Forum

The End of the "American Century?"

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Introduction

Crisis, decline, failure: these words seem to dominate the contemporary political and intellectual debate in the United States. The global economic crisis, which has been challenging the U.S. and Western certainties since 2007, appears to be a crucial element in the attempt to understand if we are witnessing the final stage of the American global power or the consequence of the end of its historical course. To be more precise, we may refer to what has been called "the American Century," quoting the famous metaphor used by the American publisher Henry Luce in 1941, and since then considered mostly powerful to symbolize the emergence and expansion of the U.S. power in the twentieth century.

Actually, as Robert O. Keohane has written in a recent article, "the United States has been going through yet another bout of declinism – the fifth wave in the last six decades" (114). The current debate has been the result of the juxtaposition, as Keohane points out, of China's rising power and American political and economic malaise. In the aftermath of the 1989 fall of Berlin wall, there were the anxieties due to the uncertainties of the post-Cold War to fuel the so-called "declinist" debate, following the publication of Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Power*. However, the cry of alarm over the frailties and internal contradictions of the American model had already dominated the 1970s, in the midst of the political, military and economic crisis, due to the combined factors of the Watergate scandal, the oil crisis and the Vietnam defeat.

Probably more than in the past, the present debate on the concept of "decline" is influenced both by political and ideological polarization. In 2010, in an article published in the *Huffington Post* blog, University of Wisconsin historian Alfred W. McCoy claimed what the future scenarios could be, taking into account data such as those published by the U.S. National Intelligence Council in 2008. For the first time the Council report had to admit that the U.S. power was declining. However, if a "Post-American World" has been envisioned by Washington pundits like Fareed Zakaria, some neoconservative intellectuals, like Robert Kagan, for instance, or Georgetown University professor and member of the Committee on Present Danger, Robert J. Lieber, refuse the "declinist" approach by ar-

guing not only that the U.S. power is far from declining, but also that U.S. hegemony is still crucial to avoid a disorderly and dangerous world.

On the other hand, when compared with the debate on the supposed "decline," it is much more interesting, from a historical perspective, to assess whether we are facing a "hegemonic" crisis in terms of reshaping the geo-political contest (from West to East?) or a global reorganization, which challenges the historical American exceptionalism – the U.S. belief in their Providential mission to spread democracy and economic growth, and the eventual emergence of a post-Westphalian or neo-Westphalian order. In this perspective, how could we envision the historical course of what we have called "the American Century"? Is that a metaphor handed over to history, together with the conceptual elements that had been its integral part – exceptionalism, the myth of the frontier, the American way to democracy, just to mention a few? Is the re-conceptualization of the American century a challenge in terms of historical scholarship and disciplinary boundaries?

In order to discuss the manifold aspects of the question "The End of the 'American Century?'" *RSA Journal* has asked eight Italian, European, and American scholars – Andrew Bacevich, Tiziano Bonazzi, Mario Del Pero, David Ellwood, Daniele Fiorentino, Michael Hunt, Donatella Izzo, and Emily Rosenberg – to analyze and comment on the different aspects of the question. We thank them and are sure the readers of *RSA* will appreciate this first contribution to a discussion that, we believe, will be at the center of historical and American studies for a long time.

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Decline

The notion that countries and nations rise and decline is based upon four simple, albeit very problematic and debatable, assumptions. The first is that they are similar (or at least comparable) to living organisms, whose growth and expansion have inner, and inescapable, limits from where states and nations can only retreat and contract. The second is a cyclical, and somehow circular and repetitive, view of history, the successive rise and decline of different powers being one of the structural constants of the

historical process. The third assumption is that international relations is a sort of zero-sum-game; in typical neoclassical fashion the sum of the relative power of all the actors involved must always be equal to zero in order to preserve the basic equilibrium of the system: the increase in the power of one actor has to be compensated by the correspondent diminution of the power of one or more other powers. Fourth and last, declinists believe (and need to believe) that power can be objectively quantified – hence their emphasis on measurable and uncontestable parameters such as GDP, nuclear warheads and the like – and that such power translates more or less automatically into influence.

In the case of the United States, debates and phobias on the possible decline of the country have accompanied its history from its very birth. Since the U.S. was deemed to be born to "begin the world over again," its destiny was immediately defined in terms of power and territorial expansion: of rise and, inevitably, of possible decline. Expansion was actually considered necessary not only to fulfill the mission, but also to avoid decadence and consolidate the Republican experiment. The debate was fierce and corrosive from the very beginning, with one faction denouncing the inner corruption brought by this expansionist logic. A turning point, however, was represented by the 1898 war and the birth of a formal, and formalized, American empire, when the dreams and rhetoric of national greatness finally began to be matched by the reality of national power. In the ensuing, virulent discussion between imperialists and anti-imperialists, both camps made abundant use of declinist fears, phobias and tropes. For the imperialists, the rise to empire was a way to reinvigorate a country that had progressively lost its fiber and, indeed, virility: to reverse the process of decline that had begun after the Civil War. For the anti-imperialists, instead, the Empire brought with itself corruption, degeneration and, inevitably, decline (Hoganson; Beisner).

The second turning point was World War II. At end of it, the United States found itself in a condition of unprecedented, and inevitably transient and artificial, superiority. In a world devastated by the war, the U.S. was much richer, stronger and more powerful than before the conflict and the rest of the world. Its GDP had increased by 60%; it owned two thirds of the world's gold reserves and three-fourths of its invested capital; its economy was three times that of the USSR; it, alone, possessed nuclear

weapons. At that point the bar was set too high, and much of the subsequent debate on the possible decline of the United States stemmed from the inability of many to understand that 1945 could not last – that any change in the post-World War II international environment would lead to an inevitable, as much as relative, decline of the U.S. (Leffler).

A discourse of possible/imminent/inevitable decline suffused U.S. Cold War political and public discussion. We can find many examples of it in the 1950s, from the McCarthy hysteria to the missile gap controversy and the unfounded belief that the Soviets were ahead in the development of long range rockets. But declinism as an intellectual and media industry really took off in the 1970s, when many, if not most, Cold War certainties began to crumble. Deep divisions within the Atlantic community notwithstanding, the discussion at the time was framed in terms of a military, economic, and even moral and cultural decline of the West, and of Western capitalism, more than just of the United States. During the decade, the most common catchword in the U.S. and Europe was "limits." This emphasis on limits found its sublimation in one of the most famous presidential speeches ever, Jimmy Carter's "crisis of confidence" harangue, in which the President called for sacrifices that even today, in the midst of one of the most difficult post-recession recoveries of the past century, appear remarkable if not outright bizarre.[1]

Despite Reagan's hyper-nationalism and "morning in America" rhetoric, this discourse of decline did not abate in the following years and returned with a vengeance in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Interestingly enough, it was progressively "Americanized": what was now feared, and had to be avoided, was the decline of the United States and not of the "West" (i.e.: the capitalist camp) as a whole. The main competitors had become Washington's long-standing Cold War allies, Japan and Germany in particular, able to unscrupulously exploit U.S. military protection to

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[1] "I'm asking you for your good and for your Nation's security," Carter said, "to take no unnecessary trips, to use carpools or public transportation whenever you can, to park your car one extra day per week, to obey the speed limit, and to set your thermostats to save fuel. Every act of energy conservation like this is more than just common sense – I tell you it is an act of patriotism"("Address to the Nation").

save on defense spending, and to focus on the economy, thus improving their competitiveness vis-à-vis the (once) mighty American industrial giant. The U.S. was suffering from a form of "imperial overstretch" historian Paul Kennedy proclaimed in 1987 in one of the most popular (and best) history books of all times (Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall*).

