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American Exceptionalism: Its Beginnings, Its Decline, and the Need For Its Revival

Stephen Goniprow

Long before the colonists revolted against Great Britain and successfully gained independence, before the framers of the United States Constitution outlined their American vision, early American settler John Winthrop declared that America could be entirely different from any other nation in the world. While writing down his aspirations for America on board the *Arbella* in 1630, Winthrop revealed his dream for the nation. He said, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us” (Winthrop). Frustrated by the social conditions that disenfranchised countless peoples in Europe, Winthrop believed that America could offer people something new and exceptional, prompting other nations to examine their own values and norms. Winthrop wasn’t alone. In announcing to the world that the thirteen colonies would no longer answer to Great Britain, Thomas Jefferson opened the nation’s *Declaration of Independence* by explaining that in America, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Jefferson). For Winthrop and Jefferson, America not only had the capability, but also the responsibility, to provide each and every citizen with an equal opportunity to succeed. This fundamental idea, that American lands would be filled with boundless opportunity, is what has enticed millions of immigrants to leave their native lands and journey to America’s shores. Aside from Winthrop and Jefferson, countless other American visionaries have connected American exceptionalism to equal opportunity. But despite this strong link, an unprecedented rise in income inequality since the 1970’s has severely undermined the nation’s duty to provide each citizen with the opportunity to achieve upward mobility. For American exceptionalism to remain present in twenty-first century American culture, income inequality needs to be drastically reduced.

In Winthrop’s *A Model of Christian Charity*, he made it clear that implementing Christian principles into American culture was essential to American exceptionalism. While a large gap divided the haves from the have-nots in Europe, Winthrop advocated that Americans should support

and care for one another. He pleaded, “We must bear one another’s burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren” (Winthrop). Citing the Biblical command that man should “love his neighbor as himself,” Winthrop believed that a values-based society would result in strong and vibrant communities and, ultimately, lead Americans to collective prosperity. He continued, “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body” (Winthrop). As Winthrop suggested, for the nation to become a “city upon a hill,” Americans could not be solely concerned with their own self-interests, private estates, and annual salaries. For the country to be exceptional, each individual would have to place the nation’s collective interests above their own and selflessly participate within the community. In doing so, Americans would reap the overflowing rewards of a community life where each citizen was taken care of. Without Americans buying into the idea that each citizen shared common interests and responsibilities as active participants in American democracy, exceptionalism would be impossible to achieve.

Over one hundred years after Winthrop voiced his American vision, J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, released in 1782, confirmed that the young and growing nation was indeed exceptional. Commenting on the American character, Crevecoeur said, “It is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe” (Crevecoeur). Unlike European nations, where income inequality had plagued the health of cultures, Crevecoeur argued that the American character was defined by the similar socio-economic standing that each citizen shared. This claim, of course, was delivered through the narrative of a modest farmer. In addition to explaining that a working-class identity made America distinct and exceptional, Crevecoeur reported on the vast opportunities for every American, saying, “There is room for everybody in America; has he any particular talents, or industry? He exerts it in order to procure a livelihood, and it succeeds” (Crevecoeur). In a free-market society that produced winners and losers, Crevecoeur wasn’t arguing that everyone would experience upward mobility in America but that each citizen, at the bare minimum, had the opportunity to rise or fall.

For Crevecoeur, Americans were unique in the sense that they shared a collective spirit and purpose from the moment they stepped on the shores of the new world. Their decision to leave their native lands in the search for something greater illustrated their common quest for a new beginning and a

better life. Before their arrival to America, “two thirds of them had no country” (Crevecoeur). But once on American lands, a transformative process occurred as the “idle may be employed, the useless become useful, and the poor become rich.” (Crevecoeur). He even referred to the nation as the “great American asylum,” a place where anyone could experience a personal “resurrection.” In describing the immigrants who traveled to America, he observed, “Urged by a variety of motives, here they came. Every thing has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants...but now by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root and flourished!” (Crevecoeur). As Crevecoeur masterfully demonstrated in *Letters From an American Farmer*, eighteenth-century America was exceptional. It renewed the lives of ordinary people and provided them with hopes and dreams. Undeniably, Crevecoeur’s American vision rested on the fundamental belief that anyone, regardless of class, race, or religious beliefs, had the ability to experience rebirth in a nation filled with opportunities.

