

From Exception to Order: The Formation of American Exceptionalism in the 1950s

This paper would be connected to my doctoral research about the origins and evolution of the idea of American exceptionalism. I argue that “exceptionalism” is an intellectual construct, thus we need to trace the transformation of the concept in the intellectual debates to get a full picture of its role in the thinking about America’s place in the world. Furthermore, I believe the early Cold War is an important period in this transformation, because this is the time when America unquestionably embraced a leadership role in world politics, thus changing its inward-looking exceptionalist discourse to a discussion about a certain role in global order. At the same time, this is the period when many formerly Marxist intellectuals moved away from the American Communist Party (and later from Marxism itself), and more clearly embraced the U.S. side in an emerging Cold War. However, they brought with themselves their own way of thinking and own terminology, which influenced how – among many other things – America’s foreign relations were discussed. This made it possible for an originally marginal Marxist discourse about “exceptionalism” (as the U.S. being a potential exception to the laws and generalities of Marxism) to be re-interpreted in a way that focuses on the unique rights and responsibilities of the leading power.

The paper would be based on both primary sources of intellectual debates of the time, and secondary literature on the U.S. intellectual life of the 1940s and 1950s. While “exceptionalism” existed before, this word was connected to a narrow understanding related to Marxism, and it only appeared in a wider context in the early 1950s. After working more than a decade on it, Max Lerner – himself a former Marxist – published his book *America as a Civilization* in 1957, in which exceptionalism was discussed in a separate chapter, which can be seen as a breakthrough in this discourse. My paper would look at this discourse, and explore the transformation of exceptionalism in a method in line with studying the *history of ideas*; by situating texts within their intellectual context. The contribution can be twofold: first, the empirical investigation can highlight the lesser known origins and evolution of this idea; second, it can also supplement the theoretical understanding of exceptionalism by focusing on the interaction of a specific self-view with the changes in the structural position of the United States.