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THE COINAGE OF THE TERM AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ITS ORIGINAL MEANINGS

Within the past two decades, 'American exceptionalism' has become a trendy term both in political debates and academic discussions. Today, the words 'American exceptionalism' generally imply either the uniqueness or superiority of a number of American features over those of the rest of the world. However, the term originally had little in common with such interpretations when it was coined in a controversy among American Communists in 1920s. Relying on the publications of various Marxist factions in the USA and documents of the Comintern, this paper aims to trace the early history of the term 'American exceptionalism' in the 1920 and 1930s and to deconstruct related concepts. It is argued that even solely within Marxist discourse the term 'American exceptionalism' had several meanings and all of them differed considerably from contemporary definitions. First, it was used sarcastically to address the members of the Communist Party who did not believe that the crisis of capitalism had already started in America. Then, the interpretations of the term ranged from the belief in the exceptional impeccability of the Comintern under the Soviet leadership, to the claims that exceptional features of American imperialism should be taken as evidence of Lenin's theory of uneven development. The paper also outlines the concepts, which 'American exceptionalism' tended to imply later, from the 1940s to 1960s both inside and outside Marxist discourse. In addition, the paper employs a range of methods suitable for analysing any myths of exceptionalism, with special attention to Roland Barthes' theory of mythological systems. Finally, the paper suggests a definition of exceptionalism, which may be used as a starting point for the historical study of similar myths. Refs 46.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, Lovestone, Foster, Comintern, Communist Party of the USA, CPUSA, Marxism, consensus history, Daniel Bell, identity, the theory of myth, Barthes.

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ВОЗНИКНОВЕНИЕ И ПЕРВОНАЧАЛЬНЫЕ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИИ ТЕРМИНА АМЕРИКАНСКАЯ ИСКЛЮЧИТЕЛЬНОСТЬ

За последние два десятилетия словосочетание «американская исключительность» стало крайне популярным как в политических кругах, так и в научной среде. Под словами «американская исключительность» сейчас, как правило, подразумевают уникальность американского государства и его превосходство над другими странами. Однако изначально термин «американская исключительность» имел мало общего с подобной интерпретацией, так как был сформулирован в ходе полемики между американскими коммунистами в 1920-е годы. На основе анализа публикаций различных фракций Коммунистической партии США и материалов Коминтерна в статье предпринята попытка проследить историю термина «американская исключительность» в 1920–1930-е годы и выявить смыслы, которыми наделяли этот термин различные марксистские группировки. Автор статьи приходит к выводу, что в этот период термин «американская исключительность» имел несколько значений, и все они значительно отличались от современных интерпретаций термина. Так, изначально сторонниками «американской исключительности» иронично называли тех членов Коммунистической партии США, которые полагали, что американский капитализм, в отличие от европейского, все еще не вступил в фазу кризиса. Сами же «фракционеры» вкладывали другой смысл в термин «американская исключитель-

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ность». С их точки зрения, исключительные черты американского империализма должны были восприниматься только лишь как доказательство ленинского закона о неравномерности развития капитализма. Они использовали термин «исключительность» как лозунг возвращения к чистому ленинизму, неискаженному руководством Коминтерна. В 1940–1960-е годы «американская исключительность» стала наделяться новыми смыслами как в рамках, так и вне рамок марксистского дискурса. Наряду с анализом ранних концепций исключительности в статье рассматриваются и возможные методологические подходы к изучению данных представлений, при этом особое внимание уделено теории мифов Ролана Барта. Наконец, в статье предложено научное определение «представлений об исключительности», которое может стать полезным инструментом в историческом исследовании подобных мифов. Библиогр. 46 назв.

Ключевые слова: американская исключительность, Лавстоун, Фостер, Коминтерн, Коммунистическая партия США, марксизм, школа консенсуса, Дэниел Белл, идентичность, теория мифа, Барт.

Since the 1990s, ‘American exceptionalism’ has become one of the most hotly contested topics in American politics, media and academia. Perhaps it was the president of the United States, Barack Obama, who unintentionally gave a decisive impetus to the spread of ‘exceptionalist’ hysteria in 2009. When asked if he could “subscribe... to the school of American exceptionalism”, Obama replied that he believed in American exceptionalism, just as he suspected that the British believed in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believed in Greek exceptionalism [News 2009]. Immediately, he was harshly criticized for a lack of patriotism¹, and afterwards a bacchanalia of ‘exceptionalism’ broke out, involving both supporters and critics of the idea. The word has become so common that now anyone who wants to discuss the peculiar traits of America would likely be using the term ‘exceptionalism’.

However, this has not always been the case: until the 1990s the words ‘American exceptionalism’ were hardly familiar to the average American. It does not mean though that there was not a similar *concept* or theory before, which likewise implied a distinctiveness of the USA. There were plenty of them, but they had different labels: Manifest Destiny, Frontier theory, concepts of Anglo-Saxon superiority, the American dream, the American credo and many others. The term ‘American exceptionalism’ was just one of them, and it appeared in an unlikely environment: in the Communist discussions of Marxism in the 1920s.