Even the end of the Cold War, and the much celebrated triumph of the first Gulf War, did not sedate these anxieties and apprehensions. The real winners of the Cold War were Germany and, especially, technologically hyper-advanced Japan, Kennedy re-stated in a much acclaimed – and now almost embarrassing – futurologist sequel to his 1987 *magnum opus*. Many pundits, scholars and commentators concurred: the costs of the Cold War, they argued, had prostrated the United States, laid the conditions for its inevitable decline, and paved the way for the emergence of other great powers. Another historical cycle was coming to an end, and on its ashes a new cycle was opening; after the American century, the perennial circularity of history was setting in motion once again (Kennedy, *Preparing*; Arrighi; Hogan).

Such cries appealed across the political and cultural spectrum, and this explains their persistence and popularity. For the Left, the decline of the U.S. was the inevitable byproduct of its imperial adventures and activist foreign policy; for centrist technocrats, it reflected the inefficiency and dysfunctionality of the American political process. Finally, many on the Right attributed this alleged decline of the United States to what they considered the moral and cultural decay of the country.

The post-Cold War years temporarily silenced this discussion. No alternative power poles emerged. Contrary to all predictions, the American economy grew at accelerated speed, with productivity rates the rest of the capitalist world could only dream of; the allegedly soft and pervasive power of the United States was dissected and magnified as never before. The return of a discourse of national greatness accompanied these changes. "If we have to use force, it is because we are America," Secretary of State Madeleine Albright confidently declared in 1998, justifying the possibility of a new intervention in Iraq. "We are the indispensable nation," she continued, "we stand tall. We see further into the future" (qtd. in Calleo).

A discourse of decline redux returned, however, after the terrorist at-

tacks of 9/11, neoconservatives' strategic follies, George Bush's reckless fiscal policies, and the post-2007 financial meltdown. This time – *Financial Times* chief foreign affairs commentator Gideon Rachman proclaimed – U.S. decline was "for real" and only years of crying wolf were blinding people to the hard reality (Rachman). Evidence of such decline was now paramount: the skyrocketing public and private debt; the permanent and quasi-structural twin deficits domestic and external; the lack of national cohesion and consequent ideological polarization; the inadequacy of the political system and the congressional deadlock; the strategic blunders, in Iraq and Afghanistan; the decreasing efficacy of U.S. unquestioned military preponderance; the growing hostility to U.S. foreign policy, among friends and foes alike.

But is this decline truly "for real"? And does it make sense, in today's international politics, to use decline as a category of analysis? The answer is a clear "yes & no" to distill dialectics down to its basics. At a closer look, many of the alleged signs of America's decline reveal a sort of Janus face, thus becoming not just sources of weakness and fragility, but also elements of strength and even catalysts of U.S. power and hegemony. Debt is thus the precondition of the ability of the United States to drive global economic growth through its insatiable, and indeed bulimic, domestic market: it is the basic matrix of the post-1970s "U.S. empire of consumption," the ability to consume (in debt) having been one of the crucial assets of the United States. The U.S. might be overstretched, but its network of bases and its system of alliances endow it with a "control of the commons" that no one, as of today, can challenge. As for its economic vulnerability, the post-2007 transition has so far revealed the greater ability of the U.S. to adjust and re-think its economic model than that of austerity-obsessed and Berlin-centric Europe (Maier; Posen).

So, yes: the United States is possibly in decline, but some features of such decline are exactly those it has used to re-think and re-assert its global hegemony.

More important are, however, the inner limits and contradictions of the category of decline itself. If we go back to the four basic assumptions I mentioned at the beginning of my commentary, such contradictions become almost self-evident. Can the increasingly elusive and diffuse nature of power be measured, clearly and objectively? Can we consider nations living

organisms? Do we really believe in historical cycles and repetitions, dramatic or farcical as they can be? Finally: are international relations a zero-sum game in today's highly integrated world? What do we make in such a model of the deep and structural interdependence between China and the United States? What were the global reverberations of the post-2007 U.S. financial crisis, and how can they be re-conduced to such zero-sum-game logic where, to restore equilibrium, someone's ascent is *ipso facto* someone else's downfall?

At the end of the day, thinking in terms of rise and decline tells us a lot of a specific political culture or of a particular historical juncture. It's a testimony of the fears, confusion and sometime paranoia that often dominate times of crisis. But it is also a less useful, much less useful and productive, way to try to make sense of the coeval international system and the role the only superpower continues to play in it.

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Nationalism and the Debate over U.S. Hegemony

I devoted the conclusion of *The American Ascendancy* to the issue of hegemony. Returning to the topic today, I find that the fate of U.S. hegemony has become a hot topic that evokes both pessimistic and optimistic appraisals.

Historians and political scientists with a historical bent have gravitated toward the view that U.S. hegemony is in deep trouble. David S. Mason's *The End of the American Century* is a good case in point. Mason surveys the erosion of American dominance in compelling domestic and international detail. His conclusion: "At a minimum, the United States will suffer decline in wealth, standard of living, and global influence" (215). Others convinced of the weakness of the U.S.'s position emphasize that dominance even at its zenith in the post-World War II years was limited and from the 1970s was badly battered.[1]

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[1] Good recent summations of this perspective can be found in the Andrew Bacevich and

Those pessimistic about long-term U.S. prospects can point to the doleful conclusion of intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, the broadly damaging 2008 economic crisis, the frustrating resistance on the part of regional powers (from Iran and Russia to China and North Korea), and the prolonged and ineffectual hand-wringing over fiscal affairs.

Despite this evidence for U.S. decline, some observers cling to optimism. Robert J. Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future*, embodies that tendency in spades. Lieber makes the slide in U.S. influence a recent development, dating it from the 1990s, and he minimizes the ground the U.S. has lost since the triumph over the Soviet Union. Invoking familiar neoconservative themes, Lieber contends that lost ground can be recovered through social and ideological mobilization at home. By restoring something akin to the old Cold War outlook, Americans will regain the confidence and policymakers the capacity critical to the continuation of global leadership. Thus can the United States live up to its special mission in the world and serve as the indispensable guarantor of international order, security, and liberal values.

International relations realists seem to maintain a guarded optimism about U.S. prospects grounded in a conviction that policymakers in Washington can preserve U.S. dominance if they correctly read and adjust to the current configuration of interstate power, the rise of new non-state actors, and the challenge of acute trans-national problems. Steven Weber and Bruce W. Jentleson, for example, think a salvage operation possible. U.S. leaders have only to bring their policy in line with the world as it is today rather than with a world nostalgically remembered. To take another example, G. John Ikenberry's *Liberal Leviathan* contends that the liberal global order that the U.S. put in place is still basically intact and amenable to U.S. leadership. This realist tendency to make continued U.S. influence dependent on reading international developments aright is also evident in the U.S. government's recent forecast, the National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (2012).

In reviewing these divergent pessimistic and optimistic approaches, I am struck by the absence of attention to U.S. nationalism as an element in

Walter LaFeber contributions to *The Short American Century.* Ed. Bacevich.

the decline equation. The Tea Party revolt and the seemingly eternal presidential election campaign have provided forceful reminders of how badly frayed the national consensus has become and how important national consensus is as the basis for politics and policymaking. Nationalism's conceptual utility is precisely its capacity to get us to reflect on what collective views Americans have embraced and how those views with both domestic and international ramifications have changed.

Bringing nationalism into the picture is strikingly easy to do. The ground has been prepared by a large, sophisticated collection of theoretical writings going back to the 1980s, and on that ground has arisen a considerable body of historical scholarship on various facets and phases of U.S. nationalism. This rich literature can help us think about the currently troubled U.S. position in three basic ways.

