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Hyperpower Exceptionalism: Globalisation the American Way

JAN NEDERVEEN PIETERSE

We are in a unique position because of our unique assets, because of the character of our people, the strength of our ideals, the might of our military and the enormous economy that supports it.

(Vice-President Dick Cheney,
addressing the Council on Foreign Relations, February 2002)

Today's era is dominated by American power, American culture, the American dollar and the American navy.

(Thomas Friedman, 2000)¹

In international affairs the USA displays growing unilateralism. International development policies have been constrained by the Washington consensus. The USA fails to sign on to international greening protocols. Until recently the USA was perennially in arrears in United Nations dues. On several occasions (such as Nicaragua, Panama) the USA has not followed international legal standards and it ignores the International Court if its verdict goes against it. American policies contribute to the enduring stalemate in the Middle East. Take any global problem and the USA is both the major player and the major bottleneck. It is a reasonable question to ask whether this is just a matter of the current US administration or whether more profound dynamics are at work.

Progressive social forces and international institutions the world over make proposals for global reform, whose list is considerable and growing, but without US cooperation they stand little chance of being implemented. By logic, the world's sole superpower is also the world's major status quo power. The world leader, then, turns out to be the global bottleneck and in this light US conditions and problems become world problems.

The thesis of 'American exceptionalism' (AE) in American social science holds that the USA is a special case. If we would take this claim seriously, what does it imply for US leadership? What does it mean when a country that by its own account is a historical exception sets rules for the world? Let us revisit the arguments of AE and ask how this spills over into the international arena.

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This exercise is not meant as another round of anti-Americanism; that would take us back decades and bring us on to conservative terrain. We may appreciate or admire US society for its many contributions—such as its cultural mix as an immigrant society, the vitality of its popular culture, its technological and economic achievements—and yet be concerned about the way it relates to the rest of the world. In the words of Timothy Garton Ash, ‘I love this country and I worry about its current role in the world’.² This treatment seeks to take a clinical, matter-of-fact look at American conditions and their consequences for global conditions. The argument under examination is whether the claims and ramifications of AE are important for understanding the politics of contemporary globalisation and, accordingly, whether the margins of political change in the USA hold implications for global change.

The aim of this treatment is not to revisit the ‘globalisation as Americanisation’ thesis. This is a variation on the modernisation = Westernisation = globalisation thesis, which is an extremely narrow account of globalisation. Globalisation also involves Easternisation and South–South flows. In recent years much discussion on Americanisation has focused on cultural dynamics, or what Nye calls ‘soft power’: the role of media, popular culture and transnational consumerism. This is rarely adequately correlated with other dimensions of US influence: economic, financial, institutional and military. The lack of articulation between soft and hard power is problematic and yields too culturalist an approach.

The present inquiry differs from the conventional cultural imperialism thesis. Overall US impact may to a considerable extent be a matter of what Galtung called ‘structural imperialism’: shaping other societies through structural leverage, rather than just through direct political intervention.³ This includes, but goes beyond, the cultural industries and the familiar litanies of Coca-colonisation, McDonaldisation, Disneyfication, Barbie culture and US media conglomerates. While these have high visibility and receive overwhelming attention, the more significant impact of American exceptionalism probably concerns economic policies, international politics and security. These too are ‘cultural’, but covertly rather than overtly so, and less visible in everyday life. They concern not just relations among advanced countries but relations across development gradients that affect the majority world. This treatment differs from the hegemony literature in international relations (discussed below) by taking into account American domestic politics.

The article argues that American exceptionalism affects contemporary globalisation in several ways. US laissez-faire prompts a worldwide shift from stakeholder capitalism to shareholder capitalism; world economic management led by Washington-based institutions involves a pattern of neoliberal globalisation that has brought increasing global inequality. In world politics, the USA blocks the formation of international institutions unless they can be used as instruments of US power.

The first part of this exercise is easy, at least in the sense that there is ample literature on AE, mostly from US sources, and the key themes are familiar. The difficulties are to avoid mistaking US ideologies for realities, to avoid impressionism and to be concise while the data are vast. The literature on ‘America’,

the largest and foremost developed country, is vast and multivocal. This part of the treatment serves as a *précis*, organised in brief vignettes. The second part probes the international ramifications of AE. This is less widely talked about, tucked within specialist literatures on international relations and international political economy (including transnational enterprises, the Washington consensus and military affairs), and is more controversial. Twinning the themes of AE and global ramifications is the pioneering element in this inquiry. The terrain is large, the literatures are extensive and therefore this treatment is pointed. The closing section criticises AE as a self-caricature and considers possible counterpoints.

American exceptionalism

The profile of AE is fairly familiar. Its origins lay in ‘the merger of the republican and millennial traditions that formed an ideology of American exceptionalism prominent in American historical writing’.⁴ Another familiar line of reasoning follows Werner Sombart’s question of 1906, ‘Why is there no socialism in the United States?’ AE is a controversial thesis also in the USA. Thus it is argued that ‘because of American heterogeneity we have not had a singular mode or pattern of exceptionalism’.⁵ Nevertheless, it remains broadly endorsed by influential American thinkers across a wide spectrum: in history,⁶ labour studies,⁷ race relations,⁸ and in political science where it has taken on salience through a major work by Seymour Martin Lipset.⁹ AE of a kind has also been signalled abroad, often with admiration, from de Tocqueville to Gramsci, Dahrendorf and Baudrillard.

