U.S. Constitution internationally.

In addition to the atypical government institutions found in the United States, scholars describe Americans as atypical in their conflicting understandings of constitutionalism. In particular, originalism as a method of constitutional interpretation is either uncommon or non-existent in peer Western democracies or the wider world.[4] The weight of originalism, which aims to interpret laws based on their original intent, is tied to the fact that America has the world's oldest written constitution. Peer Western democracies therefore tend to lack a U.S.-style divide between theories of original intent and living constitutionalism under which rights should instead evolve consistently with social norms.

[1] See, for example, Kingdon, *America the Unusual*; Levinson, *Our Undemocratic Constitution*, 29-30, 69; Katharine Young, "American Exceptionalism and Constitutional Shutdowns", *Boston University Law Review* 94, no. 3 (2014): 991-1027.

[2] Arend Lijphart, "Polarization and Democratization", in Persily, ed., *Solutions to Polarization in America*, 79.

[3] Ginsburg and Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*, 163, 205-06.

[4] Greene, "On the Origins of Originalism", 18-61.

This is an area where comparative and ideological understandings of American exceptionalism intersect. "A distinctive feature of American constitutional culture is its quasi-religious veneration of its framers and founders", as Jack Balkin observed when describing "a powerful trope" not found "in most other constitutional democracies".[1] "To understand the attractions of originalism in the United States, one must stop thinking of it primarily as a theory of interpretation and start thinking about it as a cultural narrative", he suggested.[2] Balkin depicts the popular image of the American people, nation, and Constitution as simultaneously born in the founding. This imaginary, which eclipses the failed Articles of Confederation (1781-1789) that preceded the U.S. Constitution (1789-present), fostered a distinctive ideology: "Through political revolution, the American people brought themselves into being as Americans and created a state and a Constitution under which they still live".[3]

Atypical dimensions of the U.S. Constitution tend to be justified by the conviction that the framers were miraculously "allowed access to a set of timeless and transcendent truths", as Joseph Ellis argues. Evoking an "Immaculate Conception", Ellis recounts how a quasi-religious belief has bolstered "the constitutional doctrine of original intent", which "has always struck most historians of the founding era as rather bizarre" given the document's "ambiguous language" and "deep disagreements" among the framers.[4]

While part of the research on American exceptionalism centers on atypical government institutions and constitutional questions, another part focuses on atypical social attitudes. Echoing the approach of countless scholars, the sociologists Jerome Karabel and Daniel Laurison wrote, "we have no wish to defend 'American exceptionalism' as it has now come to be defined", namely the notion that America is "superior". "But we do wish to examine the idea that the United States in many ways remains an "outlier'".[5] In a 2012 empirical study they concluded that U.S. politics "remain distinctive", as it "ranked as the most conservative country" on left-right values, religiosity, and militarism. Karabel

[1] Jack M. Balkin, *Memory and Authority: The Uses of History in Constitutional Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2024), 36. 58.
[2] Ibid., 59.
[3] Ibid., 79.
[4] Joseph Ellis, "Immaculate Misconception and the Supreme Court", *Washington Post*, May 7, 2010.
[5] Karabel and Laurison, "An Exceptional Nation?", 2.

and Laurison interpreted this finding as confirmation of the political scientist John Kingdon's thesis "that the political center of gravity in the United States is to the right of that of other countries".[1]

John Kingdon pinpointed the interrelationship between America's atypical institutions and atypical social attitudes. However, in *America the Unusual* (1999), Kingdon refrained from using the concept of 'American exceptionalism', echoing the reservations discussed above: "I don't want to go so far as to argue that the United States is utterly unique or exceptional. But I do think that America is very unusual among industrialized countries [in ways that] are important".[2] Still, Kingdon's research converged with scholarship on American exceptionalism, as shown by the reference to Kingdon in the conclusion of Karabel and Laurison's sociological study. What is more, Kingdon was among the scholars who demonstrated how institutional gridlock and substantive divides are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the literature suggests that these dimensions of American exceptionalism reinforce one another.

3.2. From Race to Criminal Justice

This section explores race and criminal justice, which are major areas in the historiography and intellectual history of American exceptionalism. Even though these are distinct issues, we will see that they overlap in scholarship and social debates. Rather than a matter of historical reversal, race as a source of polarization can be understood as a constant in American history. But America may become less distinctive in this area due to growing diversity in other Western democracies. Race is also dominant in explanations of modern American criminal justice's extraordinary harshness, yet this is an area where America has experienced a significant historical reversal since it previously had less punitive practices than other Western democracies. While racial and ethnic minorities have always faced discrimination in the U.S. penal system, it did not take the form of mass incarceration—a peculiar phenomenon that emerged approximately in the 1980s.

[1] Ibid., 33.
[2] Kingdon, *America the Unusual*, 22.

To begin, the study of race exemplifies the type of challenges involved in cross-national or cross-cultural studies. Comparatists examining whether race plays an exceptional role in America must assess whether concepts like 'race', 'whiteness', or 'blackness' carry the same meaning or are even employed in other countries.[1] In a comparative study with Latin America, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. described this obstacle:

> [I]t is extremely difficult for those of us in the United States to see the use of [separate categories employed in Latin America] as what they are, the social deconstruction of the binary opposition between 'black' and 'white', outside of the filter of the 'one-drop rule', which we Americans have inherited from racist laws designed to retain the offspring of a white man and a black female slave as property of the slave's owner.