This paper aims to trace the early history of the term ‘American exceptionalism’ and examine the concepts which it implied. We would argue that from the 1920 to the 1950s the *term* ‘American exceptionalism’ had several meanings and all of them differed considerably from the range of modern definitions. Furthermore, we would attempt to find out the impact they had on collective memory decades after the term was introduced, while a brief outline of the development of those early concepts will conclude the paper.

Studies in American exceptionalism are often regarded by the academic community as not valuable as they are believed to display bias and vagueness. In some cases these claims might well be true: since the 1980s many social scientists (followed by politicians) have chosen to affirm or criticize the exceptional nature of the United States instead of analysing the concept of exceptionalism as a matter of research². Such a bad reputation

¹ The mass media tended to cut the rest of Obama’s reply, where he added that nevertheless he believed in the exceptional nature of American values.

² Nevertheless, there are a few valuable works: Daniel T. Rogers [Rogers 1998], James Ceaser [Ceaser 2012], Ian Tyrrell [Tyrrell 1991], Deborah Madsen [Madsen 1998], Jack P. Greene [Greene 1993] and espe-

(‘the miasmatic incoherence of exceptionalist discourse’, as Michael Zuckerman has put it [Zuckerman 1997, p. 25]) makes it necessary to outline the methodological framework of our study.

First, we understand any ‘exceptionalism’ to be a system of thought (ideas, concepts, beliefs) and by no means a ‘real characteristic’ of any social group. From this standpoint, exceptionalism can be considered an integral part of the collective identity of a group, society or nation³. Following Rogers Brubaker’s interpretation of identity as an on-going process of identification [Brubaker 2012, pp. 89–94], we may suggest that exceptionalism, being a part of it, is also an unstable, fluctuating and complex process, rather than a fixed state of mind.

Regarding the term ‘exceptionalism’ itself, it is not easy to define and an approach chosen for this paper may add to the general confusion. To avoid this, we would like to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that in this paper the word *exceptionalism* is used in two contexts. In a strict sense, ‘exceptionalism’ is a *historical term*, which has been attached to a number of historical myths. In this respect, there is the ‘American exceptionalism’ of the Marxists, ‘American exceptionalism’ described by the social scientist Seymour M. Lipset, or the ‘American exceptionalism’ proclaimed by Hillary Clinton. Meanwhile, in a loose sense, exceptionalism is a *scientific term*, which refers to a specific range of ideas inherent in human identity. Such ideas concern distinctions from others, comparisons with them, the notions of a norm, deviation, superiority or inferiority. A concise definition of exceptionalism might be the following: the ideas of exceptionalism are *any collective ideas asserting that a certain community (imagined or not) deviates from the norms typical of all other similar communities, due to the special features it possesses*. For example, adherents to the theory of Anglo-Saxon superiority of the late 19th century believed that the Anglo-Saxons (*a community*) differed from other European nations (*communities of the same kind*) because they had inherited the best political institutions (*which are a special feature they possessed. It made it possible for them to deviate from the norm of not having proper political institutions that was a characteristic of other nations*). The definition proposed may help to deal with such challenges as defining the concepts or myths that could be labelled as ‘exceptionalistic’⁴.

Further valuable insights into the essence of ‘exceptionalism’ were obtained from the theory of *myths*, developed by the French semiologist, Roland Barthes [Barthes 2010]. According to Barthes, any myth, be it political or social, constitutes a specific semiological system, which is based upon language, another semiological system. Language consists of the three interrelated elements: a *signifier* (a sound or a symbol, e.g. [‘teibl]), a *signified*

cially the recent monograph by Hilde E. Restad [Restad 2015]. Despite the importance of exceptionalism for the present and past American collective identity, this problem has received scant attention in the Russian research literature. Moreover, the only existing comprehensive study of American exceptionalism does not even mention the Marxist origins of this term [Kontseptsiya 1993].

³ However, this explanation might be not clear enough, given the considerable and commonly criticised ambiguity of the term ‘collective identity’. In our analysis, we proceed from the assumption that collective identity is an understanding, shared by a group, of the similarities of its members and their differences from ‘others’. This understanding, being a constructed image, may include any range of similarities and differences.

⁴ One may argue that because of this confusion and the growing popularity of the like-named myth, the time has come to replace the scientific term exceptionalism with some better notion. We would eagerly agree, though so far we have not encountered any other suitable term (‘uniqueness’ or ‘distinctiveness’ would be even worse choices).