There is a wider variation in the acceptance or rejection of AE, especially among US historians, than in the components of AE itself. Major strands of AE, such as *laissez-faire* ideology and the power of business, have been fairly continuous or reinforced over time. ‘Prolonged post-war prosperity refurbished the classic American anti-statist, market-oriented values’,¹⁰ which have been further reinforced under the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. The decline in trade union membership has been ongoing and corporate hostility to organised labour and illegal corporate tactics against organised labour have increased.¹¹

This treatment is not a critique of AE: the focus is not AE *per se* but its international ramifications. To a certain extent AE is understandable in relation to US fundamentals: a vast, resource-rich continent without foreign wars on its territory; a history of settler colonialism and a modernity based on shallow foundations; a nation of immigrants and a huge interior market; the fourth largest population and the first among developed countries. By the same token, this serves as a warning light that the American *Sonderweg* reflects fundamentals in which others cannot follow. As a Bostonian remarked to de Tocqueville, ‘those who would like to imitate us should remember that there are no precedents for our history’.¹² Yet we cannot avoid problematising AE. AE serves a double function: as a summary account of US historical and geographical particulars *and* as an ideology. As a description, AE is widely referred to, yet contentious; as an ideology, AE is a self-caricature that is as old-fashioned as the stereotypes

of ‘national character’ in other nations. As such, AE itself is a form of ‘Americanism’ and part of what it purports to describe; I will detail several critical points in the concluding section. It is quite difficult to draw a line between AE as social fact and ideology; however, on the premise of social constructivism it makes sense to assume that *both* spill over into the international arena. AE as ideology may be as significant as actual deviations from historical patterns.

The long stretch of US hegemony places its stamp on societies the world over, contemporary globalisation is the latest instalment. The ongoing changes associated with contemporary globalisation are in part of a structural nature—technological changes, the information society, flexibilisation, individualisation—and in part inflected by, among others, US influence. Thus, to the extent that the American *Sonderweg* shapes global conditions, they are being shaped by conditions in which others cannot follow. To probe the question what kind of globalisation US hyperpower produces means we have to re-examine US society.

There is ample reference in the literature to the exceptionalism of other countries—such as the German *Sonderweg* and Japanese uniqueness (*Nihon-jiron*), the exceptionalism of Britain, France, Scandinavia, Europe, East Asia, China, Australia, etc. In most of these cases, however, exceptionalism is single-issue (such as British labour and French *dirigisme*), rather than multidimensional; it does not also perform as a popular ideology (except in Japan and until recent times Germany); and these states are not superpowers. Any country would look odd if its historical idiosyncrasies were to be amplified on the world stage. In the present context this is the real problem; not AE *per se*. Indeed, to the conventional repertoire of AE we must add the US status as sole superpower, exceptional because there is no country like it; hence the term hyperpower used by the former French foreign minister Hubert Védrine. This too is not merely a condition but also a mentality, so that hyperpower exceptionalism emerges as a theme in its own right; hence the title of this treatment.

Major strands of AE are free enterprise and laissez-faire ideology, the relative power of business and the limited role of government, the ideology of ‘Americanism’ and social inequality. To this familiar profile I add observations on the character of US modernity and the role of the military.

Free enterprise capitalism

Laissez-faire side by side with a weak state and weak labour organisation may be taken as the cornerstones of AE. Yet none of these, except the last, is unproblematic in a factual sense.

The US federal government behaves like a minimal state, but is also strongly regulatory and strong in the areas of defence and security. The USA is ‘the only industrialised country which does not have a significant socialist movement or labor party’.¹³ The USA has a lower rate of taxation and many fewer government-owned industries than other industrialised nations.¹⁴ Yet mixed economy or John Ruggie’s ‘embedded liberalism’ is a more apt description than laissez-faire. Government interventions include Fordism, party machines, the New Deal,

military Keynesianism, export credits, local investment incentives, the ‘war on poverty’ and affirmative action. Unlike European social democracy, American Fordism was based more on worker productivity and pay rates than on worker rights, more on corporate designs than government policy. Johnson’s Great Society was aborted by the burdens of the Vietnam War. The USA is increasingly a workfare state, but still a welfare state.

The implementation of laissez-faire in the USA has been both discontinuous, with many zigzags, and partial: some economic sectors, notably military industries, have known government intervention all along. It has been opportunistic: deviations from posture occur anytime if political expedience requires. The actual deregulation of business has increased sharply since the 1980s. The Reagan era of monetarism, supply-side economics, tax cuts and government rollback helped to inaugurate a worldwide trend of liberalisation and deregulation.

Sectors that were deregulated in the USA include banks, investment banks, corporations, energy and telecommunications. The Enron episode may turn out to be a tipping point. What emerges at the end of the road of deregulation, the next chapter after casino capitalism, is swindle capitalism. The tipping point occurs when deregulation and no-nonsense capitalism drive the US economy down. No-nonsense capitalism has gradually removed so many safeguards—accountability, transparency, legal recourse against malpractice by corporations, accounting firms and market analysts—leaving investors so vulnerable that eventually the stock market itself declines.

While actual practice has been uneven and partial, the ideology of free enterprise has been virtually constant. The key features of US capitalism—free enterprise, a minimal state, an advanced degree of possessive individualism—are anomalous by international standards, as Michel Albert argues in *Capitalism against Capitalism*. What is more anomalous still than American practice is American laissez-faire ideology. Yet this has been continuously upheld as international posture: ‘hardly anyone acknowledged or addressed the contradiction between practicing a mixed economy at home and promoting a laissez-faire economy globally’.¹⁵ As Paul Krugman observes, ‘policymakers in Washington and bankers in New York often seem to prescribe for other countries the kind of root canal economics that they would never tolerate here in the USA.... My advice would be to stop listening to those men in suits. Do as we do, not as we say.’¹⁶

Political conservatism

That government governs best which governs least.

(Thomas Jefferson)

Less government is better government.

