

American Exceptionalism, and Concept of Exceptionalism for all Nations



Hosted By

Nick T. and Dr Neville Buch

Brisbane Square Library

10 September 2022

The Philosophy Café Meet Up, Brisbane Queensland

INTRODUCTION

This is an introductory article for discussion and to outline the following:

1. Introduction 1. Ian Tyrrell and the Tyrrell Thesis
2. Introduction 2. Neville Buch and the Buch Thesis
3. Main Body for Discussion. Exceptionalism and Conceit (The Essay)
4. Conclusion 1. The Historiography of Giambattista Vico
5. Conclusion 2. The Philosophy of Hannah Arendt
6. (Final) Conclusion 3. The Contemporary Context of 'Black Sails'

Introduction 1. Ian Tyrrell and the Tyrrell Thesis

Ian Tyrrell was the first to set me on the course for my postgraduate work in the dynamic between the cultures of United States and Australia.

He is an Australian historian whose main research areas include American history, environmental history, and historiography.

He is known for his work on American exceptionalism and transnational history. Tyrrell was Scientia Professor of History at the University of New South Wales until his retirement in July 2012.

What is interesting here is that Tyrrell was born in Brisbane. Tyrrell completed a BA Honours Degree at the University of Queensland and a PhD at Duke University, where he was a Fulbright Scholar and James B. Duke Fellow. The connection with Duke University signals the fact that several other UQ historians and educators have been connected with Duke University.

American Exceptionalism: A New History of an Old Idea is Tyrrell's most recent book and gives best expression to the Tyrrell Thesis. The thesis is complex in the many details but as a short summary, it goes like this:

1. Exceptionalism is foundational in the American national mythology;
2. American history is distinct from the concept of myth; however, national mythologies are sourced from the construction of national histories;
3. The American myth is a national story with these parts:
 - a. The Puritan vision of the New World as the new kingdom of God on earth, and being the source of the American choiceness;
 - b. The Antebellum era created a cultural nationalism and the origins of the American exceptionalist doctrine;
 - c. Three figures were important in the development of the doctrine:
 - i. [Daniel Webster](#);
 - ii. [Edward Everett](#);
 - iii. [Lyman Beecher](#);
 - d. Several other themes played a role in the exceptionalist doctrine of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century:
 - i. Christian republicanism;
 - ii. Gender roles in the self-made man and woman;
 - iii. Race roles, concepts of Black-'Indian' nations, and the doctrine of Anglo-Saxonism;
 - iv. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny;
 - v. The origins of the American education system;
 - vi. The role of the American Abolitionist movement into the climax of the American Civil War;
 - vii. The role and doctrine of the American Frontier;
 - viii. The role of the early American Labor movement;
 - ix. The role and doctrine of American Imperialism in the very late nineteenth century and early twentieth century;
 - x. The twentieth century concept of Americanism;

- xi. The twentieth century concept of American socialism;
 - xii. The role of liberal exceptionalism in the concept of the New Deal State;
 - xiii. The new, neo-conservative, type of exceptionalism ('the chosen nation' today) from Reagan to Trump.
- e. Conclusion: "Exceptionalism cannot be proven either by logical reasoning or by empirical evidence, and its existence as a 'thing' can be understood only as a cumulative set of beliefs." In other words, it is history as common construction. (see, Conclusion 1).

Introduction 2. Neville Buch and the Buch Thesis

I built a thesis from these ideas of Tyrrell and from the thinking of a long list of other historians including:

In United States:

- Sydney E. Ahlstrom
- Richard Carwardine
- Robert T. Handy
- Winthrop S. Hudson
- William G. McLoughlin
- George M. Marsden
- Martin E. Marty
- Henry F. May
- Sidney E. Mead
- Robert M. Miller
- Timothy L. Smith
- William L. Sperry
- William Warren. Sweet
- Ferenc Morton Szasz

In Queensland:

- Geoffrey Bolton (during his time in Queensland)
- Ian Gillman
- David Parker
- Humphrey McQueen (during his time in Queensland)

In the rest of Australia:

- Ian Breward
- Manning Clark
- Norman Harper (American in Australia)
- Michael Hogan
- Dennis Phillips
- Annette and E. Daniel Potts (Americans in Australia)
- John Rickard

The thesis “American Influence on Protestantism in Queensland since 1945” was completed in 1994 and the doctorate was awarded in 1995. The receptive history the following decade was poor. I became a higher education policy researcher, after a year at Griffith University, at the University of Melbourne. During that time, I studied philosophy and came to appreciate deeper levels of critiquing American exceptionalist thinking from other historical frameworks; coming from the European Enlightenment and Romanticism, and also from twentieth century British Analytical philosophy, and also (German) Continental philosophy.

