The influence of American Exceptionalism on Latin American foreign affairs: a case study of Guantánamo Bay, Cuba

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Abstract

Since the inception of the United States, American Exceptionalism has played a decisive role in the mediation of relations both in the domestic and foreign spheres. This influential identity character is founded on the beliefs of American uniqueness and the sanctity of their mission, but has, nevertheless, acquired the status of a prevalent paradigm. It is, thus, a malleable state created fantasy capable of creating consensus among the American population, while also offering effective instruments of disavowal capable of exonerating significant state incongruences. Throughout the twentieth century American Exceptionalism has served as a powerful hegemonic discursive instrument, justifying countless interventions in Latin American foreign and domestic affairs. Cuba and Guantánamo Bay Naval Base provide a clear example of this course of action. The recent usage of this base on the War on Terror establishes that, despite recent criticism, U.S. hegemony is still operating in Latin America.

Keywords: American Exceptionalism, foreign affairs, Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, enemy other, hegemony
Introduction

The ideology of American Exceptionalism remains today an extremely influential tool of dissemination of American identity in the world; it is also the preferred narrative when it comes to foreign affairs.

This ideology has been a part of the United States (U.S.) since its inception, being forged aboard the Arbella amongst the Pilgrim Fathers. Nevertheless, the rhetorical instruments of American Exceptionalism were present in all key-moments of American History, such as the 19th century westward expansion, which was supported by the ideology of Manifest Destiny, or the first ventures into imperialism, the Mexican American war and the Spanish-American war, both supported by the Monroe Doctrine, which had directed the U.S. gaze to the American continent. It is, hence, surprising that the actual term was popularized by America’s Cold War archenemy: Joseph Stalin (Pease 2007, 108). This is revealing of the ideology’s longevity and perseverance, since it was able to survive, and actually thrive, through markedly different political and social epochs. I will endeavor, thus, to demonstrate that American Exceptionalism’s longevity is associated with its structural plasticity, while also sustaining a stable core based on two fundamental ideas: the exceptionality of American identity and its God oriented mission (Lipset 1997).

Donald Pease (2009), in The New American Exceptionalism, defines American Exceptionalism as a state fantasy, a conceptual tool constantly employed by the U.S. government to provide the necessary instruments for denial of contradictory aspects in society or in the State’s own rhetorics and politics. Although there are multiple state fantasies operating simultaneously, the rhetoric of American Exceptionalism prevails mainly because it allows for other fantasies to settle within its reach. Nevertheless, in order for a state fantasy to be effective in society, it has to engage the citizens, in other words, American Exceptionalism, as defined by Pease (2009) is a consensus tool. As I’ll try to demonstrate, it is during periods of great social or political duress that the mechanics of the myth are exposed, prompting the reshaping of old state fantasies or fashioning new ones.

As a young republic the United States invested in an isolationist foreign policy, since it lacked the power to intervene in world affairs. The best example of this course of action was the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which was meant to isolate the Western Hemisphere from the European sphere of influence, while pulling Latin America to its own. Hence, while the U.S. closed its “front door” to Europe and old-imperial influences, it kept its “backdoor” to Central and Latin America fully open, sporting various kinds of interventions ever since. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century the isolationist policy would be definitely terminated, during the events of the
Spanish American War (1898), which inaugurated the epoch of the U.S as a global imperial power (Hilfrich 2012, Williams 2012). The former colony surpassed its condition and became an imperial power, supported by a shift from a policy of acquisition and assimilation of contiguous territory, to one of direct acquisition and control of colonies overseas (Young 2001, 42). This also symbolized the culmination of the effectiveness of previous state fantasies responsible for the cohesion of the U.S.’ social fabric, and the inauguration of a reconfigured set of fantasies.