(Ronald Reagan)

The era of big government is over.

(William J. Clinton)

According to Lipset, the enduring values of AE—in particular liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire—have made the USA ‘the most anti-statist, legalistic and rights-oriented nation’. The USA is ‘the most classical liberal polity’ and ‘the great conservative society’.¹⁷ If ‘night watchman state’ is a common description, Nettl goes further and refers to the ‘relative statelessness’ of the USA as a society in which only the law is sovereign.¹⁸ As a result what is rightwing in most countries is the political centre in the USA.

Familiar features of the US political system include constitutionalism, checks and balances between executive and legislative powers, and the presidential system. Constitutionalism yields a law-centred polity and is the foundation of what over time has become an exceptionally litigation prone society. The USA may be described as a ‘legal–rational culture’: for ‘in no other industrial society is legal regulation as extensive or coercive as in the United States’.¹⁹ The 800,000 American lawyers represent one third of the world total of practising attorneys.

The American republic was designed as a weak state with a divided form of government. ‘The chronic antagonism to the state derived from the American revolution’;²⁰ its origins lie in the American fight against a centralised (monarchical) state. It follows, according to Lipset, that there is no tradition of obedience to the state or to law.

The American separation of powers allows and even encourages members of Congress to vote with their constituents against their president or dominant party view.... American legislators, including Congressional leaders, have voted against and helped to kill bills to carry out major international agreements in response to small groups of local constituents.... As former House speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O’Neill once put it, in Congress, ‘all politics is local’.²¹

The country’s large size, federalism and checks and balances make for a give-and-take system of spoils in Congress: cooperation at a federal level is obtained through regional and special-interest deals and redistribution. These features make it difficult to pass progressive measures in Congress, which in turn holds major implications for American world leadership. A further consideration is the exclusion of a third party in framing American political debate. According to William Greider, ‘the decayed condition of American democracy is difficult to grasp, not because the facts are secret, but because the facts are visible everywhere’.²² The facts include mass voter absenteeism, campaign financing problems and sound-bite political debate.

Social inequality: winner-takes-all

According to Lipset again, ‘as the purest example of a bourgeois nation, America follows the competitive principle of the marketplace in unions, management and other relationships’.²³ Relations between management and labour are

adversarial. With this comes an income spread that is the widest among industrialised nations. J.P. Morgan followed the rule that executives in his firms could not earn more than 20 times what blue collar workers earned. In 1998 chief executive officers at major companies earned 419 times the average pay of blue collar workers and the trend is for this gap to widen. The average chief executive pay of a large company went up 36 per cent in 1998 and that of average blue collar workers rose 2.7 per cent.²⁴ The bottom fifth of US households receives less than 4 per cent of the national income, while the top fifth takes home almost half.²⁵ The economists Frank and Cook describe this as the winner-takes-all system; they attribute its emergence to the competitiveness system in combination with changes in communication technologies that privilege winners—in corporations, finance, entertainment, sports and education.²⁶

Compared to other advanced countries the USA is marked by greater equality of opportunity and greater inequality of outcome. A classic argument suggests that the differential between opportunity and outcome accounts for the high US crime rate, as aspirations are socially shared but not the means for realising them. The vivacity of US popular culture reflects this tension between equality of opportunity and inequality of outcome.

The USA has greater tolerance for inequality than any advanced society: materially, socially and in terms of political culture. Mishra notes that ‘the Reagan administration replaced the war on poverty with a war on the poor.... Not poverty as such but pauperization, i.e. dysfunctional and deviant behaviour on the part of the poor was now identified as the main problem of the 1980s, and the early 1990s reflected this shift in agenda from a concern with poverty to a concern with the poor’. From this viewpoint, he went on, ‘poverty is no longer an issue. The social problems confronting Americans are now those of welfare dependency, out of wedlock births, criminality and other dysfunctional behaviour on the part of the lower strata of the population.’²⁷ The prevailing political discourse blames the victims, defines welfare dependency as the problem and thus views government rollback and welfare cutbacks as the remedies. This deeply embedded strain has been reinforced in recent years. Social inequality in the USA has been increasing markedly since the 1970s. Thirty million Americans live below the poverty line and 40 million are without health insurance. The life expectancy of an African American male in Harlem is less than that of a male in Bangladesh. That foundations and charities do not make up for government failure is well-documented.

Americanism

If only on account of its large size, the USA, like some other large countries, tends to be culturally parochial and inward-looking. The USA is in many ways a self-absorbed country engrossed in collective narcissism. One indicator is the dearth of reporting on foreign affairs. The people least informed about foreign affairs are the world’s most influential in this sphere.

According to Michael Harrington, the USA is ‘a country united not by common history but by ideology—the American Creed, or Americanism, which also serves as “substitute socialism”’.²⁸ The ideology of ‘Americanism’, com-

bined with exceptionalism, yields a fervent nationalism that is exceptional among modern societies, huddled around the Constitution, the presidency, an unusual cult of the flag and a popular culture of America Number One.

US technical prowess and commercial leadership in media and advertising set global standards. In pioneering mass consumer culture the USA sets standards in commodity fetishism, as in the postwar American Dream. Its large internal market makes the USA less dependent on and less sensitive to other countries, so there is little business incentive to take on foreign horizons or foreign reporting.

Shallow modernity

Through the centuries Europe experienced tribal and peasant culture, empire, feudalism and absolutism—an old world indeed. Here modernity is a stratum arising from, superimposed on and interspersed with other historical layers. Continental modernity arises out of this historical depth and so the outcome is a complex modernity. The major role of the state derives from the multiple and combined legacies of imperial history, feudalism and absolutism, while the revolutionary correction of feudalism and absolutism also required a centralised state. ‘Rhineland capitalism’ and the continental welfare state hold the imprint of the moral economy and entitlements of feudal times when lords ruled in exchange for giving economic and military protection to their bondsmen.