(a concept, e.g. the idea of what a table is) and in combination they produce the *sign* (a word, e.g. 'table') [Barthes 2010, pp. 270]⁵. In turn, the mythological system incorporates the signs of language. Thus, the products of language like a word or story, or image would act as the '*signifiers*' (e.g. a portrait of a politician). The concept — any idea — would constitute the second element of the system, the '*signified*' (e.g. an idea of national strength). Together, a form and a concept produce the third element — the *myth* itself [Barthes 2010, pp. 265–272] (the portrait perceived as an incarnation of national strength). To understand myth, it is equally important to realize its structure and its perception by people. One of the myth's most remarkable effects is that people commonly absorb it as a whole, the form and the concept together, without deconstructing it, precisely as they would do it with a word from their native language [Barthes 2010, pp. 287–290].

Barthes' theory of myth provides an advantageous analytical framework for examining 'exceptionalism'. It helps to focus on the distinction between the concepts of exceptionalism (the '*signified*' as the ideas of being unique or exceptional) and its forms (the slogans, titles, narratives, images etc.), as well as to examine how the myths have been read and interpreted.

Another feature of semiological systems might be applicable to the case of exceptionalist myths. According to a classical rule of semiology, the same form (signifier) may correspond to different concepts (signified), like homonyms in language do. Conversely, the same concepts may be expressed by different forms — words in different languages etc. In the end, each pairing constitutes a unique sign. In terms of exceptionalism, this would mean that the same text, slogan or image (like the words 'American exceptionalism' or the American flag) might signify quite different concepts. Similarly, the same concept (for example, the superiority of American democracy) might be represented through different means.

Such relations between the forms and concepts of exceptionalism can be easily illustrated. For example, in colonial communities of the seventeenth century, the concepts of exceptionalism mostly belonged to a wider European (not American!) religious discourse and concerned the issues of salvation, predestination and church discipline. In combination with terms like the 'chosen people', the 'New Canaan' etc., these concepts produced specific myths, which were understood by colonists of the seventeenth century precisely within a 'religious' conceptual framework [Adamova 2015]. However, in the discourse of the nineteenth century, the same terms — an 'elect people', the 'people of Israel', 'predestination' — constituted entirely different myths when combined with the concepts of a superior Anglo-Saxon race, the nation state or political independence from England. Similarly, such long-lived terms as 'American dream' or the 'city upon a hill' also have been parts of different myths throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The same thing happened with the term 'American exceptionalism'.

To summarize, a 'mythological' approach provides new perspectives for the study of exceptionalism, as it allows the researcher to explore the complexity of myths, embedded in collective identity. On the one hand, it helps to discover the concepts represented by the myths, and on the other, it entails new questions about the mechanisms and routes of collective memory. Why has a certain term been used repeatedly in different conceptual frameworks? What happened to the concept of a certain myth? Is there something that

⁵ While quoting Barthes, we provide our own examples, as Barthes' are too lengthy to be recounted here.

unites an exceptionalist narrative in different myths? Finally, such an approach would challenge the linear periodisation of American exceptionalist ideas, provided by some researchers, and widely reported by mass media⁶.

Unlike other exceptionalistic terms, the word 'exceptionalism' itself has been a relatively recent invention. The Oxford English Dictionary, with confirmation by most American scholars, suggests that the word 'exceptionalism' appeared in 1928–1929 in the controversy that broke out in the Workers (Communist) Party of America. An alternative opinion ascribes authorship of the term to the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville [Kammen 1993, p. 7]. Today, however, this opinion is criticised more often than affirmed [Ceaser 2012, p. 5]. Indeed, although Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* (1840) emphasized the differences between the Old and New World, he never used the word 'exceptionalism'. Only once, he mentioned the adjective 'exceptionelle', but in a context where it referred to the *situation* the Americans were in (being a part of the British people in a favourable geographical location), and neither the American nation nor the United States [Tocqueville 1868, p. 59]. A similarly erroneous assumption concerns Werner Sombart's influential work *Why is there no socialism in the United States* (1906), which is argued to have played an important part in building the myth of exceptionalism [Bell 1991, pp. 51–53]. While Sombart undoubtedly tried to examine the uniqueness of the 'American spirit' and American conditions, he never used the word 'exceptionalism' [Sombart 1976]⁷.

Therefore, the only evidence we have returns us to the first hypothesis: that the term 'exceptionalism' was coined no earlier than 1928–29 in the fierce polemics of the Workers (Communist) Party of America and the Communist International. Without the ambitious aim of covering these debates in all their complexity, this paper will focus on the concepts behind the term 'exceptionalism' in American and Soviet Marxist discourse, and will argue that there were several myths of 'exceptionalism' coexisting in the 1920s and 30s. However, it is still necessary to begin with at least some of the background of this dispute⁸.

The origins of the controversy in the Workers (Communist) Party of America in 1929 were twofold: (1) the drastic change in the policy of the Communist International (Comintern, CI); and (2) factional fights within the American communist party itself. In addition, to some extent, both processes were generated by Stalin's power struggle in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which loomed large over the whole Communist movement.