Gates observed that in the United States distinct understandings can be equated with a denial of racial identity or racial injustice, rather than as other perspectives rooted in distinct histories.[2]

Instructively, France has debated whether to adopt racial concepts that both proponents and opponents often associate with American practices. The disagreement encompasses whether the French census should collect data on race and ethnicity,[3] which appears self-evident in modern America but conflicts with France's conception of a republic of equal and indivisible citizens. In 2007, the French Constitutional Court reaffirmed these restrictions.[4] Meanwhile, historians have debated whether racial concepts used in America have existed in

[1] For example, Jordanna Matlon has observed that "it is erroneous to assume that blackness means the same thing across national contexts, especially given the particularity of U.S. hypodescent" (Jordanna Matlon, review of *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*, by Crystal Marie Fleming, *Contemporary Sociology* 47, no. 3 [2018]: 321).

[2] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Black in Latin America* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 10.

[3] Gary Dagorn, "La difficile utilisation des statistiques ethniques en France", *Le Monde*, March 19, 2019.

[4] Conseil constitutionnel (French Constitutional Court), "Loi relative à la maîtrise de l'immigration, à l'intégration et à l'asile", n° 2007-557 DC, November 15, 2007, paras. 24, 29. A neglected factor in comparisons with America is the distinct historical circumstances that have made many modern French people wary of racial categorizations that can evoke the Nazi occupation and Vichy government, which collected information on Jews to persecute and deport them. See Patrick Simon, "Les sciences sociales françaises face aux catégories ethniques et raciales", *Annales de démographie historique* 105, no. 1 (2003): 121.

France and other European nations, including in their Caribbean colonies where slavery shaped the social hierarchy.[1]

Besides sociological and empirical comparisons, the perception of a distinctive U.S. racial landscape has long been part of both American self-representations and European representations of America. Emblematically, when the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák heading the New York Philharmonic created his *New World Symphony* (1893), he sought to honor African-American culture as central to the soul of the United States.[2]

Comparative frameworks may shift if America becomes less distinctive due to growing demographic diversity in other Western societies, which face their own tensions over racism, nativism, and immigration. These shifts have buoyed research on the neglected history of Black people in Western Europe and Canada, including parallels that may exist with African-American history.[3] The United States' demographic diversity still appears greater than average in the modern Western world. Racial and ethnic minorities comprise approximately 41.6% of the U.S. population.[4] By contrast, they constitute around 30% of the population in Canada and 18.3% in England and Wales.[5] But the census in France, as noted, and various other countries do not collect such data.[6]

[1] See, for example, Guillaume Aubert, "'The Blood of France': Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World", *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 439-78; Saliha Belmessous, "Assimilation and Racialism in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century French Colonial Policy", *American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (2005): 322-49.

[2] Maurice Peress, *Dvořák to Duke Ellington* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 9, 23-27.

[3] See generally Olivette Otele, *African Europeans: An Untold History* (London: Basic Books, 2021); Michele A. Johnson and Funké Aladejebi, eds., *Unsettling the Great White North: Black Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

[4] As of July 1, 2024, the census indicated 58.4% in the category of "white alone, not Hispanic or Latino". "Quick Facts", U.S. Census, last accessed June 2, 2025,https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221.

[5] In Canada approximately 70% of the population identifies as "white", compared to 81.7% in England and Wales. "The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country's Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity", Statistics Canada, October 26, 2022, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.pdf; "Ethnic Group, England and Wales: Census 2021", U.K. Office for National Statistics, November 29, 2022, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021/pdf.

[6] When comparing the prior census data, be mindful that methodologies may vary and that subjective self-identifications are shaped by each nation's social context. See generally Anthony Daniel Perez and Charles Hirschman, "The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the US Population:

Different benchmarks may question or nuance conclusions about the United States' exceptional diversity. America is known as 'the land of immigrants' but foreign-born people represent a far larger share of the population in the United Arab Emirates (88%), Australia (29%), New Zealand (23%), Canada (21%), and Sweden (18%), among other countries, than in America (14%) according to a 2019 study.[1]

Comparative research does not suggest that 'demography is destiny', as it is a misconception that racial or ethnic identity simply dictates what people think or how they vote.[2] The German-American political theorist Yascha Mounk is among the scholars who have critiqued the tendency to over-emphasize identity on the modern American left by depicting it as a deterministic, counterproductive political strategy that contributed to the election and re-election of Donald Trump.[3] Insofar as such debates are increasingly found in other Western societies, they may someday be the object of a fuller comparative history.

The ever-expanding diversity of the U.S. population raises other historiographical questions. Although some have suggested that the crux of the racial question in the United States has been "African-American exceptionalism",[4] Latinos now constitute the largest minority group at 19.5%, compared to 13.7% for Black people. Asian Americans are another rapidly growing group at 6.4%.[5] Racial issues are accordingly taking new forms in an American society where

Emerging American Identities", *Population and Development Review* 35, no. 1 (2009): 2.

[1] "Immigrant Share in U.S. Nears Record High but Remains Below That of Many Other Countries", Pew Research Center, January 30, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/30/immigrant-share-in-u-s-nears-record-high-but-remains-below-that-of-many-other-countries/.

[2] Yascha Mounk, *The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure* (New York: Penguin, 2022), chap. 9.

[3] Ibid.; Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (New York: Random House, 2021). See also generally Susan Neiman, *Left Is Not Woke* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

[4] Hendrik Hertzberg and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The African-American Century", *New Yorker*, April 21, 1996.