In contrast, US modernity is based on the experience of petty commodity production, and slave production in the South, soon followed by industrialism and Taylorism. Thus, in the USA there are ‘no traditions from before the age of progress’; it is a ‘postrevolutionary new society’.²⁹ Since American independence coincided with the Enlightenment the country was founded on the basis of rational progressivism. Scientism, along with the legacy of religious dissidence and Protestant idealism, combined to produce Manifest Destiny and the ‘Angel of Progress’. Gramsci viewed the USA as ‘pure rationalism’; Ralf Dahrendorf views the USA as the country of the ‘applied Enlightenment’. In the absence of a deep classical tradition US culture is characterised by the ‘reconciliation of mass and class’, which entails the ‘deradicalization of class’.³⁰

The absence of dialectics with older strata (neolithic, feudal and absolutist) makes for unmitigated innovation unburdened by history: the unbearable lightness of America. This makes for ‘rupture’ as gospel. Immigration too makes rupture with history and geography a part of collective experience. Key features of US capitalism may be viewed as ramifications of American thin modernity, which in turn shapes the role of the USA in the worldwide interaction of modernities.

Strength of the military

The security apparatus plays a remarkably large role in US politics, economics and social life. The US government is a minimal state except when it comes to law and order, the military and intelligence. The only area in which the Reagan

administration engaged in long-term planning was defence and the space missile defence shield.³¹

The George W. Bush administration's increase of the military budget by US \$48 billion as part of the war on terrorism brings the 2003 military budget to US \$380 billion, which exceeds the total military spending of the world's 19 next largest military spenders. Meanwhile, deep tax cuts favouring the wealthy go together with cutbacks in spending on infrastructure, education and social services. By 2006 the US military budget will be US\$450 billion annually.

The influence of the National Rifle Association and 'gun culture' on the streets and in the media echo American historical roots as a settler colonial conquest society in which pioneer farmers act as frontier soldiers, although 1840s industrialisation and the Civil War are more likely origins of the national gun culture. This finds expression as a culture in which force and coercion serve as political tools.³² With over two million citizens behind bars—the American 'internal gulag'—the USA outranks all nations in the number of incarcerations. The USA also stands alone among wealthy countries in its extensive use of the death sentence.

The prominent role of the military enjoys broad popular and bipartisan political support. Social acceptance of the military is anchored in its serving as an avenue of social mobility for lower classes, which is one of the wheels of military Keynesianism and makes up for a class-biased educational system. Right after the party conventions, presidential candidates first address the Veterans League and invariably propose expansion of resources for the military—making sure that 'the US armed forces are the best equipped and best trained in the world'. The moral status of the US military is popularised and upheld through frequent reiteration of its role in World War II in the media (typically skipping over the Vietnam and Iran-Contra episodes). Military metaphors and desensitisation to violence pervade in entertainment. The Pentagon and Hollywood are close; a sizeable part of Hollywood production is devoted to military themes and parallels the phases of the projection of US power.

The role of the military-industrial complex in US industrialisation is not exceptional by historical standards; building military strength has been the locomotive of industrialisation in advanced countries the world over, particularly during the late 19th century.³³ What is exceptional is the enduring role of the military-industrial complex over time, in line with America's role of superpower. The conventional thesis of the US war economy is probably no longer tenable. The economic rationale of keeping a vast security force may now be overshadowed by political rationales, along with a regional spoils system that includes the distribution of government contracts and military facilities. Even so, the inclination toward the use of force in US political culture interacts with profit motives. Throughout the USA new prisons are the answer to local economic revival and privatised prisons constitute a 'correctional-industrial complex'.³⁴

Upon the end of the Cold War, 'conversion' and the peace dividend have not paid off. Instead, there has been a political and economic inclination to keep the security apparatus occupied, upgrade equipment and weapons, and provide opportunities for testing and military career opportunities with recurrent budget

expansion and mammoth projects such as 'Plan Colombia'. The military budget increase under the Bush Jr administration involves historically unprecedented magnitudes.

Globalisation as Americanisation?

The whole world should adopt the American system. The American system can survive in America only if it becomes a world system.

(President Harry Truman, 1947)

Americans who wanted to bring the blessings of democracy, capitalism, and stability to everyone meant just what they said—the whole world, in their view, should be a reflection of the United States.

(Stephen Ambrose³⁵)

There is no denying that several features of AE shape contemporary globalisation; yet developing this argument involves several hurdles.

First, inherent in the notion of 'Americanisation' is an element of methodological populism. To which unit of analysis does this apply—to *which* America? The USA, the fourth largest country in size of population, is quite heterogeneous and local differences play a significant part. US corporations with decentralised headquarters and offshore tax reporting cannot be simply identified with the USA either. Besides, transnational flows do not just run one way, but in multiple directions; there are also trends of Europeanisation, Asianisation and Latinisation of America, economically and culturally (in foreign ownership, management, style and consumption patterns). Transnational diasporas have been changing the character of 'America' all along and this bricolage character is part of its make-up. What, then, is the unit at issue? Is it a set of 'organising principles' that remain continuous over time, as Lipset would have it, or, at another extreme, is America a site, a place of transnational synthesis and bricolage? Since waves of diasporas, from the Irish to the Latino, have been shaping 'America' it does not work just to refer back to the founding fathers in order to diagnose American fundamentals. It would not be productive either to rework the *défi Américain* type of argument;³⁶ that would place the argument in a setting of national comparisons and competitiveness à la Michael Porter. This national focus is in part overtaken by the dynamics of accelerated globalisation and not appropriate to an analysis of the relationship between AE and globalisation.