⁶ This is most commonly traced back to the sermon of John Winthrop (1630), through writings of Founding Fathers and Alexis de Tocqueville, and includes nationalistic ideas of the 19th century, discussions over the Frontier, the lack of socialist party in the USA, and ends with the speeches of Ronald Reagan, George Bush or Barack Obama. This interpretation itself proceeds from the modern myths of national exceptionalism. As far as the means of representation are concerned, it is remarkable that since approximately 2010, the history of American exceptionalism is often depicted in the style of 'infographics', which aims at fixation of collective understanding. See, for example: [Friedman 2012].

⁷ Meanwhile, he used the word, which translators in English rendered as 'uniqueness', in the context that he did not believe the American spirit was unique [Sombart 1976, p. 10].

⁸ There is a considerable amount of literature on the controversy over American Marxism in 1920–1930s. Some of the books included the special chapter/section on American exceptionalism, like Theodore Draper's classic study (1960) [Draper 2009] or Robert J. Alexander's [1981]. The other useful works are: Bryan D. Palmer's [Palmer 2007] or Harvey Klehr's [Klehr 2010]. Very recently, a substantial volume containing the writings of the dissident Marxists (including some archival documents) has been published [The 'American' 2015].

Turning to the first reason, until 1927–1928, the Comintern adhered to the theory that world capitalism, though being in crisis, had entered the period of stabilisation in 1924. American capitalism was considered to be the strongest among the other countries. This stance was set forth in a special resolution on ‘the American question’ (at the Fifth Plenary Session of the Enlarged Executive Committee of the CI (ECCI) in 1925 [Kommunisticheskiy 1933, pp. 511–518]). Besides acknowledging the particular strength of American capitalism, this document sanctioned the creation of the mass ‘Labor party’ in the USA, which could unite reformist, socialist and communist forces. Regarding exceptionalism, some researchers tend to interpret this resolution as the first manifestation of a belief in the exceptionalism of American capitalism, and to attribute the authorship of this concept to Nikolai Bukharin [Draper 2009, p. 272]. However, the term ‘exceptionalism’ as well as its derivatives, was never used in that document.

The outlook of the Comintern underwent a drastic change in 1928 however, resulting from the defeat of Trotsky-Zinoviev-Kamenev’s ‘left-opposition’ in 1927, and Stalin’s attack on Bukharin’s ‘right-opposition’ in 1928 [Palmer 2007, p. 307]. Announcing its new line, the Sixth World Congress of the CI (1928) declared that the ‘third period’ of capitalism had already started and that it would entail economic crisis in capitalist countries and radicalization of the working class movement [Kommunisticheskiy 1933, pp. 768–769]⁹. Practically this meant that the Communist parties had to abandon collaboration with any moderate left groups and Labour/Socialist parties. In the case of the Workers (Communist) Party of America, it entailed the downfall of the plans to create a mass Labour party in cooperation with non-communist left groups. In turn, these circumstances provoked a new round of factional clashes inside the Workers (Communist) Party of America.

These factional fights, being the second reason for the controversy over ‘exceptionalism’, had been shaking the American Communist and Socialist movement since the early 1920s. By 1925, the main rivals were the so-called ‘Majority’ and ‘Minority’ groups. The former, headed by Jay Lovestone, Bertram Wolfe, Benjamin Gitlow, and John Pepper, the ‘intellectual’ group¹⁰, had held key positions in the party since 1925. They eagerly followed the CI’s line on building the mass Labour party in America. Their theoretical works on the routes of American capitalism later would be labelled by both their opponents and historians as the ‘Lovestoneite theory of exceptionalism’¹¹. The latter, the ‘minority group’, led by William Foster and Alexander Bittleman, was closer to the proletarian masses; its main policy was to absorb trade unions into the structure of the Communist party [The American 2015, pp. 76–77]¹².

After the new line of the CI was announced at the Sixth World Congress (1928), Lovestone and the leaders of the majority preferred to adhere doggedly to the Comintern’s

⁹ To be more precise, this turn happened a bit earlier, at the Ninth Plenary session of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in February 1928. Besides that, Stalin’s address at the Plenum of Soviet Communist Party in November 1928 was also significant, as it blamed the Right Danger, and Bukharin as its architect [Palmer 2007, p. 354]. The theory of the ‘third period’ was fully elaborated at the next, Tenth Plenary Session of ECCI, in July 1929.

¹⁰ As Paul Le Blanc and Tim Davenport put it, New York group was “more scholastic in their approach to Party doctrine” [The American 2015, pp. 71–75].

¹¹ These works were published in the Party’s mouthpiece *Workers Monthly*, (‘theoretical magazine’ *The Communist* since 1927). After the split, Lovestone’s group found their own newspaper, *Revolutionary Age* (since 1932, *Workers Age*).