First, U.S. nationalism is important today as earlier because it provides indispensable framing for policymakers by addressing the three preoccupations central to most nationalisms. It tells us who qualifies as a full citizen and thus has a genuine voice in national affairs, what kind of role the state should play as the embodiment and proponent of nationalist values, and what foreign forces pose a threat to the nation's survival and values so serious that they require a collective response.

Second, consistent with a central theoretical point, U.S. nationalism is not fixed but rather has evolved. It has arguably gone through three stages over the last two and half centuries. The most recent ran from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1960s and was organized around and promoted by a modernizing, burgeoning American state. This state-dominated nationalism came to accept and even advance an expanded understanding of citizenship (overcoming previous racial and gender barriers). And it was fixated on and galvanized by a string of international dangers beginning with the Kaiser's Germany and Bolshevism, continuing with Hitler's Germany and Tojo's Japan, and concluding in its heyday with a communist monolith that gave way to distinct Soviet and Chinese threats.

Finally, U.S. nationalism, again true to the general pattern, has never been static. What it means to be an American has always been contested – and quite intensely so at those points of transition from one phase of nationalist faith to another. We arguably find ourselves today at one of

those points of transition with the old state-centered nationalism losing its grip.

Our current transition is in part the result of the demise of the world of empire and interstate conflict in which state-centered nationalism took shape. Today's globalized world poses different challenges and imposes different constraints. The transition is also a result of striking changes in U.S. society since the 1960s. The most important may be the rise of a consumer regime that has thoroughly reshaped the basic outlook as well as daily activities of most Americans (a development adroitly sketched by Emily Rosenberg in the Bacevich volume). But there are other contenders for the loyalty of Americans, including the free-market religion so assiduously promoted over the last three or four decades not to mention a resuscitated version of the old statist faith along the lines articulated by Lieber.

Only when some alternative view speaks in a clear and broadly appealing way about the nature of citizenship, the role of the state, and the identity of the "dangerous other" will the country be able to move on to a new, fourth stage of nationalism, and only then will U.S. leaders gain the policy compass they so badly need. When and how this transition might occur no one can confidently predict. Even more difficult to anticipate is what impact a new nationalism might have on U.S. hegemony – whether to breathe new life into it or to intensify its problems.[2]

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The War With No Name

Even before the United States had "won" the Cold War, officials in Washington embarked willy-nilly upon a new war that even today more than thirty years later continues. This war without a name – an enterprise

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[2] This is only a sketch of the contours of U.S. nationalism as I think it applies to the current hegemonic disarray. Readers wanting more detail can turn to my December 2012 Krasno lecture <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyfGhPXTBfw>. An even fuller treatment should in time appear in a book tentatively (and perhaps immodestly) titled *Bridging the Gap: Academic History and the Future of U.S. Foreign Relations*.

to whose existence most Americans remain stubbornly oblivious – is ending U.S. pretensions to global preeminence.

President Jimmy Carter, of all people, fired the starter's gun for this new war in January 1980 when he promulgated the Carter Doctrine. Prompted by the Iranian Revolution that had toppled the Shah and by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the president declared that henceforth, "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America." Further, he vowed to repel any such assault using "any means necessary, including military force" (Carter, "State of the Union"). Granted, Carter had little conception of what consequences might ensue from making this commitment. Yet, in the years to come those consequences proved to be almost entirely pernicious.

When the Berlin Wall eventually fell in November 1989, followed in short order by the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the Soviet Union itself, commentators competed with one another to divine the implications. On one point, virtually all agreed: History had reached a decisive turning point. Some went so far as to argue that history itself had "ended." Alas, it hadn't. It was merely shifting to another venue. The contest to determine the fate of Eurasia might have ended (or at least was momentarily suspended). The contest to determine the fate of the Greater Middle East was just gathering a head of steam.

I am by no means suggesting that the passing of the Cold War was unimportant. The events of 1989-1991 profoundly affected the lives of many millions of East Germans, Poles, Czechs and others in what had been Eastern, but now once again became Central Europe. So too with millions more in the Balkans and throughout the precincts of what had been the USSR. Yet elsewhere, the end of the Cold War settled little and unsettled much.

In ways that soon proved problematic, it particularly unsettled the denizens of Washington, D.C., persuaded that a new era had begun over which the United States would preside as the "sole superpower." To employ the chest-thumping language of the day, the "unipolar moment" was at hand. In that regard, the end of the Cold War seemingly created an opportunity for the United States to flex its muscles, in the words of Charles Krauthammer, "unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them."

Responding to Carter's injunction of January 1980, American policymakers had already identified the Islamic world as a place particularly needing rules and enforcement. Through the 1980s, Washington had devised new instruments for projecting American hard power into this region, for example, symbolized by the creation of U.S. Central Command. Decisionmakers also manifested a greater appetite for armed intervention. Carter himself had started the ball rolling with his abortive Iran hostage rescue mission. Carter also launched the program of funneling covert assistance to the Afghan mujahedeen who were resisting Soviet occupation forces. In addition to greatly expanding support to Afghan "Freedom Fighters," Carter's successor Ronald Reagan sent U.S. Marines into Lebanon, bombed Libya, and through the "Tanker War" of 1984-1988, came to the aid of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its war against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

But this was just for starters. In response to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, President George H.W. Bush committed U.S. combat forces of unprecedented size to the Persian Gulf. Operation Desert Storm, launched in January 1991, handily evicted Saddam's legions from Kuwait. Yet the outcome of this brief encounter turned out to be less conclusive than it first appeared. Saddam retained his hold on power. In Washington's eyes, he remained a dangerous threat. So to guarantee peace and security – to "contain" both Iraq and Iran – the United States commenced the practice of permanently garrisoning its forces in the region.

Meanwhile, in Washington, Operation Desert Storm served to spur larger ambitions. Merely preventing a hostile power from controlling the Persian Gulf no longer sufficed. The stated aim was now "to remain the predominant outside power" in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, a swathe of territory that extended far to the east and to the west of the Persian Gulf proper (Office of the Principal Deputy). Underlying U.S. strategy was this operative assumption: U.S. military presence would contribute to stability, while also enhancing U.S. influence. In effect, the United States intended to accomplish in the Islamic world what it had done in Western Europe during the Cold War.

Alas, this proved to be a major miscalculation. During the 1990s, Washington persisted in its efforts to lay down and enforce rules, intervening in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, bombing Afghanistan and Sudan,

and more or less continuously jousting with Saddam. Yet little evidence existed to suggest that the region was becoming more stable as a result. As for America's standing, presence elicited considerable resentment, which manifested itself in terrorist attacks against U.S. military and diplomatic facilities and in the 1993 bombing of New York's World Trade Center.

Determined to purge the Islamic world of this offending infidel presence, Osama bin Laden orchestrated the spectacular events of 9/11. President George W. Bush responded to this vicious assault by upping the military ante. For a brief interval, the war without a name acquired one. President Bush dubbed it the "Global War on Terrorism," a. k. a., GWOT. He also fingered the enemy as an "Axis of Evil."

But most of this was eyewash. Washington's actual aim was not to eliminate terrorism – an impossible task – but to impose its will throughout the Greater Middle East. So in October 2001, for the putative purpose of punishing the Taliban regime for hosting Al Qaeda, Bush sent U.S. forces into Afghanistan. In March 2003, ostensibly to prevent to Saddam Hussein from providing terrorists with nuclear weapons, he ordered the invasion of Iraq.