A second problem is to accommodate historical variation in US politics. AE does not neatly match the actual profile of US administrations and is not necessarily intrinsic to US politics; to argue otherwise would be to essentialise US politics. Wilsonian internationalism is also part of US foreign policy and US contributions to world order include the establishment of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system, the Marshall Plan, support for European unification and policies in favour of human rights and democracy, which show at least that there is greater variation to US foreign policy than just the profile of the past

decades. In situating the transnational role of the USA it helps to distinguish several levels of analysis:

- Structural dynamics. These include scientific and technological changes pioneered by and exported from the USA, which ultimately represent an intercivillisation heritage.
- Fundamental dynamics which are general to industrialised countries. The package offered by the country that pioneers these trends affects all; yet these dynamics are not necessarily peculiar to that country. According to the convergence thesis of modernisation theory, industrial societies would eventually converge. In this category belong trends such as mass production, mass consumption, mass media, suburbanisation and information technology; that is, these are not ‘American’ *per se* but since the USA was the first comer they carry an American gloss.
- US corporations and cultural industries seek to draw monopoly rents from their temporary lead ‘by means fair or foul’. This is a common business practice with ample precedent in history. The British destroyed Indian textile manufactures and trade and sabotaged incipient industrialisation in Egypt, Persia and the Ottoman Empire.³⁷ Similar contemporary machinations belong to the domain of ‘Americanisation’ proper.
- Through international leverage (international financial institutions and the World Trade Organization (WTO)) and regional arrangements the US government seeks to consolidate its lead and institutionalise the advantage of its multinational corporations.
- The post-September 11 war on terrorism and the American imperial turn present a new development that involves an additional geopolitical agenda.

This suggests that the *core* questions of global Americanisation are contained in the last three points: drawing monopoly rents, their institutionalisation through hyperpower leverage, and imperial geopolitics.

Table 1 gives a ‘big picture’ sketch of how AE translates into policies that affect contemporary accelerated globalisation. There is an extensive literature on virtually each of these. This treatment focuses on three themes as faces of American exceptionalism as they appear on the world map: *laissez-faire* and the American role in shaping capitalism, the Washington consensus and international development politics, and world politics.

Laissez-faire

From the early twentieth century onward a major US export has been its brand of capitalism, as in Taylorism, Fordism, high-mass consumption, free trade and American corporations and business practices. Since the 1980s, under the auspices of the Washington consensus, monetarism, privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation have been added to the repertoire.

American hegemony is part of a series: US globalism followed the era of British hegemony. Manchester liberalism, neoclassical economics from the 1870s and its neoliberal resumption from the late 1970s form a series. Its international momentum cannot be divorced from the period of approximately

TABLE I. American exceptionalism and international ramifications

Dimensions of AE	Contemporary international ramifications
Free enterprise capitalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US capitalism as the norm of capitalism • Washington consensus, structural adjustment, IMF and World Bank conditionalities • Global model of polarising growth: growing inequality • Promotion of offshore economies • Deregulation of international finance • The dollar as international currency; dollarisation • The role of US MNCs • Spread of American business standards, law and MBAs
Free trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade policy as foreign policy instrument; Section 301 • WTO and neoliberal global trade rules • Free trade policies in NAFTA, APEC
Minimal state and political conservatism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrears in UN dues • Non-participation in international treaties • Non-compliance with International Court • Double standards in regional affairs (Middle East) • Promotion of narrow form of democracy • Government rollback in development policies
Weak working class organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative influence of AFL-CIO (in ICFTU) • Little support for ILO (e.g. labour standards)
Residual welfare workfare state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rollback of social sectors in development (health, education, social services)
Voluntary associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Fostering democracy by strengthening civil society’ • Promotion of NGOs (USAID new policy agenda)
Individualism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of NGOs along lines of professionalisation, depoliticisation and political fragmentation
Shallow modernity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transnational social engineering through legal means • Alignment of accounting systems to US standards • One-way transparency (US Treasury, IMF, WB) • ‘Seeing like a hyperpower’, panopticism
Hegemony of military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cold War spillovers (regional intervention legacies) • Policies of embargoes, sanctions • Unilateralism; acting outside UN Security Council mandate • Militarisation of international affairs • War metaphor in international relations: ‘war’ on drugs, ‘war’ on terrorism • Promotion of enemy images (rogue states etc.) • Mammoth projects for military-industrial complex • ‘Humanitarian militarism’: coercive approach to local conflicts • Refusal to serve under UN command • Network of military bases and intelligence surveillance • Redeployment of intelligence monitoring (Echelon) • Covert operations • Nuclear proliferation (non-ratification of NTBT 1997) • Health and environmental hazards of military operations (Gulf War, Balkans, Afghanistan and within USA)

Hyperpower Exceptionalism

TABLE I. *Continued*

Dimensions of AE	Contemporary international ramifications
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arms sales, training and fostering regional arms races• Militarisation of borders (US–Mexico model exported to Israel, South Africa)
Americanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Presenting other states as deviant• Promotion of the ‘American way’
American culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Automobile culture, fossil fuel dependence• Marketing as dominant cultural style• Star and celebrity system• McDonaldisation, Disneyfication, Barbiefication• CNN effect and sound-bite culture• Internet, Microsoft, dot.com• African American culture (jazz, hiphop)• Abstract expressionism, pop art

170 years of Anglo-American hegemony (from approximately 1830 onward and interrupted by periods of hegemonic rivalry).