¹² For the pre-history of the split and biographies of the party leaders, see: [The American 2015, pp. 69–80].

former policy, which considered American capitalism to be particularly strong and American workers to have only moderate views. Three months after the Congress, Lovestone affirmed in *The Communist* that “clashes between socialist reformism and communism” happened in all capitalist countries “with the exception¹³ of the United States where we have peculiar specific conditions in which the labor movement as a whole is very weak...” [Lovestone 1928a, p. 660]. Such a deviation from the new CI line, combined with Lovestone’s support of Bukharin, recently disapproved by Stalin, made his group especially vulnerable in the American Communist party. In early 1929, the CI recommended that the Communist Party USA (CPUSA)¹⁴ take measures against the new ‘opposition’. This ‘suggestion’ was not approved at the Sixth National Convention of CPUSA, and both contesting groups arrived in Moscow to appeal to the ECCI and — privately — to Stalin. However, this visit did not help the ‘majority group’, because the Comintern accused it of the “so-called theory of exceptionalism” even more harshly than before [Address 2015, p. 118]¹⁵ and insisted on its expulsion from the party. After some resistance, the CPUSA yielded, and in June 1929 Lovestone and his comrades were finally expelled [Statement 2015]. The whole case was widely discussed at the Tenth Plenary Session of ECCI in July 1929 [The Tenth 1929]. Lovestone appealed, but in vain [Kommunisticheskiy 1933, p. 913]. After that point, the ‘majority group’ constituted its own party, the ‘Communist Party of the USA (Majority Group)’, and that marked the final split in the American Communist movement¹⁶.

What concept (or concepts) did the term ‘exceptionalism’ imply in this controversy? What myth or myths were constructed? Finally, what trace did these myths leave in collective memories?

Even a superficial look makes it clear that the ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ factions must have had different points of view in the controversy over ‘exceptionalism’. Therefore, we will examine them separately, starting with *the Opposition Majority group*, pointing out the concepts they had *before* (1) and *after the split of 1929* (2), and following with the views of *the Comintern and the minority group* (3).

(1) *Majority group before the split of 1929*. The secondary literature sometimes attributes the authorship of the both term and theory of ‘American exceptionalism’ to the ‘majority group’ or Lovestone personally [Lipset 1991, pp. 1–3]. Nevertheless, as far as we know, before the controversy broke out in spring 1929, neither he nor his fellow party members used this *term*. Regarding a *theory* of exceptionalism, it is true that from 1925 to 1929 Lovestone, Wolfe, Pepper and the others often compared American and European capitalism and class struggle and stressed the differences between them. However, the sources scarcely reveal any plausible evidence that the ‘majority group’ considered America or its imperialism to be an exception from the rest of the world.

¹³ It is possible that the word exceptionalism was transformed out of this statement.

¹⁴ The Workers (Communist) Party of America changed its name to the Communist Party USA at the Sixth national convention in March 1929.

¹⁵ This phrase is probably the first mention of the word ‘exceptionalism’.

¹⁶ In the course of 1930s they changed their title three more times. See: [The American 2015, p. 69]. For detailed story of the split and Lovestone group, based on archival sources, see [The American 2015, p. 80–100; Klehr 2010, pp. 39–54]. By the end of 1930s most leaders of the Right Opposition group mostly abandoned Marxism, and were even involved in anti-communist activity. For example, Lovestone worked for AFL and for CIA [The American 2015, pp. 39–40].

First, in the writings of the ‘majority’ leaders, any description of ‘unprecedented’ prosperity in America and the “backwardness” of its working class always ended with predictions of forthcoming (if even years later) crisis¹⁷. Thus, according to them, America would have to *share the common destiny of all capitalistic countries*. Secondly, their writings represent efforts to *incorporate the American situation into the broad historical context*. On the one hand, existing American imperialism was likened to Britain’s in the late 19th century, and it was expected to follow the British evolutionary path: reaching its peak and then moving downwards [Lovestone 1926, p.205]. On the other hand, some attempts were made to compare the revolutionary tradition in the American past to Russian (Decembrist uprising) or French revolutionary roots. Most explicable it was made by Wolfe, who claimed that the American Revolution, even though being bourgeois, had launched American struggle for rights and against dictatorship, and therefore its heritage belonged to workers [Wolfe 1926, p.392]¹⁸. Thirdly, Lovestone and the others were constantly themselves fighting *against* the theories of exceptionalism, proposed by both “capitalists” and “social reformists”¹⁹. All of this suggests that the significant point of the ‘majority group’ leaders during that difficult (for communistic propaganda) era of Prosperity, was to convince a “backward” and unbelieving working class that America would follow the same route as the imperialistic world. The myth that the ‘majority group’ aimed to introduce was that America belongs to the Marxist plan of history *demonstrating its ‘normalcy’ rather than exceptionalism*.