The Buch thesis takes one theme of American exceptionalism, the American Revivalist Tradition (ART). As part of the exceptionalist thinking and ART, there is this view that the United States had a unique mission in the Gospel of Jesus Christ internationally. It was a compact that God made with the American people – that the nation would prosper according to the unique evangelical mission. The American Revivalist Tradition (ART) was the pattern of church and parachurch life that developed according to the unique evangelical mission. Between circa 1945 and 1985 Australian churches/parachurches surrendered themselves to ART in large numbers. More details can be found [here](#).

Main Body for Discussion. Exceptionalism and Conceit (The Essay)

The essay itself should need no expanding as it has been [available](#) since 26 May 2022. I will only summaries the main points:

1. The concern of the essay is the relationship between civility, savagery, and the Exceptionalist doctrine;
2. As shorthand definitions, Exceptionalism is the condition of being different from the norm. For nations, it is the belief that characteristics are not global, but unique to what persons want to believe is a very large ‘national community’; the norm. For persons, it is a legitimation of identity;

3. [Black Sails](#) is an American historical adventure television series set on New Providence Island and written to be a prequel to Robert Louis Stevenson's 1883 novel *Treasure Island*. In the Rousseauan thinking of this era and place, savagery – violence and discord – was virtuous, ennobling, and it was civilisation which was false;
4. Colonialism is the modernist enemy. Piracy, however, was not virtuous in this way, but only in the way that ennobles violence and needless death of an enemy; a person, a human being. There is a twisted thinking that makes civility false when thinking, correctly, that those who speak hypocritically of 'civilisation' are being false;
5. The alternatives are the compassionate Christian faith and the classical learning of the humanists;
6. From Joseph Rouse's descriptions¹ as 'Articulating the World,' the idea of 'human nature' has been a tug of war in the semantics of naturalism. From my view, it is not merely between Rousseau and Hobbes, but between Hobbes and Locke; for it is Locke who opens up the possibility of having both liberated human nature and civility.
7. Conclusion: What is need is a humanism against privateers (pirates in its original conception), and a humanism for public and educated dialogue. It is not a war I propose but peace in the educative process.

Conclusion 1. The Historiography of Giambattista Vico

The dedicated image for the essay and this talk are

- Giambattista Vico;
- Hannah Arendt; and the
- Black Sails

Giambattista Vico, a historiographer during the Italian Enlightenment, criticised the expansion and development of modern rationalism, finding Cartesian analysis and other types of reductionism impractical to human life, and he was an apologist for classical antiquity and the Renaissance humanities. Vico explains the conclusion of the Tyrrell Thesis. He was the key early thinker of constructivist epistemology, and in that way, he was the first expositor of the fundamentals of social science and of semiotics. Vico used Latin aphorism *Verum esse ipsum factum* ("truth is itself something made"). Vico greatly influence those historiographers

¹ Rouse, Joseph (2015). *Articulating the World: Conceptual Understanding and the Scientific Image*, The University of Chicago Press.

whose ideas have shaped my work: Isaiah Berlin, a philosopher and historian of ideas, and Hayden White, a metahistorian.

Conclusion 2. The Philosophy of Hannah Arendt

Philosopher Hannah Arendt also follows in the Vico tradition, and her works connects the European and American paradigms as a voluminous set of cultural and political critiques. Three of her volumes captured the importance of her outlook. *The Human Condition* (1958) untangles and balances out life activities: labor, work, and action:

- Labour – human activity directed at meeting biological (and perhaps other) necessities for self-preservation and the reproduction of the species;
- Work – leaves behind a durable object, such as a tool, rather than an object for consumption, with a clearly defined beginning and end. Arendt here is concerned that, through modern utilitarian thinking, there is a disappearance of a worth that is intrinsic, as opposed to “value”, which is relative to human demand or need;
- Action – (which includes both “speech” and “action”) is the means by which humans disclose themselves to others.

According to Arendt, the world described by science cannot be known, or not with certainty, but the self, with Descartes and other moderns thought, could be known. Though his *cogito ergo sum* was anticipated by Augustine, his *dubito ergo sum* is original and a hallmark of modernity: beginning from doubt. The life of labour became the central concern because the scientific developments took place in a Christian society that valued life. After secularization, the vestigial preoccupation with a labouring life as the central value dominates our activities. It has made us into a society of laborers.