By world standards Anglo-American free enterprise capitalism is an anomaly. Mixed economies and social market capitalism have been the majority practice throughout Europe, Asia and the developing countries, and central planning prevailed in socialist countries. Also in the British and American experience free enterprise was part posture and programme and only part reality: the self-regulating market was implemented late, partially and intermittently and the overall reality was embedded liberalism. Differences between continental European and Anglo-American varieties of embedded liberalism are matters of degree that turn into principle at several junctures; they concern the status and role of industrial policy, labour regulation, management, banks, venture capital and stocks. In the USA the differences are significant, though not quite as large as free enterprise ideology claims them to be. From a European point of view, US influence consists of the ongoing shift from the stakeholder model to the shareholder model of capitalism; or the incorporation of the political economy of social contracts into the political economy of corporations, financial markets and stock exchanges, and an overall shift from social contracts to legal–rational contractualism. This process is furthest advanced in those countries where stock markets are most developed.³⁸ The Enron episode shows how little safeguards this system provides.

American *laissez-faire* economics has been relayed internationally in various ways: through the workings of stock exchanges, US multinational corporations and their influence on corporate governance, international ratings of creditworthiness and competitiveness, through foreign investment into the USA and the pull exercised in financial markets when the US economy was dynamic, and through the Washington consensus.

The Washington consensus (WC)

The US role in international development goes back to Truman’s declaration of the ‘development era’ in 1948. Postwar US policies in the South favoured

'betting on the strong', Community Development that matched the American voluntary sector, nation building and instilling achievement orientation—all strands of modernisation theory in which modernisation = Westernisation = Americanisation. Americans were looking for a middle class in the Third World as if in search of their mirror image. Policies such as the Alliance for Progress interacted with the Cold War and the 'Washington connection'.

The Washington consensus that took shape in the 1980s as a set of economic prescriptions for developing countries echoes the core claim of AE: that the free market and democracy go together. The main tenets of the WC are monetarism, reduction of government spending and regulation, privatisation, liberalisation of trade and financial markets, and the promotion of export-led growth. The WC is a continuation of the postwar US development stance: free enterprise and the Free World, free trade and democracy. A difference is that postwar modernisation was a rival project, a contender in the Cold War; while the WC no longer looks to national security states to withstand communist pressure or insurgency: at the 'end of history' there was no more need for national security states. Hence, if modernisation theory was state-centred and part of the Keynesian consensus in development thinking, the WC turns another leaf, to deregulation and government rollback, now elevated from domestic policy to international programme. In this sense the Reagan era is a consummation of US victory in the Cold War, acknowledging no rival, no competition. This footprint shows in the policies of the international financial institutions: 'the end of the cold war has been associated with the increasing politicisation of the IMF by the US. There is evidence that the US has been willing to reward friends and punish enemies only since 1990'.³⁹

The core belief in the free market and democracy presents several general problems: unfettered market forces foster inequality, while democracy presumes equality; the free market is not really being implemented in the USA; American democracy is in deep crisis. It also generates specific problems: the kind of democracy promoted by the USA is low-intensity; dismantling government means de-institutionalisation, whereas development requires capable institutions. Hence the dispute over the 'East Asian Miracle' and the eventual World Bank turn around, bringing the state back in, now under the ambiguous heading of 'good governance'.

The WC has been implemented through IMF stabilisation lending and World Bank structural adjustment programmes. According to Kindleberger, 'the IMF and the World Bank were agreed at Bretton Woods largely as a result of U.S. Treasury: the forms were international, the substance was dictated by a single country'.⁴⁰ The WC has resulted in the rollback of government spending and the growth of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and informalisation. The net outcome is that those sectors that are unprofitable and therefore weak in the USA—health, education, social services—become weak sectors in developing countries affected by structural adjustment, where these are the first sectors affected by government spending cutbacks. Many NGOs have been platforms for social change, but with the growth of NGOs promoted and funded by the USA has come the depoliticisation and demobilisation of popular forces in the South.

Amid all the criticisms of the neoliberal turn ('the counterrevolution in development') little attention is given to the circumstance that the Washington consensus is AE turned inside out, the outside face of AE. Presenting Anglo-American capitalism as the 'norm' of capitalism, the WC represents the perspectives and interests of the Wall Street–Treasury–IMF complex. The WC now faces mounting problems—growing worldwide inequality, financial instability and crisis management—and its counterproductive prescriptions have met wide criticism, also in Washington.

The 1990s has been described as a time of contestation between American and Asian capitalism, which American capitalism won.⁴¹ In the USA the 'Asian crisis' was hailed as an opportunity for the further Americanisation of Asian economies.⁴² The export-oriented growth path promoted by the USA makes emerging markets dependent on US market access, reduces their manoeuvring room and makes them vulnerable to US trade policies. While the Washington consensus proclaims free trade and export-oriented growth, the actual policies underneath the free trade banner are more complex and range from using trade as an instrument of foreign policy (e.g. granting most favoured trading nation status and lifting or imposing tariffs) to introducing legalism into world trade rules via the WTO and influencing other countries' exchange rates (as in the 1985 Plaza Accord and the appreciation of the yen).

If we transpose US domestic inequality and its 'war on the poor' on a world scale it entails a policy of slashing foreign aid by a nation that ranks as the world's stingiest foreign assistance donor. As part of a relentless campaign towards corporate deregulation, conservative think-tanks rail against 'foreign welfare' on the same basis as welfare is blamed in the USA: 'economic assistance impedes economic growth'. International welfare does not work; Congress should eliminate aid and instead promote 'economic freedom' (read: deregulation, free trade) in developing countries.⁴³

Forty per cent of the world population lives on less than US\$2 a day. On the other side of the split screen, 5 per cent of the world population living in the USA absorbs 27 per cent of world energy and a vast share of resources. The imbalances are so staggering that one might expect this to rank as the number one problem in US public opinion or, failing that, at least in social science. However, the issue rarely comes up except in fringe publications, or under the guise of the 'energy crunch'.