The ‘left-turn’ of the Communist International in 1928 affected this concept of ‘not exceptional America’. To be more precise, the concept had not changed but its focus shifted slightly. Previously the ‘majority group’ *acknowledged* the current differences between the American and European situations, but *emphasized* a common route to follow in the future. However, after 1928, the group *acknowledged* the common aims, but *stressed* contemporary differences, in order to convince the Comintern to keep the former policy in the USA. Such unambiguous conclusions like John Pepper’s “... conditions in America are basically different from those in Europe” [Pepper 1928, p.223] did manifest the belief in the *current exceptionalism* of American capitalism. Yet, until the conflict broke out openly in March 1929, the ‘majority group’ apparently desired to prove its fidelity to the CI and commitment to its decisions.

(2) *Majority group (Opposition) after the split of 1929*²⁰. After the forced separation in 1929 (and until the end of the 1930s) [The American 2015, pp. 3–4], the ‘majority group’ continued to denounce the possibility that American imperialism or the working class might be an exception to the world development. For example, the ‘majority group’ members understood the split in the CPUSA as a manifestation of the general crisis that had hit the world Communist movement (and its best organization, the Comintern) [An Appeal 1929, p.2]. In contrast to the Comintern’s point that the crisis was caused by ‘right errors’, the ‘majority group’ pointed to ‘new leadership’ as the worst problem of the communist movement.

¹⁷ See, for example: [Wolfe 1927, p.286; Lovestone 1926, p.205].

¹⁸ Attempts to reinterpret American history are fully described by Draper [Draper 2009, pp. 273–4].

¹⁹ The capitalist theories cited and opposed, see [Lovestone 1928b, pp. 745–55], the socialist ones, see [Wolfe 1927, pp. 280–81].

²⁰ The name that the group adopted after the split was the Communist Party of the USA (Majority Group). Later it changed its name to the Communist Party of the USA (Opposition).

As far as the accusations of 'exceptionalism' are concerned, the 'majority group' had not even tried to vindicate itself from a "fraudulent unfounded accusation of 'exceptionalism'" [Declaration 1929, p. 5]. They executed another manoeuvre: they *redefined the term*. 'Exceptionalism' was interpreted as an application of Lenin's theory of the 'uneven development' of world capitalism [Declaration 1929, p. 5]. As Bertram Wolfe elaborated, this theory meant that although the communist movement all over the world had a common goal, each country had its peculiarities and therefore the methods of achieving this goal could differ. To stress the universal character of exceptionalist theory, he proclaimed, "We are more than 'American exceptionalists'. We are 'exceptionalists' for every country of the world!" [Wolfe 2015a, p. 19]. Moreover, Lenin was unequivocally labelled as "exceptionalist" [Wolfe 2015a, p. 20] and Marx, an arch-exceptionalist [Wolfe 2015b, p. 554]. It is not easy to say whether this affirmation of the theory of 'exceptionalism' was caused by the wish to purify Communist doctrine or merely to fight back against the enemies in the CPUSA²¹. Anyway, what is important here is that in their discourse, 'Communist opposition' transformed 'exceptionalism' from the myth of heretic 'right error' into the positive and orthodox communist myth of international 'exceptionalism' of every country, which represented the righteous theory of Marx and Lenin. Needless to say, such an explanation of exceptionalism was heavily criticized by the official CPUSA and the Comintern²². These fights over the 'exegesis' of Lenin's 'sacred' texts went onward in Marxist discourse.

Along with developing a new understanding of 'right' exceptionalism, the members of the 'majority group' condemned the Comintern for the error of 'wrong' 'Russian exceptionalism'. 'Wrong exceptionalism' meant that under the influence of 'new leadership' the Comintern was "mechanically transporting Russian conditions and tactics in America" [Wolfe 2015a, p. 31]. Nonetheless, despite this criticism, the 'Majority group' acknowledged the Soviet leadership of the movement, the importance of the Comintern and admired the USSR as "the bulwark, the fortress", "the only fatherland the workers of the world have" [Lovestone 1929, p. 8].

To conclude, the 'Communist opposition' gave a new meaning to the word 'exceptionalism': a belief in the uneven, peculiar development of each country within the common laws of history, stated by Marx and Lenin. In this sense, America was as exceptional as any other country. However, there was another, clear type of exceptionalist myth, which this group shared. It was an orthodox belief in the exceptionalism of the working class, which was the only hope to accomplish the work of "building up a new world" [Lovestone 1929, p. 8].

(3) *Comintern*. As noted above, it is highly probable that the Comintern and the loyal Communist parties were the ones who invented the term 'American exceptionalism' as an appellation for heresy²³. In 1929 and onwards they had been using these words extensively and provided a number of definitions. For example, the Plenum of the ECCI in May 1929 announced that the concept of 'American exceptionalism' was "as follows: there is a crisis of capitalism but not of American capitalism, there is a swing of the masses leftwards

²¹ Most historians tend to see the leaders as sincere supporters of pure Leninism. The Lovestoneites themselves later confessed that they were naïve enough in 1929 to believe they could correct the 'wrong turn' in Comintern. See [The American 2015, pp. 42–3; Klehr 2010, pp. 46–50].

²² For example, see [Statement 2015b, p. 167].