[5] U.S. Census, "Quick Facts".

whites are a diminishing group, which various experts identify as a root cause of Trumpism.[1] But present-day debates exist on a historical continuum and hearken back to the rise of the Immigration Restriction League in the late 19th century,[2] Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,[3] "repatriation" of Mexicans in the 1930s,[4] and Operation Wetback in the 1950s.[5] And the status of African Americans still remains a defining issue in U.S. history—precipitating a civil war that cost approximately 620,000 lives;[6] contributing to the Democratic Party's downfall in the South once it supported civil rights legislation;[7] and sparking modern debates over the role of racial injustice in voter disenfranchisement, police shootings denounced by the Black Lives Matter movement, mass incarceration, the death penalty, and so on.[8]

Some scholars have questioned whether American exceptionalism is germane to such issues. For example, the sociologist David Garland has recognized the importance of race in American criminal justice[9] but differed on "American exceptionalism", arguing that it is an ill-suited concept to explain modern phenomena: "We do not need to seek for deep, long-term cultural traditions and value orientations that might explain present-day practices. Instead, we need to look at recent history".[10] In particular, Garland has suggested that the United States may be converging in the same direction as other Western democracies

[1] Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, chap. 6.
[2] Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 143-47.
[3] Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
[4] Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).
[5] Ronald Mize and Alicia Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), chap. 2.
[6] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 2023), xxix.
[7] Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, chap. 2.
[8] See also Mark A. Graber, "Race and American Constitutional Exceptionalism", in *Comparative Constitutional Theory*, ed. Gary Jacobsohn and Miguel Schor (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2018).
[9] Race is among the themes in Garland's book *Peculiar Institution: America's Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010).
[10] David Garland, "The Concept of American Exceptionalism and the Case of Capital Punishment", in Reitz, ed., *American Exceptionalism in Crime and Punishment*, 117.

on the death penalty, given its gradual decline in America following the consolidation of abolition in other Western democracies in recent decades.[1]

By contrast, we saw how diverse scholars have used the concept of American exceptionalism to analyze the interplay of long-term and recent historical changes, including contingent circumstances. Carol Steiker and Jordan Steiker, two leading legal scholars, illustratively refer to "American exceptionalism" when assessing America's retention of the death penalty in the face of abolitionism's success in much of the world since the second half of the 20th century. Their research considers both modern developments and longstanding historical factors, specifically the legacy of slavery and segregation.[2] Despite questioning the concept of American exceptionalism, as noted above, Garland has himself authored a thoughtful theory of "American penal exceptionalism" that identified the death penalty and mass incarceration among the areas where America is an "outlier" in modern times.[3]

While U.S. mass incarceration largely emerged in the 1980s, scholars have also used the concept of American exceptionalism when analyzing this phenomenon.[4] America practically has the world's highest incarceration rate with 541 prisoners per 100,000 residents, which is considerably higher than other Western democracies, such as Australia (163), England and Wales (142), France (120), Italy (106), Canada (90), and Germany (68).[5] Scholars have offered a host of theories on the roots of modern America's extreme punitiveness. No consensus exists on why that is the case, including to what extent mass incarceration replicates the history of slavery and segregation.[6]

Historical reversals are a theme in research on American exceptionalism and criminal justice. Before mass incarceration emerged around the 1980s, U.S. im-

[1] Ibid., 112, 115–17.

[2] Steiker and Steiker, "Global Abolition of Capital Punishment", 399-404; Steiker and Steiker, "The Rise, Fall, and Afterlife of the Death Penalty in the United States", 299-313.

[3] David Garland, "Penal Controls and Social Controls: Toward a Theory of American Penal Exceptionalism", *Punishment & Society* 22, no. 3 (2020): 324.

[4] See generally Reitz, ed., *American Exceptionalism in Crime and Punishment.*

[5] World Prison Brief, "Prison Population Rate" (data as of April 26, 2025). See also fn. 5 at page 30, regarding the U.S. incarceration rate's relative decline.

[6] See, for example, James Forman, Jr., "Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow", *New York University Law Review* 87, no. 1 (2012): 21-69.

prisonment levels ranged toward those of other Western democracies.[1] In fact, America was among the countries that pioneered principles of rehabilitation and moderate punishment, partly by drawing upon Enlightenment reformism. Criminal penalties were generally milder than in Europe in late 18th century and 19th century America, particularly in the North.[2] "Before American penal exceptionalism and isolationism took over", Alessandro Corda and Rhys Hester add, "U.S. scholars, penal reformers, and policy makers alike were not just open to but also actively engaged in learning from other systems as well as leading penal reform at the international level".[3]

The literature on penal exceptionalism has explored the role of America's internal divisions, including the geographic diversity of a continent-size country with a highly decentralized federal system. The criminologist Franklin Zimring remarks that the United States may be "50 different countries" as far as penal policy is concerned. The death penalty is a staple of the South, whereas Michigan and Wisconsin abolished it in 1846 and 1853, respectively, long before Western European nations. "Under these circumstances, does it make any sense to discuss 'American exceptionalism' in penal practice? It may, but only if close attention is paid to the diversity as well as the uniformity that can be observed [within] the United States", Zimring finds.[4] Beyond differences between "blue" and "red" states, a national trend has seen virtually all American states experience substantial increases in imprisonment since the 1970s.[5] The history of American justice up until then did not suggest that this reversal would occur. But race and punitiveness intersect with other areas of American exceptionalism scholarship that we will now turn to, from guns to the recriminalization of abortion.