American world leadership

The USA fails to exercise world leadership in environmental, financial and economic regulation because its political institutions would not permit it to do so (in view of institutional gridlock, special interests and local politics in Congress) and presumably because its interests, as they are perceived in leading circles, would not benefit from regulation. While in many terrains the USA fails to exercise world leadership it does not permit other institutions to fulfil this role either. Arguably, US vested interests are a net beneficiary of lack of regulation or disarray. The US failure to exercise world leadership is a matter both of lack of capacity (political institutions) and lack of will (political and economic

interest). For instance, the USA is the only developed country that has not ratified the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) because doing so would override the authority of state law in family law. Similar constraints apply to several other treaties in which the USA is the only outsider among advanced countries.

The USA treats the United Nations as a rival for world leadership. For the USA to recognise and strengthen the UN would imply stepping down from the pedestal of world leadership and hyperpower status. In the 1980s power in the UN shifted from the General Assembly (one country one vote) to the Security Council and its permanent five members with the USA as the hegemonic force: the New World Order in brief. The US defunded critical UN agencies such as UNESCO and the UN system generally by chronically withholding its fees, fails to empower the International Labour Organisation, exercises political pressure on UNDP and other agencies, and bypasses the Security Council when convenient, as in the case of NATO operations in Kosovo. Instead of empowering the UN, the USA has preferred to act through the IMF and World Bank, which operate on the basis of financial voting rules. These agencies the USA can control and the outcome has been the Washington consensus.

There are multiple layers and currents to US attitudes to the UN and other multilateral institutions. Ironically, the USA has been in the forefront of the creation of multilateral institutions: the International Court goes back to an American initiative in 1899; the League of Nations and then the United Nations and the ILO have been conceived or pushed by the USA.⁴⁴ US roles in its relations with multilateral international institutions are diverse and repeatedly in conflict with one another. This 'puts the US among the most avid supporters of multilateral institutions, and yet, in different circumstances, pits it against the members and administration of some of those same institutions'. US reformism reflects 'the desire to engage in major international social engineering'. 'The symbol of law is extremely important. Law is to play as large a role in international politics as Americans believe it plays in their own domestic processes, and judicial institutions ... are deemed central'. Accordingly, the 'institutional modalities the US helped put into place'⁴⁵ are legalistic. This inclination toward international social engineering centred on law reveals America's thin modernity and Enlightenment complex turned inside out.

To the undercurrent of American isolationism, American internationalists respond that they want international engagement, but not under the UN. The UN is perceived as un-American in that it follows a different conception of world order, or as anti-American in view of the Third World majority in the General Assembly and its criticisms of US hegemony. Countries in the South are the target of stereotyping by US media and political elites who treat the world majority and its concerns as political lowlife. As a function of American narcissism US mainstream media tend to problematise all countries except the USA itself. In this casually homogenising vision countries are branded as 'loony tunes' or 'rogue states', nationalist leaders are deemed 'crazy', developing countries are backward, the European Union suffers from 'rigidities of the labour market' and Japan is guilty of economic nationalism. Meanwhile, the USA is opportunistic when it comes to agricultural subsidies and steel imports from

Europe and other countries. The US sense of geographical and historical distance from other continents leads to exaggerated perceptions of difference with other cultures, to the point of portraying a worldwide 'clash of civilisations'. In other cultures that have been intimately interacting crossculturally for centuries this is viewed as a bizarre premise.

The US Senate has not ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the George W. Bush administration plans to implement the space missile defence system. Underlying the failure to ratify the nuclear test-ban treaty is the 'desire to keep all political and military options open, and, indeed, broaden their scope'.⁴⁶ The 2002 Congressional Nuclear Posture Review and the idea of using nuclear deterrence against up to 40 countries shows what is meant by 'keeping options open'.

Noteworthy is not AE, but the reality of other countries by and large following US leadership without much question. Among OECD countries France is the major exception; other counterweights have been Russia and China. Russia has been severely weakened by Washington politics under the guise of the IMF; China has been virtually neutralised through the process of accession to WTO membership. US strength is a function of the weakness or lack of political coherence of other political constellations. European and Asian lack of coherence match US opportunism in international affairs: hence the global stalemate.

Hegemonic stability theory holds that 'in the absence of a world government the global economy can be stabilised when a powerful nation plays the role of flywheel', performing several stabilising functions.⁴⁷ This is a policy of carrots rather than sticks. EU countries and Japan *grosso modo* accept US policies in the context of the G8, OECD, WTO and IMF because they share overall benefits, such as concessions on trade and agricultural policies in the case of the EU, find shelter under the US military umbrella and benefit generally from US economic growth. This does not rule out disputes, but political differences are not large enough to upset the applecart. A problem with international relations theories is that they impute more coherence than may actually exist and rationalise what is in effect political improvisation. What of 'hegemonic stability' in view of recurrent economic crises, continuing political stalemate in the Middle East and the current US recession? International relations theorising privileges politics over economics, overt politics over covert politics, often underestimates questions of security and geopolitics, and puts a systemic gloss on policy processes that, at times, may be better described as absurd.

Beyond American exceptionalism?