Although Winthrop and Crevecoeur were reporting on the American character multiple centuries ago, several prominent twentieth-century American political figures described American exceptionalism in similar fashion. In a 1942 address to the United Nations at the height of World War Two, President Franklin Roosevelt said, “Grant us a common faith that man shall know bread and peace—that he shall know justice and righteousness, freedom and security, an equal opportunity and an equal chance to do his best” (Roosevelt). For Roosevelt, equal opportunity was the driving force behind American exceptionalism. Building off of Roosevelt’s comments not two decades later in the 1959 “kitchen debate,” Vice President Richard Nixon told Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, “the United States, the world’s largest capitalist country, has from the standpoint of distribution of wealth come closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society” (Nixon). While Roosevelt argued that equal opportunity was the prerequisite to exceptionalism, Nixon added that every American’s ability to experience upward mobility in a “classless society” was also paramount to American greatness. Although Roosevelt and Nixon were describing what American exceptionalism meant for twentieth-century Americans, the latest discourse on exceptionalism suggests that politicians still hold in large part, unchanging views on what makes America the greatest nation in the world.

Not ten years ago, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry delivered a speech that expressed the importance of forming an American vision rooted in equal opportunity. After accepting the nomination for President at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, Kerry informed his Boston audience that in the United States, “We believe that what matters most is...the shared values that show the true face of America...family, faith, hard work, opportunity and responsibility for all, so that every child, every adult, every parent,

every worker in America has an equal shot at living up to their God-given potential. That is the American dream and the American value” (Kerry). By demonstrating the interdependence of equal opportunity and the American dream, Kerry had joined a long list of politicians who recognized social equality as an indispensable feature of American exceptionalism. Also, in his second inaugural address in 2013, President Barack Obama said,

For we, the people, understand that our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it. We believe that America’s prosperity must rest upon the broad shoulders of a rising middle class. We know that America thrives when every person can find independence and pride in their work; when the wages of honest labor liberate families from the brink of hardship (Obama).

As these twenty-first century American politicians suggest, creating an equal starting point for Americans in a capitalist society is directly tied to American exceptionalism. With this in mind, is twenty-first century America exceptional?

Despite the recent economic recession, the rise of credentialism, and the stagnant average household incomes of middle and lower class members since 1979, the firmly engrained concept of the American Dream continues to intoxicate Americans. Given the political, economic, and social forces that prevent working-class Americans from experiencing upward mobility, why do they still hold this optimistic outlook? *New York Times* writers Janny Scott and David Leonhardt say, “The idea of fixed class positions rubs many the wrong way. Class contradicts their assumptions about the American dream, equal opportunity and the reasons for their own successes and even failures” (Scott and Leonhardt). As Scott suggests, Americans typically deny that class barriers have emerged from the economic system of capitalism. For example, according to a 2010 poll conducted by the *New York Times*, seventy-five percent of Americans said that in the past thirty years, the opportunity to climb up the class hierarchy has increased or stayed the same (Scott and Leonhardt). With this in mind, national discussion on socio-economic inequality in political and social arenas is unpopular because the American people still buy into the idea of exceptionalism. However, when the fogged perspective of optimism is removed and replaced with a pragmatic perspective of America’s social class system, it becomes evident that disparities between the rich and poor have dramatically increased over the past thirty years.

According to psychologist Daniel Goleman, a decades-long trend of rising inequality has transpired in America. He says, “Since the 1970’s, the gap between the rich and everyone else has sky rocketed. Income inequality is at its highest level in a century” (Goleman). But how did pervasive income inequality become a prominent feature of American culture? In many ways, the federal

government holds a large responsibility in ensuring that Americans live in a society that fosters upward mobility. For example, the development of the middle class in 1950's America did not happen by accident, at least in Paul Krugman's mind. Krugman, a Nobel Peace Prize Winner and professor of Economics at Princeton University, says that the middle class was "created by what has been called the Great Compression of incomes that took place during World War II, and sustained for a generation by social norms that favored equality, strong labor unions and progressive taxation. Since the 1970's, all of those sustaining forces have lost their power" (Krugman). Today, those "sustaining forces" have been replaced with tax cuts for America's elites, the outsourcing of jobs, and severe poverty that has cost millions of Americans their homes. Furthermore, the average household incomes of working-class Americans have remained stagnant since the 1970's, while incomes have doubled for the top one percent (Krugman). The culmination of these forces and statistics has produced a distinct result: the middle class has shrunk in size. The economic transformation of the 1990's, which was spurred by modernization and new technologies, has led to even greater rates of monetary disparity between the haves and have-nots.