[1] Stuntz, *The Collapse of American Criminal Justice*, 33-34.

[2] See generally Stuart Banner, *The Death Penalty: An American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), chap. 4-5; Jouet, "Revolutionary Criminal Punishments".

[3] Alessandro Corda and Rhys Hester, "Leaving the Shining City on a Hill: A Plea for Rediscovering Comparative Criminal Justice Policy in the United States", *International Criminal Justice Review* 31, no. 2 (2021): 205, 212.

[4] Franklin E. Zimring, "The Complications of Penal Federalism", in Retiz, ed., *American Exceptionalism in Crime and Punishment*, 182.

[5] Ibid., 186-89.

3.3. From Domestic 'Culture Wars' to International Conflict

This section initially focuses on America's peculiar 'culture wars' over guns, abortion, health care, wealth inequality, and human rights. Scholarship in this area is intertwined with wider historiographical debates about the distinctive roles of religion, gender, and anti-government attitudes in American society. The section subsequently discusses international affairs, which can partly be understood as a cultural issue given recurring divides within American society regarding the role that the United States should play internationally.

At the outset, research on the right to bear arms again encompasses debates about the inherent or contingent nature of American exceptionalism. Today, the United States has the world's highest number of firearms per capita[1] and remarkably lax regulations.[2] Scholars have cautioned against tracing these circumstances simply to the right to bear arms under the U.S. Constitution's Second Amendment. Conceptions of the right to bear arms have evolved and a radical gun-rights movement did not emerge before the last decades of the 20th century, long after the framers' epoch.[3]

Guns have been a recurrent feature in histories of violence in the United States. Over a generation ago, Richard Hofstadter already explored whether "exceptional violence" had made America an outlier.[4] A sizable share of modern U.S. homicides is caused by firearms. Nowadays, various comparatists refer to 'American exceptionalism' when analyzing America's peculiarly high homicide rate compared to other Western democracies or industrialized nations, although America is not an outlier worldwide since various developing nations

[1] Karp, *Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers*, 4. That being said, 48% of American households reported having no guns as of 2024, underscoring the divide in American society on gun ownership and gun culture. "Guns", Gallup, last accessed June 2, 2025, `https://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx`.

[2] See generally John J. Donohue, "The Swerve to 'Guns Everywhere': A Legal and Empirical Evaluation", *Law and Contemporary Problems* 83, no. 3 (2020): 117-36.

[3] See generally Cornell, *A Well-Regulated Militia*; Jouet, "Guns, Identity, and Nationhood", 2-7; Winkler, *Gunfight*.

[4] Richard Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence in the United States", in *American Violence: A Documentary History*, ed. Hofstadter and Michael Wallace (New York: Vintage, 1971), 6. See also Stuart Carroll, "Thinking With Violence", *History and Theory* 55, no. 4 (2017): 31; Eric Monkkonen, "Homicide: Explaining America's Exceptionalism", *American Historical Review* 111, no. 1 (2006): 76-94.

have worse or similar homicide rates.[1] Even studies that do not mention 'American exceptionalism' may address identical questions in practice, such as an OECD report on homicide:

> The 'divergent' development of violence in the United States is one of the puzzles of historical criminological research. (…) other Western Offshoots such as Canada and Australia, with potentially similar frontier legacies, converged to the European levels well before 1950, but the United States persisted on its own trajectory.[2]

A variant on this theme is the prevalence of police killings of civilians, particularly African-American men, often with impunity.[3] As Zimring writes, "[a]ny empirical analysis of American police violence in international perspective must start by acknowledging American exceptionalism". "The gross statistics are dramatic", he underlines, noting that "the rate of police use of deadly force in the United States is forty times that of Germany and one hundred times that of the United Kingdom". American police officers are themselves also far likelier to be killed by civilians wielding firearms.[4]

If these features of American exceptionalism may appear negative to some readers, recall that the comparative definition of the concept is not normative given that the United States' distinctive features may be interpreted positively or negatively. For example, a significant proportion of modern U.S. conservatives believe that an unbridled right to bear arms is a pillar of American identity and liberty. Besides protection against criminals, this right is increasingly rooted in the conviction that an armed citizenry is an indispensable safeguard against government 'tyranny'.[5]

Guns are hardly the only issue in the literature on modern America's 'culture wars'. Abortion, contraception, sexual education, and the theory of evolution also tend to be drastically more controversial in America than elsewhere in the West. Due to a host of sociohistorical factors beyond this article's scope, research suggests that many U.S. conservatives have gravitated toward ultra-

[1] Robinson and Maxwell, "Typifying American Exceptionalism", 369, 373, 379-82.
[2] OECD, *How Was Life? Global Well-Being Since 1820*, 146.
[3] See generally Paul J. Hirschfield, "Lethal Policing: Making Sense of American Exceptionalism", *Sociological Forum* 30, no. 4 (2015): 1109-17.
[4] Franklin E. Zimring, *When Police Kill* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2017), 87-88.
[5] Jouet, "Guns, Identity, and Nationhood", 2-7.

traditional conceptions of Christianity that are unusual by modern Western standards, whereas the views of U.S. liberals are more in line with those of fellow Westerners.[1] In addition to shaping "exceptionalist" beliefs about America's providence,[2] the nation's distinctive religious landscape has influenced its comparatively atypical social debates over abortion and other areas of public policy.[3]