Bush and his lieutenants were counting on decisive victory to extend the unipolar moment into the indefinite future. But victory was nowhere to be had. In Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. forces became bogged down in conflicts they proved unable to win. Meanwhile, the scope of U.S. operations expanded into Pakistan and Yemen, returned once more to Libya and Somalia, even extended to the southern Philippines.

Once again, U.S. military exertions produced not stability but greater instability. What distinguished Bush's effort from those of his several predecessors is that this time the costs were vastly greater. Rather than dozens of battle casualties, U.S. combat deaths now numbered in the thousands. As for the dollar costs, no one knew for sure, but projections reached into the trillions.[1]

To his credit, Bush's successor, President Barack Obama, recognized the futility of invading and occupying countries. He experimented with alter-

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[1] For estimates, see the Brown University "Costs of War" project at <http://costsofwar.org/>.

native methods, targeted assassination emerging as the preferred American military *modus operandi*, with results still to be determined.

Obama also jettisoned the term GWOT. Once more the project to which the Carter Doctrine had given birth lacked a name. Yet still the project continued, even as its larger purpose became increasingly difficult to discern. One thing alone appeared certain: the reckless misapplication of the Carter Doctrine had brought the unipolar moment to a resounding and humbling conclusion.

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Re-visioning the American Century

In February 1941, ten months before the United States entered the Second World War, *Life* magazine's publisher Henry Luce set forth an internationalist vision that he called an "American Century." Arguing against a geographically narrow and "isolationist" nationalism, Luce's essay attributed his nation's global position to its international benevolence and economic vitality. As "the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprise," America offered the rest of the world "industrial products" and "technical skills," potentially spreading the "abundant life" that is "characteristically an American promise." The twentieth-century world, Luce claimed, would eagerly embrace America's democratic values and its formula for prosperity. Universalizing American ways would spread "the training system of the skillful servants of mankind"; "the Good Samaritan"; and "the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice" (64-65).

In the immediate postwar period, American policymakers often invoked this broad concept of an "American Century" under the phrase "the American Way of Life," one so universally attractive that it would spread throughout the world. In carefully drawn propaganda programs during and after the end of the war, policymakers sketched a model that would spread through voluntary enlistment and persuasion rather than by military power and coercion. What was the American model implied in the

terms American Century and American Way of Life? Here is a summary (Wall; Osgood; Belmonte).[1]

– A system of mass production/mass consumption, driven largely by private markets, that employed technological innovation to bring productivity gains, used advertising to stimulate demand, and welcomed government as a promoter and regulator (but not as an owner) of enterprise.

– A belief system that linked this mass production/mass consumption dynamic to the growth of a robust middle class whose well-being was assured by strong corporate-run welfare policies (privately provided health care and retirement benefits), moderate pro-capitalist labor unions, and a progressive, redistributive tax system that supported demand-led economic growth. This same middle class, of course, provided the audience for Henry Luce's *Time-Life* publishing empire and seemed a bulwark against communism and other radical ideologies. The American Century was to be a Consumer Century in which workers shared in an ever-widening circle of consumer abundance that mitigated class conflict and alleviated poverty (Rosenberg).

– A pluralist mass culture fostered through policies promoting "free flow" of information and imagery internationally. This "freedom" would, of course, open and expand markets for America's media empires, including Luce's.

– A growing acceptance of racial, ethnic and religious pluralism, bolstered by both the repudiation of Nazi-linked racial nationalism and by the spread of economic abundance.

– Recognition that women should be educated, independent, and mobile. New roles for women in the 1940s were often embraced mostly within a gendered division in which middle class men were presumed to earn a "family wage" and women were "liberated" from work – through rising

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[1] Cooperation between the State Department and the Advertising Council in promoting these messages abroad, especially in a widely distributed publication "The Miracle of America," is documented in Box 1, Folder "Advertising Council," General Records of the Department of State, International Information Administration, Private Enterprise Cooperation Staff, Subject File, 1948-1953, RG 59, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

male wages and labor-saving household technology – to become skilled managers of family consumption.

What seemed to be a historical condition of national exceptionalism animated this idealized American Way. But postwar policymakers, following Henry Luce's lead, stretched their exceptionalist vision into a universalistic prescription for global destiny. America's model, they preached, could influence others to construct a similarly expanding and uplifting kind of capitalism. Military preparedness had to be part of such an internationalist vision, but at the heart of the concept of the American Century and the American Way lay the assumption that "freedom" and "democracy" depended on rising material abundance and on the kind of socioeconomic fairness that could sustain a relatively stable political consensus – internationally as well as nationally (Potter; Boorstin).

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, much of this image faded. The promise of this American Way receded at home, and the term American Century often justified policies abroad that increasingly looked like economic exploitation and militaristic domination. What have been some of the circumstances that accompanied this "fall" of the American Century ideal?

The vision of consumerist abundance that undergirded the original American Century vision unraveled in at least two different ways. First, the impressive spread of consumerist societies (and new middle classes) throughout the developed world and recently in nations such as China, India, Brazil, and Korea means that many areas of the globe have embraced, in different ways, programs aimed at elevating living standards through mass production and mass consumption.[2] In this world, the America of crumbling infrastructure, dysfunctional governmental decision-making, impoverished populations, and economic inequality no longer shines as brightly as before.

Second, the promise of American abundance has eroded. Since the 1970s, the United States has experienced a rising inequality of both wealth and income along with a declining commitment to fostering economic

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[2] Predictions about Chinese economic ascendancy, a multipolar world, and the rapid growth of a global middle class were highlights in the report by the National Intelligence Council (*Global Trends 2030*). For an analysis, see Shanker.

egalitarianism. The neoliberal policies emerging from challenges to Keynesian economics have left middle class Americans trapped between stagnating wages and the growing debt loads needed to maintain middle class expectations for decent housing, education, health, and the consumer lifestyle that had once been celebrated as an especially American "freedom." At the same time, deregulation and tax cuts for high-income Americans augmented the pool of speculative money and contributed to a mushrooming financial sector that, in effect, rewarded speculation more than production. The increasingly high-risk and highly leveraged economy, which imploded in 2008, further increased economic inequality as profits were privatized but losses were socialized. As ordinary consumers staggered under debt, unemployment, and falling wages, the financial industry continued to favor speculative instruments over job creation. This un-virtuous cycle turned the American Century vision inside out (Reich; Rodger; Borstelman; Stein; Mason; Judis; Acemoglu and Robinson).

Moreover, growing environmental threats have increasingly challenged the functionality of the American Century's economic model. In recent times, global warming, accelerated by dependence on fossil fuels, most adversely affects people and nations with the least financial resources to adapt. The energy-intensive and environmentally profligate style of American mass consumption (a style that had emerged in the context of the commodification of the seemingly inexhaustible natural bounty of the North American continent) cannot be spread to all of the world's growing population. The technologies of abundance that Henry Luce hoped could be universalized have proven to be ecologically unsustainable.

While the promise of mass consumption-led growth has become hollowed out by neoliberal policies and environmental harms, the term American Century itself has seemed to shift meaning. The anxieties associated with the Cold War reoriented ideas of national strength so that policymakers came increasingly to equate the American Century with the preeminence of U.S. military might (Bacevich, *Washington Rules*). The triumphalism of the post-Cold War period and the fears of the post-9/11 environment further solidified the militaristic connotations of the term.