²³ The mass media sometimes attribute the authorship to Stalin himself, who allegedly used it in private talks with Lovestone. So far, there is no confirmation of that. At least in his speeches before the ECCI of the Comintern in May 1929, Stalin never used it.

but not in America, there is the necessity of accentuating the struggle against reformism but not in the United States, there is a necessity for struggling against the Right danger but not in the American Communist Party” [Address 1929, p. 118]. Being repeated from article to article, such accusations created a dominant myth, which was an instrument for the power struggle within the CPUSA. However, a closer examination of the sources would reveal the fact that the actual concepts of that myth concerned *any exceptionalism*, rather than a particularly American one. To demonstrate this, the major concepts should be outlined.

The accusatory texts and speeches usually pointed out three main ‘sins’ of the Lovestone’s group. The first of them was *a sympathy with capitalism* and “exaggerating” the strength of American capitalism [Address 2015, p. 118]. However, in 1929–1930, that accusation was just one in a row of other important issues such as the next ‘sin’ of *factionalism* or, in terms of exceptionalism, prioritising the interests of one exceptional faction over the whole American Communist party. Not surprisingly, this statement was particularly emphasized by Stalin [Stalin 2015, pp. 106–10; Desyatiy 1929, p. 284]. Stalin had been eliminating factions in his own party, and the ‘Right danger’ campaign (which followed anti-Trotskyist Left-danger campaign) reflected this policy on the international scale. Lastly, the worst sin of the ‘majority group’ was the *deviation* from the Comintern line. This deviation constituted the main reason for the expulsion of Lovestone and Pepper from the CPUSA [Statement 2015a, pp. 154–6]. Later the fact of ‘deviation’ allowed their opponents to claim that the ‘Majority’ group was actually fighting against the Comintern itself. Such an interpretation meant that another kind of exceptionalism was denounced: claiming the right not to follow the Comintern line, in other words, announcing the *exceptionalism of one Communist party from the Comintern unity*.

It is important to stress that the Comintern did not consider ‘exceptionalism’ to be exclusively American fault. At the 10th Plenary Session of the ECCI (1929) the communist parties of the other countries were also made to confess that they had similarly faced the heresy of the “right danger” or “exceptionalism” in their own parties. To illustrate that, it would be enough to relate the ludicrous case of the Swedish Communist party. Unlike the other participants of the Plenary Session, the Swedish representatives had not complained of exceptionalist trends in their party. Therefore, they were immediately impeached for claiming ... their own Swedish exceptionalism of being free from ‘exceptionalism’! [Desyatiy 1929, p. 429].

Overall, we suppose that fighting against *American* imperialism was not the primary concept instilled by the Comintern in the discourse of ‘American exceptionalism’. Much more important was to transfer a negative image of the pluralism of opinions inside *any* Communist party and, moreover, to demonstrate the erroneous nature of any deviation from the Comintern line. Moreover, the myth of exceptionalism was not ascribed to the American party; it was considered to be the common fallacy, a synonym with Right danger, threatening the whole communist movement of the whole world.

The myths of ‘exceptionalism’ within Marxist discourse gradually almost disappeared from the Comintern and Soviet discourse²⁴ (as apparently the myth was important only

²⁴ For example, at the following 11th plenum of the ECCI and then the Seventh Congress, there were scarce mentions of exceptionalism (not only American, but also Swiss and Dutch [The Communist International 1935, pp. 156–7, 163–5]).

within the contemporary situation of the 'left-turn') and had become more 'American' in the writings of CPUSA members. Regarding the latter, further polemics were provoked by the mere existence of the Opposition of Lovestone, Wolfe and the others. Moreover, the myth of exceptionalism, as an important turning point in the party's history, became a part of their collective memory with the help of CPUSA historians²⁵. Nevertheless, interest in the myth of exceptionalism was fading on the whole with the exception of two splashes of attention. The first was caused by the CPUSA Jubilee in 1934, when the history of the party was re-evaluated [Bedacht 1934, pp. 871–872]. The second, a larger one, occurred in the late 1940s, when the story of the 'majority group' exceptionalist 'uprising' seemed to repeat itself. This time the 'opportunistic' approach was voiced by the leader of the CPUSA, Earl Browder (an implacable opponent of Lovestone in 1930), who intended to rebrand the CPUSA as the Communist Political Association, but was decisively repulsed by the party members and was expelled. During that controversy his policy was labelled "Browderism" as well as time-honoured 'exceptionalism'. A remarkable example of this reconstruction of the old myth is the article by William Foster. He traced the history of the 'right-wing' American exceptionalism, in which he included not only the 'apostles of exceptionalism' Jay Lovestone and Earl Browder, but even 'left-wing' John Cannon as well [Foster 1949]. He refined the old myth, and confined the meaning of the concept of exceptionalist heresy to supporting capitalism and struggling against the good orthodox Marxism.