In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court's controversial *Dobbs* decision overruled the constitutional right to abortion that *Roe v. Wade* had recognized in 1973, thereby allowing abortion's recriminalization.[4] After decades of setbacks in eradicating *Roe*, balanced by incremental success in restricting abortion access, the 'pro-life' movement's victory was enabled by Donald Trump's appointment of three Supreme Court Justices. At the time of writing over a dozen American states had instituted criminal bans on abortion in stark contrast to the historical evolution of reproductive rights. Although abortion has been a source of divide in diverse nations historically,[5] the overwhelming trend had been toward its liberalization and decriminalization.[6]

International tensions over America's divergence arose as several Western heads of state sharply denounced the recriminalization of abortion. The magnitude of criticism from U.S. allies even spurred Justice Samuel Alito, the author of *Dobbs*, to defend himself and the decision when speaking at a conference on religious liberty organized by Notre Dame University in Rome.[7]

Comparative history can still question or nuance American exceptionalism. For instance, the decriminalization of abortion in America preceded Canada by

[1] Jouet, *Exceptional America*, chap. 3, 4.

[2] Ian Tyrrell has described how, to several generations of "religious exceptionalists", "the United States has had a mythic beginning that was both Christian and chosen for a providential task in the eyes of God". Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 15.

[3] Jouet, "Abortion and American Exceptionalism".

[4] Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Org., 597 U.S. 215 (2022).

[5] On Canada and France, for example, see Frederick Lee Morton, *Pro-Choice vs. Pro-Life: Abortion and the Courts in Canada* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Jean-Yves Le Naour and Catherine Valenti, *Histoire de l'avortement: XIX^e^-XX^e^ siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

[6] Jouet, "Abortion and American Exceptionalism"; Foreign Policy Staff, "Roe Abolition Makes U.S. a Global Outlier".

[7] Margaret Talbot, "The Last Word", *New Yorker*, August 28, 2022.

fifteen years.[1] Canada was more of an outlier in the West until *Morgentaler*—its historical analogue to *Roe*—a 1988 decision that decriminalized abortion[2] following a series of failed legal challenges.[3] Some Canadian women still face geographic and financial hurdles to abortion.[4] Yet such restrictions and obstacles have gone considerably farther in America than Canada, where major gains in the right and access to abortion have been made in past decades.[5]

Another area of exceptionalism scholarship focuses on America as the lone industrialized nation without universal health care.[6] It also has the highest healthcare costs globally, despite subpar medical results.[7] Again, not all the research refers to 'exceptionalism' though it recurrently underlines that America is an outlier, as indicated in OECD reports.[8]

Analogously to the fifty-year battle to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, an extraordinary fervor characterized attempts to repeal the Obama administration's health-care reform, the Affordable Care Act of 2010 or 'Obamacare'. Scholars found that it "is the most challenged statute in American history" and that "[t]he breadth of the more than 2,000 legal challenges has been staggering".[9] What is peculiar is not simply the vehemence and persistence of this battle but its substance—a right generally accepted by both conservatives and liberals for several generations elsewhere in the West.

This is among the areas where some have referred to American exceptionalism in an ironic fashion fusing its ideological and comparative definitions. The

[1] Mugambi Jouet, "A History of Post-*Roe* America and Canada: From Intertwined Abortion Battles to *Dobbs*", *Northwestern Journal of Human Rights* 23, no. 3 (2025): 187-269.

[2] Supreme Court of Canada, *R. v. Morgentaler et al.*, 1 SCR 30 (1988).

[3] See, for example, Supreme Court of Canada, *Morgentaler v. The Queen*, 1 SCR 616 (1976).

[4] See generally Chris Cummins, "Decades Later, Abortions in Canada Are Still Hard to Get", *Policy Options*, August 13, 2019.

[5] Kelly Gordon and Paul Saurette, "The Future of Pro-Choice Discourse in Canada", in *Abortion: History, Politics, and Reproductive Justice After Morgentaler*, ed. Shannon Stettner, Kristin Burnett and Travis Hay (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 278.

[6] While the concept of 'universal health care' is widely used by experts, that does not mean that these systems are homogeneous. See sources cited at page 31, fn. 5.

[7] See generally Jeffrey D. Sachs, *Building the New American Economy: Smart, Fair, & Sustainable.* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017), chap. 8; OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023*, 28.

[8] See, for example, *OECD, Economic Surveys: United States 2024*, 93.

[9] Abbe R. Gluck, Mark Regan, and Erica Turret, "The Affordable Care Act's Litigation Decade", *Georgetown Law Journal* 108, no. 6 (2020): 1472-73.

late Uwe Reinhardt, a leading German-American economist, made the following observation when analyzing the United States' colossal medical spending and mediocre health outcomes: "Americans pride themselves on being 'exceptional'. A number of facts about the U.S. health care system are indeed exceptional, and some are downright bizarre or curious".[1] Reinhardt advanced that, next to other prosperous countries, Americans have been less able to reach consensus on "the distributive social ethic that should guide our health system".[2] This observation evoked the findings of a study comprising interviews with university students, which suggested that belief in American exceptionalism (in the ideological sense) aligned with opposition to economic reform. 'Exceptionalists' downplayed or denied wealth inequality, emphasizing the American Dream and a classless society.[3]