Cuba lay at the epicenter of the Spanish-American conflict (1898) – the event that formally introduced the United States to imperialism. This territory was one of the last possessions of the Spanish Empire, and it was in the midst of an internal revolution with great possibilities of successfully expelling the “old power.” The U.S was eager to enter the conflict due to the geopolitical advantages that a base in the Caribbean Sea would mean to the advancement of its hegemony in Latin America – it would suit the pursuit of a global Manifest Destiny the U.S gradually began to defend. Therefore, and despite the legislation that would prevent the formal annexation of Cuba, the American presence in the island, formal or otherwise, has been a constant after 1898, and especially after the signing of the Platt Amendment, which created Guantánamo Bay Naval Base (GITMO), in the 1930s.

GITMO has played a central role in the U.S.-Latin American relationship over the decades, serving as the indelible presence of the hegemony, and acquiring different meanings throughout history – it has been the symbol of the fight against communism in the Cold War period and the forgotten exile of refuges in the later decades of the previous century. Recently, however, within the context of the Global War on Terror, Guantánamo Bay Naval Base has once again resurfaced as the beginning road of the “imperial déjà vu” (McClintock 2009: 53)

The current legal-political situation of Guantánamo Bay as the mass producer of human inexistence, in the form of the Homo sacer (Agamben 1998: 114), is the product of years of carefully crafted legislation that placed the territory outside American legislation, but always within its executive grasp. This reveals that the U.S hegemony, although quite contested in recent years, still plays a determinant role in Latin-American events. The periodic interventionism has generated an aura of suspicion between the U.S. and its neighbors, which still react at the slightest sign of interference in their internal affairs (Williams 2012, 2).

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12 “Manifest Destiny” was the expression coined by journalist John O’Sullivan at the outset of the war with Mexico, which justified U.S. expansionism in terms similar to those of American exceptionalism; indeed, it can be seen as the shape America exceptionalism took in this period (1840s).
Exporting American Exceptionalism

In the 20th century American Exceptionalism has been an insurmountable defining trait of American identity; it is probably also the most influential foundational myth not just to Americans, but also to world affairs as it was used to justify innumerable U.S. interventions in the world.

The myth of American Exceptionalism began aboard the Arbella, in 1630, when Pilgrim Father John Winthrop allegedly proclaimed the uniqueness of that group of people, chosen to conquer wilderness and act as God’s vessels in the creation of a society that would be an example to the world (Caesar 2012, 5, Hilfrich 2012, 78). However, and as previously stated, the plasticity of the concept has allowed it to perpetually enlist, and witness, the most important moments of the American History. It would be impossible to recall all these moments, but it is possible to single out two cases of momentous expansion: the westward movement of the 19th century and the Imperial impetus inaugurated in the Spanish-American War (1898). In both moments, the rhetoric of American Exceptionalism was of paramount importance, supplying the necessary structures of desire and disavowal to which the American citizens could cling to in order to deal with the realities of colonial rule – first, when dislocating and exterminating the indigenous populations and first settlers on the path to the Pacific Coast; and afterwards, when foreign populations and territories came within its grasp.