The Marxist range of understandings of the term 'exceptionalism' prevailed in the USA until the 1960s–1970s. It is noteworthy though that in the course of the twentieth century there were several influential *non-Marxist* myths implying the exceptional nature of the United States. To name a few: Frederick J. Turner's 'Frontier' thesis, James T. Adams' 'American dream', Henry Luce's 'American century', Ronald Reagan's 'shining city on a hill', the historiographical and political theory of consensus in American history (developed by Daniel Boorstin, Richard Hofstadter, Louis Hartz) and many others. However, none of them employed the term 'exceptionalism' to describe American uniqueness. Even when this term was used, it always referred only to the Marxist controversies²⁶. It means that the term was still detached from other exceptionalist narratives.

Perhaps it was Max Lerner, who used the term 'American exceptionalism' outside of the Marxist framework for the first time in his voluminous work *America as a civilization* (1957) [Lerner 1961]. He interpreted American exceptionalism as a combination of unique geographical and natural features. That point differed considerably from the explanation given by the CPUSA. A few years later, economist Martin Bronfenbrenner, examined 'American exceptionalism' [Bronfenbrenner 1961]. What he produced was a curious mixture of Marxist myths combined with the views of 'consensus' historians. Bronfenbrenner listed a number of peculiar American features, which were believed to have prevented America from entering conflicts and revolutions. However, the article was pessimistic as it warned its readers of the end of 'American exceptionalism'. Similar points of view were expressed again fifteen years later in the more famous article by Daniel Bell, *The End of American Exceptionalism* (1975) [Bell 1980], where 'American exceptionalism' was treated as a combination of exceptional features, including democracy, natural conditions

²⁵ The best example is the seminal book written by the main opponent of Lovestone and veteran of the exceptionalist controversy, William Z. Foster. It contains a chapter concerning the fights against the theory of exceptionalism [Foster 1952, pp. 271–275].

²⁶ For example, Hartz uses the word exceptionalism in the Marxist context [Hartz 1993, pp. 260–261].

and many others. This publication aroused heated discussions, therefore it has marked the creation of a new concept of 'American exceptionalism', detached from Marxist discourse [Adamova 2010, p. 178]. Perhaps, this point is the watershed where the term 'American exceptionalism' entered new rounds of interpretations and new myths were added to the existing ones.

To conclude, observing the modern American political discourse that is overwhelmed with the term 'American exceptionalism' and looking back at the obscure origins of the term, one may wonder how 'American exceptionalism' managed to run so far. Being born in a marginal community as a sarcastic curse implying a theoretical fallacy if not treason, now it has reached the peak of political and cultural influence, being praised and serving as a magic spell whose utterance is obligatory for any successful American politician. However, we should not be deluded by this seemingly 'from rags to riches' story of 'American exceptionalism'. Like any other signifier within a myth, the term 'exceptionalism' has comprised different, even controversial concepts, which constitute its mythological essence.

The variety of interpretations and the complexity of the mythological structure was demonstrated by the outline of the early history of these myths. Even within the Communist discourse this term was ambiguous, as it stood for different concepts, and consequently, constituted different myths. One, shared generally, concerned the exceptional nature of the working class and the world Communist movement, when compared to any other movement or class. The other 'orthodox' myth constructed the 'negative' image of 'American exceptionalism', which accumulated the worst 'right' errors: sympathies with capitalism, factionalism and deviation from the only correct line (norm!), namely that of the Comintern. Finally, the 'majority' opposition, the 'protestants' of Communism, built their myth of 'exceptionalism' on the wish to purify corrupted Leninism. However, they generally tried to prove the 'normalcy' of America, i.e. the ability of her working class to start the socialist revolution in the future. Overall, all Marxist myths of exceptionalism were deeply ingrained in the contemporary Communist discourse: none of those myths were extolling the greatness of America; they were about mass party, Communist doctrine, the struggle for power, and fulfilling Marx's predictions of the Age of Prosperity in America.

How did it happen that these international concepts behind the words 'American exceptionalism' were replaced by their opposite extreme — the national ideas of American uniqueness? It seems that the answer lies in the field of collective memory. By the end of the 1940s, the Marxists generally laid aside the myths of 'American exceptionalism', and the memory of the essence of the initial debates was gradually fading away. Meanwhile, from the 1950s to the 1970s the USA had to face new economic and political challenges that gave rise to new exceptionalist theories and strengthened the national discourse. Perhaps it was then, when the old Marxist shell of 'exceptionalism' was filled with new 'mixed' contents by relatively left-minded social scientists. And there the new 'exceptionalism' was reincarnated.

Thus, the analysis of exceptionalist myths re-affirm another conclusion: these myths have not been developing in any linear way, following any progressive (or regressive) lines. Their transformations depend heavily on shifts in collective identity and memory during the changes that the society was passing through. Therefore, instead of imagining a linear periodization of exceptionalist thinking, a researcher has to admit that he or she is surrounded by a densely interwoven web of interpretations.

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