Wealth inequality is an area of American exceptionalism drawing scholars from multiple fields. The French economist Thomas Piketty documented how the United States has grown more unequal than other industrialized nations: "These findings stand in sharp contrast to the belief in 'American exceptionalism' that once dominated US sociology, according to which social mobility in the United States was exceptionally high compared with the class-bound societies of Europe". However, Piketty explains that America generally enjoyed greater wealth equality and social mobility than Europe in the 19th century.[4] Social divide over the legitimate role of government and the welfare state is a longstanding theme in the historiography of American exceptionalism.[5] But

[1] Reinhardt, *Priced Out*, 47.
[2] Ibid., 99.
[3] Anthony R. DiMaggio, *Unequal America: Class Conflict, the News Media, and Ideology in an Era of Record Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2021), chap. 3-5.
[4] Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 617.
[5] See, for example, Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" *History Workshop* 17, no. 1 (1984): 57-80; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace &

simply attributing modern America's acute wealth inequality to an exceptional history would blur how Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal inspired other nations' initiatives to reduce wealth inequality. After all, "[w]hen it came to progressive taxation, the United States went much farther than Europe" in this epoch, as Piketty stresses when recounting a historical reversal.[1]

To go full circle in this article's historiography, consider how the United States' rise as a superpower recalls questions facing past generations, namely whether Americans have rightfully separated themselves from the world.[2] Rejecting the idea of "a pendulum between isolationism and internationalism" to describe U.S. foreign policy, Restad has proposed the concept of "unilateral internationalism, meaning that the United States has always been internationalist (engaging with the world politically, economically, and militarily) but has preferred to conduct its foreign policy in a unilateral, rather than multilateral, manner".[3]

Tellingly, American exceptionalism and human rights has become a prominent field exploring the United States' indifference, ambivalence or defiance toward international standards. Its scholars analyze America's chronic refusal to recognize international courts or ratify human rights treaties,[4] including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Convention on the Rights of the Child.[5] All other Western democracies have ratified these treaties and, more generally, none has exempted itself from international standards as systematically, despite a few parallels. For example, Canada still matches the United States in refusing the jurisdiction of the

World, 1955); Kammen, *In the Past Lane*, 172-73, 179, 188-89; Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, trans. Patricia M. Hocking and C. T. Husbands (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1976).

[1] Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 190.

[2] See, for example, Jasper M. Trautsch, *The Genesis of America: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Formation of National Identity 1793-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), 263-64.

[3] Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, 3, 8.

[4] See generally Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*; Laurence Burgorgue-Larsen, "Les États-Unis et la justice internationale : Entre l'utilisation et l'instrumentalisation du droit international", in *Le droit international à la croisée des chemins*, ed. Rafâa Ben Achour and Slim Laghmani (Paris: Pedone, 2004), 233-69.

[5] These treaties respectively entered into force in 1981 and 1990. U.N. Treaty Collection, `https://treaties.un.org/`.

Inter-American Court of Human Rights.[1] France previously matched America in initially resisting the International Court of Justice. Within Western Europe, France was also late to fully recognize the European Court of Human Rights' jurisdiction, doing so in 1981.[2]

Some Americans wish their country converged with international norms, whereas others defend its divergence. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the late Supreme Court Justice, was an active participant in this social debate extending beyond the legal field. Quoting the Declaration of Independence, Ginsburg invoked a history of internationalism supplanted by ahistorical nationalism.[3] In any event, this area of exceptionalism is fairly recent insofar as the bulk of impugned international treaties and institutions were created in the post-World-War-Two era. Delving further reveals older root causes, including the U.S. Constitution's peculiarity in requiring a two-thirds Senate vote to ratify a treaty,[4] as opposed to a simple majority.[5] This atypicality is epitomized by how, following World War One, the United States neither ratified the Versailles Treaty nor adhered to the League of Nations, regardless of President Woodrow Wilson's leading role in supporting these initiatives. Compounding this paradox, much of the international community had initially acclaimed Wilson for America's newfound leadership on the global stage.[6] Strikingly, the Versailles Treaty was not ratified by the U.S. Senate, even as in 1920 it voted 49-35 *in its favor*, which fell short of the two-thirds threshold.[7]

Different theories on America's unilateralism focus on its geopolitical interests or superpower status,[8] whereas others question the extent to which U.S.

[1] Bernard Duhaime, "Canada and the Inter-American Human Rights System", *International Journal* 67, no. 3 (2012): 648-53.

[2] Burgorgue-Larsen, "Les États-Unis et la justice internationale", 238-44.

[3] Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "'A Decent Respect to the Opinions of [Human]kind': The Value of a Comparative Perspective in Constitutional Adjudication", Sir David Williams Lecture, University of Cambridge, May 9, 2005, reprinted in *FIU Law Review* 1, no. 7 (2006): 27-44.

[4] U.S. Constitution, Article 2 § 2.

[5] As Table 1 indicates, only five other countries required a legislative supermajority for treaty ratification according to a 2008 study. See Hathaway, "Treaties' End", 1271-72.

[6] Alan Dawley, "Woodrow Wilson and the Failure of Progressivism at Versailles", in Guarneri, ed., *America Compared*, vol. II, 198-218.

[7] "Rejected Treaties", U.S. Senate, undated, `https://www.senate.gov/legislative/RejectedTreaties.htm`.