In the 1990's, an unprecedented rise in the population and wealth of the upper class began to occur. Laissez-faire government policy, new technologies, and globalization were the major contributors to the class's economic transformation (Frank 49). From 1995 to 2003, the number of million-dollar homes in the United States more than doubled; and for the first time, America's millionaire population surpassed Europe's millionaire population (Frank 2). But despite the economic boom, conditions for middle and lower class workers remained stagnant. According to the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality, the nation's top CEO's made thirty nine times more than the average worker in 1970. By 2000, the salaries of top CEO's skyrocketed to 1,039 times that of the average worker (Stanford Center). But why has America's recent economic growth primarily benefited America's elite? Sociologist Dalton Conley says, "As the technological sector expands, the majority of jobs are being created at very high skill levels with corresponding high salaries or at very low wages with little room for upward mobility" (Conley 568). In support of Conley's claim, when the Congressional Budget Office released their report on income inequality in 2011, it was discovered that disparities in wealth had reached Gilded Age levels (huffingtonpost.com). Commenting on the nation's worsening economic conditions, Krugman says, "Lately inequality has re-entered the national conversation. Occupy Wall Street gave the issue visibility, while the Congressional Budget Office supplied hard data on the widening income gap. And the myth of a classless society has been exposed: Among rich countries, America stands out as the place where economic and social status is most likely to be inherited" (Krugman). As Krugman highlights, diminishing opportunities for working-class Americans have put greater pressure on the federal government to turn things around.

In December 2013, President Obama expressed the dire importance of curbing income inequality and restoring America to the land of equal opportunity. In a speech dedicated entirely to the issue of income inequality, President Obama pointed out that Americans, “may not follow the constant back-and-forth in Washington...but they experience in a very personal way the relentless, decades-long trend that I want to spend some time talking about today. And that is a dangerous and growing inequality and lack of upward mobility that has jeopardized middle-class America’s basic bargain—that if you work hard, you have a chance to get ahead” (Obama). In his speech, President Obama reminded Americans that equal opportunity needs to be fully engrained into American culture, or else, the nation fails to be exceptional. Additionally, President Obama explained how income inequality leads to an erosion of equal opportunity and prevents upward mobility. He said,

The problem is that alongside increased inequality, we’ve seen diminished levels of upward mobility in recent years. A child born in the top 20 percent has about a 2-in-3 chance of staying at or near the top. A child born into the bottom 20 percent has a less than 1-in-20 shot at making it to the top. He’s ten times likelier to stay where he is. In fact, statistics show not only that our levels of income inequality rank near countries like Jamaica and Argentina, but that it is harder for a child born in America to improve her station in life than it is for children in most of our wealthy allies—countries like Canada or Germany or France. (Obama)

If America’s current economic difficulties are drawing comparisons to the poor economic systems of Jamaica and Argentina, and if nations like Canada and France are doing a better job of providing their citizens with the opportunity to get ahead, can America still claim to be exceptional?

Because of the unprecedented rates of income inequality that have become a prominent feature of twenty-first century America, the idea of American exceptionalism is being severely undermined. Even worse, the health of the nation is rapidly deteriorating and both rich and poor citizens will continue to be affected until the income gap between them shrinks. After all, President John F. Kennedy warned in his 1961 inaugural address that, “If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich” (Kennedy). In his 2011 album *Wrecking Ball*, American rock ‘n’ roll legend Bruce Springsteen exposed the detrimental effects that income inequality has had on American culture. Discussing the album in an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Springsteen said,

You cannot have a social contract with the enormous income disparity – you’re going to slice the country down the middle.

Without jobs, without helping folks with foreclosures, without regulating the banks, without some sort of tax reform . . . Mitt Romney paid 15 percent tax? Without addressing those issues in some way, I don't think the country is going to hold together. I understand the effects of globalization, I understand all that, but at the end of the day, you can't have a society and you can't have a civilization without a reasonable amount of economic fairness, full employment, purpose and civic responsibility. (Springsteen)

As Springsteen's comments illustrate, because Americans are being denied a fair shot at participating in the American experience and achieving upward mobility, the future of the nation currently hangs in the balance. America was designed to be a nation where any ordinary citizen could get ahead through hard work; and ironically, the United States has become eerily similar to the nations that the early American settlers detested. Winthrop issued a sharp warning against socio-economic inequality in *A Model of Christian Charity*, saying, "But if our hearts turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship and serve other gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them, it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither pass over this vast sea to possess it" (Winthrop). Although Winthrop's warning came centuries ago, the idea that income inequality could destroy American exceptionalism and demoralize the vitality of the nation still holds true today.