American political rhetoric has also imparted a jingoistic tenor that implicitly or explicitly associated the American Century with the need for

expanded military power. In the presidential election of 2012, for example, the central message of Mitt Romney's "major foreign policy address" of October 8, 2012, proclaimed that "the 21st Century can and must be an American Century." This statement also provided the lead quotation for the presidential transition website that had been readied in anticipation of a Republican presidential victory.[3] Even as candidate Romney claimed the term, however, his call for accelerated military spending and his domestic policies ran contrary to the ideals at the heart of Henry Luce's vision. The 2012 Republican Party's platform and policies pointed toward further undermining labor unions; rejecting ethnic and racial pluralism; fighting against the types of business regulation and tax progressivity that had built a stable capitalism with a broadening middle class in the postwar era; and promoting the aggressive coal, gas, and oil policies that would hasten irreversible environmental damage. In Romney's American Century, government would channel spending to help create jobs and exert American influence in the world predominantly through the military sector, the only area of the federal budget not slated for cuts (in fact, a Republican presidency promised additional increases in military expenditures.) Romney's embrace of the term American Century signaled that its early ideals were in free fall, especially in Henry Luce's own Republican Party.

Is the American Century, then, in decline? The answer depends on the context. Some recent speculation on the decline of an American Century considers the question primarily in terms of military might and geopolitical power. Viewed this way, commentators and politicians who lament the decline of the American Century are probably correct. American power has and will remain in relative decline, but this seeming decline is actually a reversion of what is a more normal, and perhaps more healthy, international system (Zakaria). We now live in a far more multipolar world than that inhabited by the World War II generation, which saw their nation's preeminence soar because of the destruction wreaked on potential rivals.

If the American Century, however, signifies the international transmission of the values enunciated in Luce's original vision, the question of its

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[3] Transition website at <http://politicalwire.com/archives/2012/11/07/romneys_transition_site.html>.

end seems harder to answer. In the United States itself, militarism, economic inequality, an eroding middle class, and environmental challenges seem to auger the end of Luce's American Century. But adaptability might also be possible. A sustainable mass production/mass consumption system, adapted to the cultures and environments of specific locales, could still support expanding middle classes. A global ethos that America may lead or at least join could yet morph toward sustainability. Multiethnic societies such as that of the United States could emerge as stronger than those that assert ethnic, racial, or religious exclusivity. Education and greater independence for women could ease gendered divisions and generally improve health and prosperity on a global scale. This would not be a century dominated by American power or products or skills, as Luce envisioned. But a consumerism that was sustainable both environmentally and socioeconomically through redistributive policies and investment in human and material infrastructure might help realize Luce's larger vision of a "humane internationalism."

Still, it is difficult to imagine America leading such a transformation. The seeming success of its mass production/mass consumption system has spawned blockages that retard needed change: blockages introduced by a financial sector that no longer sees middle class prosperity as essential to its profits and by gigantic energy companies whose profits depend on fossil fuels. These kinds of blockages are characteristic of once dominant powers that become so strangled by the entrenched interests that shaped their pasts that they cannot adapt to preserve the overall system. If Luce's vision of a "humane" American Century is in decline, those who most loudly lament its passing by calling for more military resources and more neoliberal policies constitute symptom rather than savior.

David Ellwood, Johns Hopkins University Bologna Center

America in 2013: Still a European Power?

In my new book-length treatment of Europe's American Century, I attempt to show that, while no one can doubt the dividing force of the great upheavals of the early twenty-first century, certainly underlying realities

preserve for American power a very special place in the evolution of Europe's character and destiny, and that this role is as strong as ever (Ellwood, *The Shock of America*).

The way to appreciate this reality is to step back from the daily headlines and look at those margins of their experience where Europeans encounter *change* of some form or other, particularly of the cultural variety. There, it seems to me, they are just as likely to encounter America as in any previous phase of contemporary history. The reason for this is that the urge of U.S. mass culture to project its presence into Europe – as now across the globe – in an endlessly shifting variety of forms and directions, continues to represent a pervasive force for innovation which Europeans can never ignore and are always obliged to come to some sort of terms with. The penetrative power of the industries and cultures which in the 1990s brought EuroDisney and CNN, *Jurassic Park* and *Baywatch*, MTV and Microsoft Windows, now forces Europeans to decide how to deal with Facebook and Twitter, *Avatar* and *Django Unchained* and above all, Apple and Google.

By taking into consideration much broader conceptions of power than the usual political and economic categories, and looking instead at all the connections the U.S. has developed over time linking *power* to *influence*, then the function of America's presence in contemporary European history can begin to emerge in all its complexity. Long years of research and reflection in these areas have produced in my mind a series of semi-theoretical suggestions:

1. There is something distinctive or unique in the way America projects its power – or *potenza* or *potenzialità* – in the world. This specialness consists in an unrivalled capacity to *invent ways to project power*, using combinations of the hard and the soft, the old and the new, the visible and the invisible, combinations which change constantly and unpredictably. My favorite example is still the first Gulf War, which saw a combination of the oldest form of power projection of all – the punitive military expedition – with the newest: the birth of the myth and the reality of CNN, the 24-hour news channel.

2. This ability is based, I think, on at least four factors:

a). the porousness of the border between the public and the private sphere: personalities, corporations, universities, foundations, media operations, and experts cross it constantly back and forth.

b). the capacity to conjugate medium and message: so much technology is more than just a modality or appliance – the Net itself, the social media, the myth and reality of Silicon Valley. But then there are all the other message carriers, from the fashionable celebrities to the products, brands, and icons. Look at America's armed forces and their hardware. A drone is more than a weapon: it too is a medium carrying a message.

c). the force of U.S. creative *industries*, as illustrated on a vast and detailed scale by the French researcher, Frédéric Martel. *Le Monde*, in December 2012 calculated that 6.3% of U.S. GNP comes from this sector, two and half times that of its nearest competitors (Kaltenbach and Le Guay; Martel).

d). the permanence of a form of *ideological creative destruction*. There is a vast, swirling market place for ideas, or at least concepts, or notions, in the U.S.: invent a phrase like "the end of history," or "the clash of civilizations," and your fortune is made. As Daniel Rodgers has shown in his intellectual history of recent times, these constructs may look artificial and over-blown, but they can frame debates on policy, shape opinions and agendas, and condition subject areas in universities. They have certainly fed the ideological polarization of the nation over the last 20 years or so, and driven on the destructive force of neo-liberalism.

The result of all this, I suggest, is to place the U.S. firmly at the top of the hierarchy of cultural power in the world, always promising or threatening some new challenge to every local idea of *modernity*, *sovereignty*, *and identity*, at a time when these fundamental reference points of a people's place in the world are in any case in constant state of flux, under the relentless pressures of globalization, economic crisis, demographic change, climate upheaval, and all the rest.

In conclusion, I would suggest that this effort of coping and coming to terms with the American challenge has, over time, profoundly divided the Europeans horizontally and vertically. There is no such thing as Europe finding its unity in standing up to the U.S. When I talk of horizontal differences I refer to the contrasts in responses in societies which have roughly the same power statuses politically, economically, culturally, most specifically Britain and France. They are poles apart in their attitudes on what comes out of America. The French insist on cultural diversity and

have made it an official policy, visible in all sorts of fields. In contrast, the British seem to embrace whatever comes out of the U.S. quite uncritically: their media and political élites are enthralled; their governments import as many models, practices and people as they can, even while they insist that their Britishness is undiminished (Ellwood, "Bemused by America"). These divisions among Europeans come out most starkly in moments of crisis, like the Iraq war and the financial saga. The French have not hesitated to gloat at the failures they perceive of the Anglo-Saxon model of finance capitalism. But look closer and the differences affect all sorts of everyday practices in a globalized world, as the splits which emerged at the recent Dubai conference on Internet governance demonstrated.