[8] See, for example, Sachs, *A New Foreign Policy*; Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 124-29.

foreign policy has been unilateral in the post-World War Two era given America's role as a founding member of the United Nations and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), not to forget the Marshall Plan and other U.S. initiatives. While America's postwar power and international leadership reinvigorated 'exceptionalist' subjective beliefs about its chosenness,[1] countless scholars described America as an objective outlier in foreign policy. In particular, as of 2023 "[t]he USA remained by far the largest [military] spender in the world, allocating 3.1 times more to the military than the second largest spender, China", and more than the next nine countries combined.[2] The United States likewise stands out internationally in having approximately "eight hundred military bases in some eighty-five countries" according to a 2020 study, which noted that in contrast "the thought of finding a foreign base in the United States is basically unimaginable".[3] At the same time, countries that host U.S. military bases can welcome them as part of their own national defense strategy against rival powers, especially Russia and China. These circumstances have again led to competing theories, ranging from empire-building or overreach, such as during the Vietnam War,[4] to *Pax Americana* describing the United States' role in building the relative peace and stability in the aftermath of World War Two.[5]

The latest developments will someday become part of the historiography of American exceptionalism, as Donald Trump's second presidential term has raised new questions about the United States' international position. One interpretation is that the administration is severing traditional alliances in view of a narrowly transactional approach to international relations reflecting its conception of America's national interest. This is exemplified by the recurrent threat of punitive tariffs and a 'trade war' against practically all countries, friend and foe alike, notwithstanding concerns that this could lead to a domestic and

[1] Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 504.

[2] Tian et al., *Trends in World Military Expenditure*, 2023, 2-3.

[3] David Vine, *The United States of War: Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 2.

[4] See generally Guarneri, "American History as if the World Mattered (and Vice Versa)", 204, 212; Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2016); Vine, *United States of War*, 8-13.

[5] *Pax Americana* has itself been the object of competing theories. See generally Lawrence Sondhaus, "Soft Power, Hard Power, and the Pax Americana", in *America, War and Power: Defining the State, 1775-2005*, ed. James A. Fuller and Sondhaus (London: Routledge, 2007).

global economic crisis. Another interpretation is that America might not forgo alliances altogether but may incrementally become an outlier within the West in pursuing a realignment with Russia and other authoritarian regimes while alienating longstanding allies, including fellow Western democracies.[1] Declarations regarding the prospective annexation of Canada and Greenland, a Danish territory, in the name of America's national interest present unprecedented questions for the modern Western bloc. The United States, Canada, and Denmark are among the twelve founding member states of NATO, which now has thirty-two members. Since its foundation in 1949, the United States supported NATO as a military and diplomatic alliance against Russia and its allies. In 1984, President Ronald Reagan characteristically proclaimed that

> the NATO Alliance represents a living commitment of the nations of the West to the defense of democracy and individual liberty. By uniting Europe and North America in this way, it has deterred war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact for three and a half decades and made possible the longest period of peace and prosperity in modern history. (…) I am proud to rededicate the United States to the ideals and responsibilities of our Alliance.[2]

Scholars will explore whether a historical shift crystallized when President Trump questioned America's alliances and blamed Ukraine for its war with Russia, echoing the Kremlin's position,[3] whereas 86% of Americans instead blamed Vladimir Putin for invading Ukraine.[4] Following the remarkably tense meeting

[1] See generally Anne Applebaum, "The End of the Postwar World", *The Atlantic*, February 20, 2025; Zarka, "Le plus terrible cauchemar mondial", 4.

[2] Ronald Reagan, "Proclamation 5158: 35th Anniversary of NATO", Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, March 6, 1984, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/proclamation-5158-35th-anniversary-nato.

[3] Daniel Michaels and Laurence Norman, "Europe Flails for Response After Trump Blames Kyiv for Ukraine War", *Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2025; Alex Leary, "Trump Blames Zelensky for Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", *Wall Street Journal*, October 18, 2024.

[4] Filip Timotija, "86 Percent Blame Putin for Russia-Ukraine War: Survey", *The Hill*, March 20, 2025, https://thehill.com/policy/international/5205793-putin-trump-russia-ukraine-war-survey/. For a fuller discussion of U.S. public opinion on Ukraine, see William A. Galston and Jordan Muchnick, "What Americans Believe about Ending the War in Ukraine", Brookings Institution, April 4, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-americans-believe-about-ending-the-war-in-ukraine/.

with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House on February 28, 2025, a Kremlin spokesperson declared that the Trump administration "is rapidly changing all foreign policy configurations" and that it "largely aligns with our vision".[1] At the time of writing, a potential end to the war on Ukraine remained under negotiation but these shifts were encouraging European nations to increase their military budgets and play a greater role in organizing their defense. For decades, various U.S. and European experts had observed that NATO was excessively dependent on America, thereby agreeing with a point that several U.S. presidents had made, and that Trump would assert more forcefully in his second term.[2] All in all, the prospective international realignment has proved controversial in American society, exacerbating its polarization, although the United States may change course again in the future.

3.4. A Polymorphic and Malleable Subject

This article has documented how the latest scholarship tracks longstanding historiographical, definitional, and theoretical debates. Many scholars still understand American exceptionalism to mean that America is comparatively an 'exception'. In contrast, many others continue to approach it as a belief in America's greatness or superiority. Figure 1 above represents how these two approaches overlap like in a Venn diagram, because some scholars have explored how ideological convictions in American exceptionalism have influenced the nation's comparative evolution.

My research further suggests that nowadays scholars rarely use the phrase to

[1] Lauren Irwin, "Kremlin: Trump foreign policy 'largely aligns' with our vision", *The Hill*, March 3, 2025.