Between Past and Future (1961) is a survey of western philosophy which drills down into many concepts which her previous work raised, and other concepts: Tradition, Modernity, The Concept of History, Authority, Freedom, Education, Culture, “Truth and Politics”, “The Conquest of Space”, and the “Stature of Man”. Arendt concludes with a view that the end of Platonic and Aristotelean tradition of philosophy came with Marx, according to whom the philosopher had to turn away from philosophy in order to be involved in society and human affairs, thus, to change the world. In Marx’s outlook, man creates himself, that his humanity is the result of his own activity, and that what distinguishes man from animal is not reason but labour.

The Life of the Mind (1977-1978) was material from the 1973–1974 Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen (the first woman to do so). The work focuses on her earlier distinction between *vita activa* (active life) and the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life), a process from the former to the latter. The work is a deep consideration in modernity of ‘Thinking’, ‘Willing’ and ‘Judgement’.

So, what has all of these works of Hannah Arendt to do with American Exceptionalism, I hear you ask? Arendt’s work demolishes the historiography of American Exceptionalism. Her work was embraced as a significant contribution in American (non-unique) intellectual life. However, she never really addressed culture as national culture and her political categorising (in terms like ‘republicanism’ and ‘American Revolution’) was never conventional, in American or even English semantics. Yet her world philosophy was seen as an important critique to the quintessential American materialism and commercialisation. Others made the connections between Arendt’s approach² and the American mythology, and, more often than not, the commentaries relate Arendt’s insight on the role of the American revolution as a world event; and removes the conventional exceptionalist semantics from within the American culture. Jeremy Arnold argues:

Contemporary American discourse is saturated with worries about, or hopes for, America's decline. However, fears of America's decline have been a persistent theme of American writing since the second generation of New England Puritans, worries contained in the genre of the Americanized jeremiad. I will argue that Arendt's *On Revolution* should be read as a jeremiad that both repeats and problematizes the spiritual/material opposition of the classic American decline narrative. Seeing *On Revolution* as a jeremiad—a literary form central to American writing and dominated by a mood of despair and lamentation over decline that also issues in a positive call to remembrance and action— enables us to better account for a persistently misunderstood feature of Arendt's argument and **to use the text as a political and theoretical resource for responding to powerful and unsettling political movements dominating American politics.**³ [My emphasis]

David Watson brings it wonderfully together when he stated:

...Later she was to overlay these insights [German philosophy] with other sources and ideas - American political constitutionalism, New World cultural traits that contrasted with some of these European concerns, and the developed critique of Hegel and Marx

² It is difficult to speak of an “Arendtian” philosophy as such, with her work being extraordinarily cross-textured.

³ Arnold, J. (2014). Arendt’s Jeremiad: Reading “On Revolution” in a Time of Decline. *The Review of Politics*, 76(3), 361–387. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43670987>

- but in accepting these new influences Arendt never retreated from a sense that she was bearing a torch passed to her by her teachers, Heidegger and Jaspers, and their teachers from the Greek and German traditions.⁴

What this tells us is that the neo-conservative scholars, since William F. Buckley, who continued to defend a version of American or American-regional exceptionalism, do so upon a rejection of the philosophical 'canon'⁵ outside of the United States. Often neo-conservatives, like Buckley, would speak in hollowed tones on 'western civilisation' but the narrative becomes a progressivist celebration of American or American regional identity.

(Final) Conclusion 3. The Contemporary Context of 'Black Sails'

The 'Black Sails' entertainment tells what is very wrong in our global culture. There are many themes and issues, but Americanisation or Hollywoodisation is the largest part. Visual entertainment has a 'drug' effect in our bodies. We are drawn into the constructed drama, something very artificial to our own life experiences. The bigger the falseness of the drama the bigger the drug-induced escapism. Often there are attempts at legitimatisation of the storyline or self-legitimatisation at the time we indulge on the viewing. "The film, or episode, speaks of these noble messages." And maybe that is true. Nevertheless, we have to ask ourselves what have we really come to understand? Are we exceptional? Are we conceited?

⁴ Watson, D. (1992). Hannah Arendt and the American Republic. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 28(3), 427. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40320370>

⁵ When I use terms like 'canon' I am invoking a degree of imagination within the quote marks. Imagine what a world canon of philosophy might theoretically look like, and not a statement that such a 'canon' could exist.