But there is also a vertical division among nations, a ranking judged by their ability to mobilize the political, moral and human resources needed to fashion a modernity of their own, to create alternatives to the American models and presences, or at least syntheses of what is thought most appealing from the American version of "the West" with local practices adapted from tradition. You can see these processes going on in China with the naked eye, as well as in societies like South Korea and Turkey. In Western Europe there are of course long-standing and comprehensive versions of modernity still at work: the Scandinavian, the Rhenish, the Latin, the social democratic, the E.U. project. All of them have evolved in ways which very often have nothing to do at all with what has come out of the U.S., unless you count their universal dependence on an idea of economic growth which first arrived here with the Marshall Plan.

But if you live in a middle-ranking country like Italy, you can see that *when change comes along* there are makers and takers of models and innovation. Whether it's in economic theories or environmental laws, manufacturing or music, scientific research or sport. What is new in London, Paris and Berlin – not to mention New York and Los Angeles – will always fascinate the Italian media far more than what's new in Madrid, or Warsaw, or Dublin (not to mention further afield). And what's new in Italy will very rarely attract the attention of London, Paris, Berlin or New York. Compare the number of books, plays, films, TV programs translated from English into Italian with the number translated from Italian into English. Look at the idea of university rankings, and their content.

As the Mexican writer Jorge Castaneda suggested years ago, a nation aspires to hegemony when it develops the "ideological message and the cultural ambition to transform the history of its success into a recipe for others" (25). Will Germany do this now in Europe? Does it want to? Will China in Asia? Looking at the history of our various positions in the hierarchy of cultural power in the West, we may care to recall also a little-noticed section of Joseph Schumpeter's classic *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* of 1942 (Schumpeter 129-30):

> Mankind is not free to choose … Things economic and social move by their own momentum and the ensuing situations compel individuals and groups to behave in certain ways whatever they may wish to do – not indeed by destroying their freedom of choice but by shaping the choosing mentalities and by narrowing the list of possibilities from which to choose.

In this sense, America most certainly remains a European power. Hands up all those who have bought or intend to buy an I-Phone 5!

Tiziano Bonazzi, University of Bologna

American Exceptionalism and the End of the American Century

In my early years as an Italian Americanist over four decades ago, the idea of American historical exceptionalism was not fashionable among Italian scholars and the general public. My friends and I spoke of the United States as the paramount capitalist country whose democratic bourgeois ideology – meaning false consciousness – far from being unique, was an expression of international capitalism and its history. A not so small minority of the people I knew thought of America as the leading democratic nation: not a lone star in an empty sky, though, but rather *prima inter pares*, first among equals, member of a noble sisterhood of Western nations heir to the same European history. In the 1960s when I first read Max Lerner, who was among the first to speak openly of American exceptionalism, I found him a rather boring expression of bourgeois thought. In Italy bourgeois democratic thought had more profound spokesmen, beginning with my

mentor Nicola Matteucci, who was instrumental in introducing American constitutionalism to Italy. The American Founding Fathers, Matteucci maintained, were the illustrious heirs, not the opponents, of a European political discourse on limited government that, via Henry de Bracton and England, reaches back to medieval constitutionalism. If a fault line exists in the history of the West it is not between the Old and the New World, but is instead between those who built the "modern state" – that pivotal political creation of Renaissance Europe that spread to the Americas after 1776 – on the principles of limited government, as in England, Holland and the United States on the one hand, and those who understood government as subject only to the laws it makes through the legislative branch of government, as in German *Staatslehre* on the other.

In my experience exceptionalism began its career in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after the New Left attack on the "repressive tolerance" of mainstream America, when historians tapped the resources for studies in social, racial, and gender histories It was then that the so-called "consensus historians" became a target for their unswerving faith in the uniqueness and superiority of the American experience. Ronald Reagan and the neoconservatives then subsequently rescued the idea from the bottomless pit radicals had thrown it into, and American exceptionalism became – and still is – a hotly contested political concept, one whose elements are used by pollsters to measure the mood of American public opinion. And the polls always tell the same story: the vast majority of Americans, many of them liberal, believe their country to be unique, in the sense of being special and better than other countries.

As a boy growing up after World War II in a strong anti-fascist family, I was inoculated against all forms of nationalism – and American exceptionalism undoubtedly is one. As an Italian living in a country able to survive and prosper with a history of disunion, discord, and no national mission except the one concocted by fascism, I was suspicious of claims to a *sonderweg* or special destiny. My early strivings against exceptionalism and, for instance, George Bancroft's para-hegelianism – so European in seeing one nation, his nation, as the culmination of history – have been vindicated by historical research, most of it American, that has reached a new consensus underlining the conflicting nature of American history. Such developments

make it necessary to reconsider exceptionalism and to take a new look at the fact that, contrary to what historical, sociological and economic data show, a majority of Americans hold to the empirically unsustainable idea of American uniqueness.

We can proceed from here to the topic of this Forum, the debate on the end of the American Century. Henry Luce's 1941 awakening call to war as the midwife of an American Century, was part of the debate between "fortress America" supporters and internationalists in which both sides strongly believed America to be special. The internationalists differed from their opponents on two points. First, they believed that American values and the American way of life were not only in line with universal principles and the course of history, but would be accepted by everyone on earth if given a chance to choose. Second, American freedom, that is human freedom, would be in danger even if Germany and Japan were defeated unless the whole world was liberated by the United States and made the American vision of liberty its own. Today what sounds stunning in Luce's essay is that while speaking of freedom as agency, it makes the world a passive recipient of an American-made political and social vision. Only the United States and the enemies of liberty have an active role in the great historical drama unfolding; everyone else sits waiting for its *dénouement*. True as it is that Henry Luce can be read as a political realist and most of what he writes has a sound factual basis, it is easy to detect a cluster of master ideas and values that give coherence and purpose to what he writes: ideas and values that set America apart from the rest of the world, while maintaining that they are universal and sought after by all mankind. The world has already been partially Americanized, Luce writes; war will complete the task.

Authors detect an expansionist urge in American history from its very inception and link it to exceptionalism and its inherent universalism; but expansion as a cultural trait means different things, from territorial expansion and war, to industrial progress and growth, to spiritual change and salvation, and more. All these meanings can be found in the exceptionalist tradition at different times. American Century exceptionalism, as sketched by Henry Luce and finalized in the 1940s and 1950s by consensus historians, theorists of the American way of life, political scientists shaping pluralist and modernization theories, and the political class, turns the

Christian and natural rights universalism of the American tradition into a combative political globalism. The United States is to them the paradigm of liberty, the eternal "first new nation" of Seymour M. Lipset, whole and ever progressing. Paradoxically, America constantly changes because liberty is ever expanding; at the same time change ought to happen but only within the framework of the already achieved perfection of the American Constitution and American national character. America, then, has to fight enemies of freedom abroad and disruptive changes at home. The neoconservative emphasis on Constitutional "originalism," for instance, can be seen in this light.

The amount of space at hand compels me to sketch a rather abstract ideal type, to use a Weberian term. It is understood, however, that United States history in the American Century cannot be discussed in terms of exceptionalism only. It would be exceptionalist to an extreme to do that. However, if the ideal type is accepted, we have a tool to understand why the debate on the coming of a "post-American world" is so divisive and at times dramatic.

The various versions of exceptionalism in American history were inclined to insulate the United States from the rest of the world in order to preserve the nation. American Century exceptionalism gave this tradition a twist and turned it into a sort of "defensive" globalism having the security state, modernization policies in the Third World, and a friendly push towards mass consumption in advanced societies that would make them more akin to America and less prone to socialism, among its main features. Exceptionalist social and political culture basically refused to see the world in plural terms and turned nationalism into an ideology of benevolent Americanization of the world.