[2] Back in 2012, for instance, an article in *Le Monde diplomatique* had suggested that Europe rethink its defense strategy and emphasized that, "[s]ince the 1960s, the Pentagon's leadership is irritated by the anemic nature of European defense budgets". Olivier Zajec, "L'Alliance atlantique présente sa facture à l'Europe", *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 1, 2012, 14 (my translation). See also Katarina Đjokić, "Allies' Defence Expenditures: A Rocky Ride to Compliance", in *The Alliance Five Years After Crimea: Implementing the Wales Summit Pledges*, ed. Marc Ozawa (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2019).

express a conviction in America's greatness or superiority.[1] Prior generations of historians were notably charged with holding such nationalistic beliefs themselves. According to the late Robert Middlekauff, however, assumptions about the United States' superiority "have been much more common outside the profession than within".[2]

American society may still have encouraged exceptionalism studies reflecting the popular belief that the United States is a special nation.[3] In this sense, the prominence of exceptionalism narratives may partly be a manifestation of American patriotism or nationalism buoyed by U.S. power, including universities with superior financial resources and capacities to disseminate research at home or abroad.[4]

On one hand, comparative research on exceptionalism draws upon quantitative and qualitative evidence to critically analyze the United States. On the other hand, certain claims about American exceptionalism may indeed be unprovable, such as whether America is a special country chosen by God to be a beacon of light to the world. Assuming a god exists, their nature, will or plan is not provable. By the same token, if American exceptionalism is taken to mean that America has deviated from concrete 'laws of history', that would also be an unprovable claim. The notion that history genuinely has 'laws' implies a providence ordering human events. Hence, a range of ideological and nationalistic claims about American exceptionalism are unverifiable matters of faith or belief. Even so, scholars can analyze the roots, prevalence, and influence of such convictions in the United States, which may themselves shape distinctive facets of American society.

[1] Exceptions naturally exist, as the following quotation shows: "[T]his volume persuasively and successfully builds the case for American Exceptionalism—that the political systems, the civic and social institutions, and the economic philosophies and policies of the United States have irrevocably changed the world for the better in immeasurable ways" (Paul W. Grimes, "Foreword", in Lall Ramrattan and Michael Szenberg, *American Exceptionalism: Economics, Finance, Political Economy, and Economic Laws* [Cham: Springer, 2019], vii).

[2] Robert Middlekauff, "The Sources of American Exceptionalism", review of *The Intellectual Construction of America*, by Jack P. Greene, *Reviews in American History* 22, no. 3 (1994): 387.

[3] Robert B. Townsend, "In Conversation with Ian Tyrrell", *Perspectives on History*, May 1, 2006, https://perma.cc/HYV9-3X7V.

[4] See generally Catherine Paradeise and Jean-Claude Thoenig, *In Search of Academic Quality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 34-35, 54-57, 174-76.

We now see how the study of American exceptionalism is intertwined with broader epistemological questions relevant to any interpretive theory. Even when collected with a rigorous methodology, quantitative and qualitative evidence is always amenable to interpretation. Such interpretation usually reflects human agency since one could choose to interpret the evidence in another way. History, social science, and law, among other fields, share interpretive features that make them open to this criticism. If these potential pitfalls demonstrate that comparative theories of American exceptionalism are suspicious, however, the argument may prove too much. Such pitfalls could serve to discredit virtually any interpretive theory.

If we zoom out, we instead see that the scholarly debate over American exceptionalism is a variant of wider debates about how to define, measure, and theorize concepts, social phenomena, and historical events. Any '-ism' or concept may kindle this debate. When comparatists theorize exceptionalism, they invite questions: 'What does exceptionalism mean? By what standard? By whose standard?' Such questions are indispensable, but they should hardly mark the end of scholarly analysis, which inherently entails malleable definitions and benchmarks.

Throughout the article, we saw that theories abound on whether America has evolved distinctively and, if so, why. Historical reversals, societal divides, and 'culture wars' are abiding themes in the literature, which reveals change and contingency, not innate or immutable characteristics. To date, exceptionalism scholarship has widely been associated with what separates Americans from the world, although this article has explained how core dimensions now revolve around the nation's extraordinary polarization. All too often, American exceptionalism means not simply Americans against the world, but Americans against Americans.

4. Conclusion

American exceptionalism has always lied at the intersection of myth and reality. At one end of the spectrum, its ideological definition echoes an enduring faith in American chosenness and superiority. At the other end, comparatists refer to exceptionalism in a non-ideological sense when theorizing how America is objectively an outlier among Western democracies and, to a lesser extent, in the wider world. But the comparative and ideological study of American exceptionalism can converge insofar as patriotic or nationalistic convictions shape distinctive social attitudes, practices or policies. Last but not least, some scholars have sought to nuance or correct understandings of American exceptionalism by suggesting that the United States is not necessarily an exception in certain areas, if at all.

Interdisciplinary research on American exceptionalism can broaden our perspectives and avoid cultural essentialism by revealing a nexus between historical, societal, legal, institutional, and contingent factors. By bringing into dialogue diverse lines of scholarship, this article has captured the analogous conversations occurring among scholars largely siloed into separate fields. While contrary understandings will always remain, studies on the comparative and ideological dimensions of American exceptionalism can and do coexist. Each offer their own insights while helping nuance one another's conclusions, thereby offering a fuller understanding of a multifaceted subject. The absorbing evolution of the United States will ultimately remain a key area of study for years to come.

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