This inquiry finds that AE has inflected contemporary globalisation in several ways. American *laissez-faire* transposed on a world scale fosters a worldwide shift from stakeholder capitalism to shareholder capitalism. Two decades of world economic management led by Washington-based institutions have brought increasing global inequality. The American combo of 'private wealth and public squalor' is gradually being transferred to the global domain. In world politics, the USA blocks the formation of global public goods and international institu-

tions unless they can be used as instruments of US power. As a hyperpower it acts on a narrow understanding of power as military force.⁴⁸

One option in assessing AE is the view of Timothy Garton Ash, who writes: 'Contrary to what many Europeans think, the problem with American power is not that it is American. The problem is simply the power. It would be dangerous even for an archangel to wield so much power.'⁴⁹ This view strips American power from its 'American' imprint, which is unrealistic because the character, scope and magnitude of American power are not intelligible outside the frame of American dynamics. This is attractive in that it sidesteps the burden of anti-Americanism. Anti-Americanism is so boring and old-fashioned that one response may be to take American conservatism for granted, like the weather, or appreciate it for the sake of difference and sheer American resilience. The strident conservatism in most US media is so habitual that one hardly notices anymore. A consequence of this line of thinking is that it means taking the global effects of AE for granted, but let us note that, if anti-Americanism is old-fashioned, so is Americanism.

If one option is to skip AE altogether, another is to take it at face value. Taking AE at face value means yielding to essentialism and conservatism in US self-representations, which is the impression one comes away with from Lipset's work. According to Lipset, 'the dark side of American exceptionalism' is constituted by 'developments which, like many of its positive features, derive from the country's organizing principles. These include rising crime rates, increased drug use, the dissolution of the American family, sexual promiscuity, and excessive litigiousness.'⁵⁰ This essentialist thinking in terms of principles and values ignores processes and politics. Moreover, this diagnosis is coined in strikingly moral terms, like a neoconservative litany; it overlooks more structural and troubling trends such as the persistence and rise of inequality, the structural weakness of federal government and the decline of US democracy.

AE is an old-fashioned self-caricature that predates the realities of American multiculturalism and ignores the 'other America' of the civil rights movement, '1968', social movements ranging from the anti-Vietnam War mobilisation to the 'battle of Seattle', and the polls that register majority positions on labour rights, women's rights, the environment and other issues that are far more progressive than those held by mainstream media and political elites; a country where Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men* goes through nine printings in a week and ends up as the number one bestseller for months on end.⁵¹ Lipset's AE refers to a quasi-existing fantasy land like a Walt Disney model town, ruled by a country club government and misinformed by corporate media. The fundamental problem of Lipset's assessment is that it homogenises AE, or buys into a narrow version, and ignores the political processes through which a kind of AE is being reproduced.

Both extremes, ignoring AE or taking it for granted, are simplistic. A middle course is to recognise that AE is a self-caricature that is upheld and reproduced politically and culturally. US fundamentals and dynamics are distinctive, but this does not rule out the possibility that on this basis diverse politics, domestic and international, can follow and indeed have followed in the past, such as Wilson's multilateralism, the New Deal and Jimmy Carter's human rights internationalism.

Another feature of Lipset's assessment is that it is completely inward looking and ignores the external ramifications of AE. Thus it is itself a form of narcissistic Americanism. By world standards, the dark side of the current form of AE is that the American way is not a replicable and sustainable model of development. The free market and democracy made in the USA are no shining example. US consumption patterns are not replicable—they are not even replicable within the USA. Not everyone in this world will or can have a two car family, a suburban home, a college education. Not everyone in the USA does either, but the standard itself is not seriously in dispute. The US ecological footprint—its excessive use of energy and other resources—is not replicable either. Social inequality is another fundamental problem. Globalisation the American way matches this pattern and yields winner-takes-all globalisation that increasingly mirrors American conditions of glaring inequality, phoney marketing culture and a coercive approach to deviance on a world scale. US institutions and domestic balance of forces are a variable in world politics and we must consider not just what happens but also what does not. An increasingly prominent discussion concerns the deficit of global public goods;⁵² in fact, 'global public goods' itself as a US-enforced euphemism for 'global governance' is a non-starter in conservative USA.

What, then, are possible counterpoints to the current scenario of globalisation the American way? There are essentially two options: internal and external change. The 'other America' is not to be underestimated, but the present *rappports de force* do not suggest major changes. 'Another America is possible', but not now. The emergence of a new US political movement such as a green party is possible but constrained by the institutional features of the American political system. The commercialisation of US culture means that public space has been privatised; the media are corporate and the margins of info-tainment are slim. As if in a vast project of self-colonisation Americans have surrendered their forums of public engagement. The reactions to the Enron episode, the corporate scandals and loss of trillions of dollars illustrate the power of the status quo. It has led to a weaker stock market and prompted moves to achieve greater corporate accountability; yet the indications are that these changes will be marginal because influential players from the Business Roundtable to the Democratic Party have no interest in major reform.

If there is to be meaningful change in the current direction of globalisation, then, it has primarily to come from outside the USA. Precedents in which states across the world have come together in international agreements without US participation are the Kyoto protocol and the International Criminal Court. This kind of international institution building sets a new direction. The international spillover of the Enron episode may also be more significant than the domestic reaction in the USA. Internationally, it prompts a shift away from US accounting standards and business practices. The international shift from stakeholder to Anglo-American capitalism is risky when the US model of shareholder capitalism itself is fragile and unstable. In this light, substantive dialogue and rapport between the European Union and Asian countries may contribute to a new agenda. New industrial countries in South and Southeast Asia and Latin America and transitional and developing countries may find common interest in stable

international institutions, multilateral regulation of international finance and reorientation towards a social and democratic capitalism. International labour organisations and social movements that seek global reform, such as the World Social Forum, hold a further potential of shaping a transnational reform coalition that can change the agenda. Such a coalition, including European, Asian, American and Latin American progressive forces, could redirect and reshape the course of globalisation.

Notes

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