Across the nation, a growing number of citizens believe that exceptionalism is a myth. Because of the harsh realities of widespread income inequality, most twenty-first century Americans have not experienced the equal opportunities that were intended to define the nation. As a result, these Americans rightfully contend that the nation has failed to live up to its fundamental promise that through hard work, upward mobility can be achieved. In citing the adverse effects that rising inequality has had on American culture in a December 2013 speech, President Obama pointed out, "Rising inequality and declining mobility are also bad for our families and social cohesion—not just because we tend to trust our institutions less, but studies show we actually tend to trust each other less when there's greater inequality" (Obama). With the President's words in mind, it makes sense that a 2011 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that less than fifty percent of Americans believe that American culture is superior to others (Blow). Additionally, *New York Times* writer Charles M. Blow reported in 2011 that an NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey found that, "most Americans believed that we aren't simply going through tough times as a nation but are at the start of a long-term decline where the U.S. is no longer the leading country in the world" (Blow). These findings should not be overly surprising, especially when considering *Nation of Change* writer Robert Reich's recent comments

that, “most people are on a downward escalator...people are working harder than ever, but still getting nowhere” (Reich). Unless the federal government makes a sincere effort to drastically reduce income inequality moving forward, more and more Americans will continue to accept exceptionalism as a myth instead of doctrine.

While almost every policy-maker would agree that income inequality needs to be reduced in twenty-first century America, Congress’ inability to agree on just about anything has severely undermined efforts to fix the problem. But first, what types of policies and programs would work towards promoting equal opportunity? In December of 2013, the Editorial Board of the *New York Times* argued that, “A higher minimum wage would have an immediate effect on the buying power of millions of workers, stimulating growth and employment. Greater spending on high-quality preschool, a new emphasis on career and technical education and affordable higher education would all help to lower the barriers to economic mobility” (Editorial Board). In his speech on income inequality, President Obama advocated for many of the same policies that the Editorial Board outlined. While the President expressed the important role that education can play in restoring equal opportunity, the idea that education can foster social equality and promote exceptionalism is nothing new. Deeply embedded into the minds of many prominent American educational reformers is the redemptive belief that if operated properly, the education system has the power to transform society. For example, in 1848, Horace Mann argued that the greatest combater of social inequality is education. He said, “Education...beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (Mann 669). Sharing Mann’s sentiments on the relationship between education and society, in 1900, reformer John Dewey warned against an unequal educational system, saying, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (Dewey 19). In 1904, President of the National Federation of Teachers Margaret A. Haley said that the “fundamental object of the public school in a democracy” is to “preserve and develop the democratic ideal” (Haley 145). As these educational reformers suggest, the quality of education that children receive has a lasting impact on the quality of democracy in which they live in. As the widening gap between America’s haves and have-nots continues to cast an ominous cloud over a nation that allegedly provides its members with hopes and dreams, the public education system needs to be utilized as a tool capable of curbing income inequality.

Although rising inequality, a trend that started in the late 1970’s, has limited opportunity and mobility for working-class Americans, it is not

too late to reverse the decline in American exceptionalism. *New York Times* writer Charles M. Blow says,

We have to stop snuggling up to nostalgia, acknowledge that we have allowed a mighty country to be brought low and set a course to restitution. And that course is through hard and tough choices. You choose greatness; it doesn't choose you. And that means that we must invest in our future. We must invest in our crumbling infrastructure. We must invest in the industries of the future. We must invest in a generation of foundering and forgotten children. We must invest in education. Cut-and-grow is ruinous mythology. We must look out at the world with clear eyes and sober minds and do the difficult work as we've done time and time again. That's how a city shines upon a hill. (Blow)

As Blow explains, exceptionalism can survive the social problems of twenty-first century America, but only if policy-makers and the American people are willing to make the sacrifices and decisions needed to restore equal opportunity. Writer Michael Kammen says, "When we examine the meaning of Americanism, we discover that Americanism is to the American not a tradition or a territory... but a doctrine—what socialism is to a socialist" (Kammen 178). As Kammen suggests, Americanism is an idea. It is an idea that shapes Americans lives, dictates their steps, and refines their beliefs. Americans will never be able to prove that Americanism is tied to exceptionalism. However, Americans can decide whether or not they want to buy into the notion that to be in American is to be exceptional. Lou Masur says, "Exceptionalism is above all else the story we choose to tell about ourselves—not some organic, immutable structure. And in telling it, over and over, at times we even make it so...America is nothing if it is not a compelling story. New plot lines will emerge, but we've known the central character for a very long time" (Masur 2). With Masur's words in mind, Americans can revive exceptionalism; but only if they are willing to do so. In a nation where the gap between the haves and the have-nots is rapidly expanding, Americans will have to rally behind the idea of exceptionalism—for equal opportunity to be present in all communities from sea to shining sea. In doing so, perhaps Ronald Reagan's words in his 1986 State of the Union Speech will ring true one day. In that speech, he said, "In this land of dreams fulfilled where greater dreams may be imagined, nothing is impossible, no victory is beyond our reach, no glory will ever be too great. So now, it's up to us, all of us, to prepare America for that day when our work will pale before the greatness of America's champions in the 21st century" (Reagan). For Americans to collectively prosper in the 21st century, they must buy into the idea of American exceptionalism, an idea that has sustained and driven the nation since its inception.

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