Thus it has been burdensome for Americans to think of their country as the most powerful nation on earth and nothing else. The tradition of exceptionalism and their social culture make Americans disinclined toward power, or perhaps compel them not to acknowledge its presence to themselves. Whatever the case, the fact that the United States fought both Fascist and Soviet totalitarianisms and that the model of the consumer society proved so appealing forestalled the possibility of admitting that the United States does not have a special mission and is prone to divisions and

defeats. What is considered normal in the life of other nations, that is, the possibility of "declension," to use a term largely used by students of exceptionalism, in the case of America, however, is considered decline. Thus the exceptionalist myth vitiated American politics, making it extremely difficult to understand actual change. Facing a world where other countries now challenge the status of America as the only superpower, where non-western cultures are able to confront western values and political institutions, and where the phenomenon of globalization puts growing pressure on the autonomy of nations, Americans find it increasingly hard to identify a role for the United States and a vision for American society.

American Century exceptionalism was wrong as history and is dead as actual policy. Defining cultural traits and memories, however, cannot be shed off at will. The debate over the end of the American Century started a reconsideration of Western civilization and the American role in it. Hopefully the debate will continue and sharpen its aims, but emotions are not the captives of science and nobody should expect that the sentiments of a majority of Americans will change any time soon.

Daniele Fiorentino, University of Rome Three

A Compass in Stormy Weather: U.S. Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century

As the strongest emotions for 9/11 subsided following the tenth anniversary celebration of 2011, Americans moved their reflections on the meaning of their mission, but especially of culture and identity, from the more immediate questions on its rationale and the apparent crisis of the system to a reconsideration of their own history. The question many historians and political scientists keep working on is not only if the American Century is finally over; rather, the reasons for the declining power of the United States. Many, as pointed out by Fareed Zakaria in his essay *The Post-American World*, agree on the fact that a world dominated by the U.S. since the end of the Cold War is quickly moving toward a multiplicity of the sources of power. However, if the American Century is over, the United States still seems capable to provide readings of the possible future

scenarios that other countries can contribute to form as they reassess the influence of American culture. We are moving into a multipolar world, although the United States will remain for long an important factor. However, Robert Kagan holds that actually the American model is here to stay, at least for a while.

The loss of stability, a blurring of identity, and a general reconsideration of purpose in American culture, and a critical revision of exceptionalism, are the underlying themes of the recent relationship of the United States with the world. Along with them, the historian should also keep in mind the relevance of the interpretive categories of U.S. history: the frontier, a pluralistic society, the conception of the future, the perception of and the relationship with other people and other countries, its definition and application. Only by keeping in mind all these factors and categories it is possible to achieve an understanding of the new role the United States is coming to play at the world level while at the same time appreciating the changing relationship of the country with the rest of the world. In order to understand this process, it can be useful to turn the attention to American culture and its influence without relying only on the catastrophic pictures some scholars and pundits insist on depicting.

The United States should first come out of the usual "Us/Them" dichotomy (where "Them" stands for the rest of the world) and redefine its place without elevating barriers. Obama's reelection demonstrates to an extent the desire many voters had for a redefinition of American identity and of their own selves. Many American writers keep searching for a meaningful definition of identity; one that could be multicultural, gender sensitive and cosmopolitan. An identity that today probably would better define the sense of being American.

While movies and TV series of the early century focused on disasters and future gloomy scenarios, the movies produced between 2011 and 2012 seem to turn an eye back onto the fundamentals of the American experience. Many directors and scriptwriters interrogate themselves via the country's past, sometimes not so recent, that keeps claiming an exceptionalism that seems out of date. When we consider Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, exceptionalism appears to be still in place. However, the struggle against slavery was not only American and not necessarily a redeeming experience for the world, since several European kingdoms had abolished it earlier and

Czar Alexander II emancipated serfs exactly the same year of the outbreak of the Civil War.

When watching *Homeland*, one of the most successful TV series today, and supposedly one of President Obama's favorites, we realize how the American experience is not that exceptional after all. Somehow, 9/11 contributed to make Americans reconsider their categories vis-à-vis the world. There was no exceptionalism or mission anymore. They are unique as any other people.

"We are all Israelis now," wrote *The New Republic* editor emeritus Martin Peretz after the attack on the Twin Towers. He paraphrased J.F. Kennedy in Berlin and *Le Monde* after 9/11 (Colombani) to explain the feeling that had befallen Americans as new targets of Islamic terrorism. The French newspaper, however, had added a telling statement: "the new century has truly begun." However, Peretz, like other well known critics of the multicultural nation of the new century, too often identifies the crisis with the loss of a previously construed identity, a supposed homogeneity of citizenship that was never a real mark of Americanism. In this perspective the term "Homeland" assumed in the past decade a disturbing meaning reflected also in some decisions made by the Department by the same name, constituted shortly after 9/11 by President George W. Bush. Indeed, it is a shared feeling in the United States that the country itself is threatened within and not only in its role as a superpower. In any case, it is worth remembering that the format for *Homeland* is the Israeli *Prisoners of War*.

As it is often the case in TV series produced after 9/11, *Homeland* deals with "clear and present danger." The female protagonist, Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), is a bipolar CIA counterintelligence officer who, thanks to her psychic disturb, is an excellent if disquieting detective. She is after an Al Qaeda master-minder and ends up working with a former POW who possibly carries on a double game. What *Homeland* conveys in the end, besides the personal profiles of the characters and the never ending fight against Islamic terrorism, is a changed American perception of the world. It is not much anymore the good guys against the villains; there is a more complex and fearful reality to be understood. A reality that is as much inborn as it is foreign.

This can be done for example by looking back in history, by taking a

self-critical approach capable of giving new answers to old questions. Is the country's mission over after all? And what is its identity?

From *Lincoln* to *The Conspirator*, from *The Help* to *J. Edgar*, several movie directors and scriptwriters have tried to look back at the meaning of American memory and to suggest the construction of a shared identity not necessarily exceptional.

Even *Argo* and *The Company You Keep* contribute to a new reading of the American experience. Focusing on more recent history, they seem to go to the roots of American decline. The complex and fantastic rescue of six Americans in Iran during the assault on the Tehran embassy in 1979, narrated in *Argo*, and the conscience crisis of elderly ex-terrorists from the 1970s put up by Robert Redford in *The Company you Keep*, provide a partial answer to the reasons of American decline. The 1970s represent a turning point in the American conscience. The upheavals of the previous decade, Vietnam and the imperial presidency began fading as a new conscience of the fragility of the American dream dawned. The new crisis originated after all also in the inability of the Americans to realize they are co-protagonists in a wider world and to look on the outside in a true dialogue with other cultures and realities.

It was in those years that a group of young literati produced novels marking a change in the evident discomfort each new generation seems to prove toward the capitalist dream of the American model. *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Americana* and *The Child of God*, by Roth, De Lillo and McCarthy, well interpret the shift from the "counterculture" to the "culture of complaint." Part of the problem nowadays is that this generation is still regarded as the true interpreter of American uneasiness with itself and the world it has created. But, although *American Pastoral* by Roth and *Underworld* by De Lillo, both published in 1997, still projected a critical approach of American society and of the new issues arising from the end of an era, they still dealt with an American world that was fading in those very years.

To understand what is happening today in the "American mind," it can be more productive to turn to writers who came of age or were at the beginning of their career at the end of the Cold War. They grew as the crisis worsened. While authors such as De Lillo, Philip Roth and Paul Auster are undoubtedly central to an understanding of the end of the American

Century, they cannot truly project themselves into the twenty-first. Rather, in this exercise, prominent authors like Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen and Nathan Englander, Bret Easton Ellis and the late David Foster Wallace can be useful. They are excellent interpreters of a "mid-generation" that risks being overlooked as an important protagonist of a middle passage between the American Century and the future that is in the making.

As the emergency of the end of the twentieth century deepened, they had to put up also with the crisis of the self their fathers and older brothers underwent in the 1990s. As they became the new interpreters of a destabilized American identity in need of repair, they had to take hold of their own selves and overcome at the same time their youth. They had to reconsider the temptation of proclaiming themselves "forever young." It is their younger brothers' task now to imagine a blurry and challenging century which maybe does not look so hazy to them, after all. A world that possibly will not be United States-centered much anymore, but which can still find in American culture a useful compass to orient itself in the stormy decades ahead.

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American Studies and the End of the American Century

"Until now," Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar write in opening their *Globalizing American Studies*, "American Studies has been conducted under the shadow of the American Century, an epistemological framework and a period of time that have, it seems, drawn to a close" (1). The sense of contemporary American Studies as a narrative of crisis couldn't have been stated more clearly. As the academic field devoted to the study of "Americanness" and its changing configurations, American Studies has been closely intertwined with the "American Century": it accompanied the rise of the United States as a world power with Van Wyck Brooks's famous call for a "usable past" in 1918; it operated as an organic part of its apparatus during the Cold War; it questioned its legitimacy in the post-Vietnam war era; it mirrored its diversity and honored its plurality with the rise of multiculturalism. Now that the "American Century" is chronologically over, American Studies seems to be ambivalently poised between celebrating its symbolic demise and advocating its extension.

The specific form this ambivalence has taken is the move towards the transnational and the global, reflected in the very title of Edwards and Gaonkar's book and, over the last decade, repeatedly represented as an antidote to American Exceptionalism, "the meta-narrative that declared the United States exempt from the rules through which it regulated the rest of the global order" and "recast the reason of state as a teleology" (Pease, "Postnational" 265), providing American Studies with its foundational ideology at the time of its academic institutionalization in the 1930s and 1940s. American Exceptionalism recapitulated a number of assumptions: the existence of an "American mind," with its distinctive qualities of optimism, idealism, individualism, innocence, pragmatism; its location in the New World and exemption from the limitations and corruptions of Europe; its continuity throughout national history in the form of pervasive themes operating at all levels of national culture (Wise). Doing American Studies thus amounted to investigating and celebrating the quintessential meaning of America, in its fundamental uniqueness and difference from the historical experience of any other country.

This bracketing of "America" from any wider world stage – all the more paradoxical if one considers the origin of the term "exceptionalism," coined by Stalin and used by the U.S. as a cultural weapon during the Cold War (Pease, "Exceptionalism" 108) – has been systematically challenged, along with the rest of the exceptionalist stipulation, by the New American Studies, emerging from the 1990s as the new synthesis in the field. In a series of powerfully critical foundational works (Rowe; Kaplan and Pease), the New Americanists have unearthed a thick history of international imbrication, restoring a sense of the U.S.' worldwide expansionism and imperialism. By "reconceptualiz[ing] the American as always relationally defined and therefore as intricately dependent upon 'others' that are used both materially and conceptually to mark its boundaries" (Radway 17), they have denaturalized the easy isomorphism of culture, nation, and state, focusing on cultural and material flows and on social and intellectual relations across geographical boundaries, while promoting a substantial internationalization of the field. What has come to be called "Transnational American Studies" is the result of this forcing open of the field to take into account that which had been considered to be outside its purview.

But what does the transnational name exactly? A detailed analysis of the constellation of critical practices gathered under this definition exceeds the scope of this short contribution. However, if we take Robyn Wiegman's tentative six-pronged typology (published in a former issue of this journal) as a starting point, we soon realize that the varieties of Americanist work she describes have little in common. Is the transnational in Transnational American Studies a change in objects or in point of view? Does it affect the analytic or the epistemology of the field? Is it a methodology or a mode of knowledge production? Is it connected to the nationality of the scholar or to the institutional site where the scholarship is produced? Attitudes change considerably even in some of the foundational contributions to this reconceptualization of the field, ranging from Shelley Fisher Fishkin's call for more internationalized objects of study and practices of scholarly exchange; to Djelal Kadir's critique of the provincialism of U.S. American Studies and call for a change of paradigm through a more diverse geography and nationality of Americanists; to Amy Kaplan's critique of his critique for reinstating exactly the kind of inside/outside binary on which exceptionalism is predicated.

To the extent that the transnational moment of American Studies is part of the overall intellectual project of New American Studies, it certainly obeys its basic impulse of constantly pushing forward the boundaries of its own investigation, endlessly reproducing and reclaiming its newness by grounding it in the constantly renewed enabling fiction of a previous, less daring intellectual moment to be rejected and overcome – Cold War American Studies for the New Americanists, national/nationalistic American Studies for Transnational American Studies. But developments in a scholarly field – especially one so institutionally enmeshed in the self-representation of a global superpower – can hardly be accounted for only in terms of inner intellectual trajectories. The rise of the transnational as a critical term in American Studies is in fact coincident with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the untrammeled neoliberal phase of global capitalism, the worldwide (though by no means unchallenged) hegemony of the United States as the single remaining world superpower, and – last but not least – the global reach of the post-9/11 "Homeland Security State" (Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*). In this sense, what the transnational names is both the extension of American Studies to worldwide dimensions, trav-

elling on the wings of globalization-as-Americanization, *and* an antidote against the New American Studies' identification with the now solitary political superpower – an identification that would entail its allegiance to the state from which it had disaffiliated itself in its founding gesture of rejecting the Cold War disciplinary formation.

Thus understood, the transnational is a *pharmakon* in Jacques Derrida's sense – both treatment and poison. As a critical label, or aspiration, it shares the underlying idealism that also marks the New American Studies – the understanding of a scholarly field as the scene for creating justice and displacing global hegemony; the investment in an apparatus of knowledge seen as *per se* productive of material socio-political change; the conviction that Americanist critique, in intellectually disaffiliating itself from U.S. state practices, can stand immune from involvement in the extensive power of the U.S. knowledge industry and of the U.S. global hegemony. To that one might reply that unless (or until) a revolution in world power relations repositions the hegemonic center of global knowledge production in Kandahar or Cairo, or unless/until China has completely supplanted the United States as world power, imposing its own agendas and its own paradigms of knowledge, Transnational American Studies is doomed to remain a rhetorical gesture. There is an aporia in trying to redefine in transnational terms a field that is grounded in the nation as the founding element of its disciplinary ontology, and that is consequently bound to reproduce the discourse of the nation even while affecting its deconstruction. There is a further aporia in attempting to divest American Studies of its involvement in the neo-imperial dynamics of global capitalism by claiming allegiance to radical anti-imperialist movements throughout the world while expanding the grasp of American Studies to worldwide dimensions by claiming an intellectual exteriority to America. There is, finally, an even deeper aporia in constructing the field of American Studies in such ambitious and wide-ranging terms that its mission becomes symbolically reconfigured as the intellectual equivalent of the exceptionalist "America" that it had disclaimed at the outset.

From the vantage point of the close of the "American Century," however, one might point out the ways in which Transnational American Studies is a narrative of crisis, betraying not just an ambition but also an anxi-

ety. The ambition is an ambition of mastery: providing an updated and enlarged legitimization to the engulfing narrative of American Studies by refashioning the old nationalistic version of American Exceptionalism to make it viable on a newly globalized stage. The anxiety may well be the flip side of the same coin – American Studies' need to stabilize and consolidate national identity in the face of the global shift of power away from the U.S., and its need to keep paradoxically reinscribing "America" as a global hegemon through its critical practices exactly at the historical moment that threatens the demise of that hegemony.

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