In the early years of the American republic the discourse of American Exceptionalism was for self-consumption because the young republic followed a policy of isolationism. This meant that the United States preferred (or refused) to intervene in world affairs, although preserving ties specifically related to commerce (Williams 2012, 38). The best example of this policy was the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which affirmed the U.S. lack of interest in Europe’s affairs while also confirming its intention to safeguard the Western Hemisphere from “old powers” and further colonial occupation (Williams 2012, 39). Thus, it is possible to discern U.S. isolationist policies towards Europe, but not towards Central and Latin America, a position that was initially appreciated by its neighbors. Nevertheless, “the Monroe Doctrine did not lead to hemispheric solidarity, and for decades, it did not prevent European intervention. Moreover, it was eventually applied in ways that denied Latin American states important features of self-determination” (Williams 2012, 67). In fact, the Monroe Doctrine while highlighting the isolationist tendency towards Europe, also reinforced the U.S.’ grasp on the American continent – it was on its own backyard that the United States realized they were a player, and a major one, in an international system (Williams 2012, 47).
The isolationist policy targeting Europe, would be in place until the end of the 19th century, after which an imperialist policy would rise and govern U.S. international affairs until today. Once this period was inaugurated, the United States persistently attempted to extend dominion over people beyond its borders, while also trying to cement its hegemony over the Western Hemisphere (Williams 2012, 79). The Spanish-American War (1898) was the trigger for this new stage in U.S. history: it alone changed the world’s perception of the United States (from witness to top player), and it also permanently changed the nature of relationships within the Western Hemisphere. From April to August 1889, the United States had exponentially increased its foreign territory, by acquiring the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico and establishing a protectorate over Cuba; in 1903, the Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty with Panama also granted the U.S. authorization to continue creating a canal that would link the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, which transformed the nation into the most important actor in foreign markets (Williams 2012, 81). The Panama Canal is, moreover, evidence of the United States prolonged interventions in Central and Latin American (foreign and domestic) affairs. The canal rested on Colombian territory and its construction was contracted to a French company that proved unable to finish the engineering feet. The trading routes it established were thoroughly inciting to multiple imperial powers, including the U.S. that sought to buy the French company and to negotiate a treaty with the Colombian government (Williams 2012, 100). The Colombian were unwilling to the American wishes, which led Teddy Roosevelt to endorse a Panamanian coup d'état, and later negotiate the treaty that resulted in the Panama Canal, thus demonstrating the recurrent machination that Central and Latin American governments were subjected to by the U.S. already in this period (Williams 2012).

The Spanish-American War (1898) also exposed a recurrent, yet muted, issue introduced by the Mexican-American war (1846-48): racism in the imperialist venture of the United States – the reality of foreign populations that the United States had no intention to absorb into its own population (Barrera 1979, Hilfrich 2012, 5). These were merely a byproduct of the imposition of its hegemony on the Western Hemisphere and the world (Williams 2012, 81).

Manifest Destiny, the Monroe and Truman Doctrines and other assembly pieces of American Exceptionalism, hence, all strive, at different moments, to contain American citizens within the confines of the social fantasy that is the United States of America.

Nevertheless, the actual coinage of the term American Exceptionalism happened in the 1920s and we owe it to Joseph Stalin, America’s archenemy during the Cold War period (Pease 2007, 108). The term was reappropriated a decade later by the budding area of American Studies, intent on
asserting the exceptional uniqueness of American identity by contrasting it to its contemporary ideological enemy: communism (Pease 2007, 108). It is therefore possible to ascertain that American Exceptionalism endured over the centuries and still plays a determinant role in American society, a fact confirmed by James W. Ceaser (2012, 8) in the article “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism” which describes the process in the following term:

“[a] line that runs from the seventeenth century Puritan thought to the Revolution, to the mid-nineteenth century doctrine of manifest destiny, to late nineteenth century American imperialism, to Wilsonian idealism, to cold war anticomunism, and finally to George W. Bush’s unilateralism.”

The endurance of the myth throughout centuries of different, and sometimes opposing, ideologies seems to be associated to its plasticity. That is, like a biologic organism, American Exceptionalism appears to be in a perpetual evolutionary process that allows for its ressignification according to contemporary socio-cultural-political paradigms. This is possible due to the fluidity of its constituent concepts, but also because American Exceptionalism is constructed on a set of interchangeable, and interdisciplinary, discursive tools responsible for its transformation. The two fundamental ideas of the ideology - the uniqueness of the American identity and the singular mission once ordained on America as a nation (Calabresi 2006, Pease 2009), are both open-ended concepts that allow for it to acquire different meanings according to the demands of a particular cultural setting (Ceaser 2012, 7).

Despite its pervasiveness and perennial influence, the discourse of American Exceptionalism is not consensual, which demonstrates that this state sponsored fantasy is not as persuasive as originally thought. It is during periods of great distress, such as the Cold War and more recently the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, that fissures appear in the seemingly homogenous social fabric of society and consequently in its discourses (Pease 2009, 1). These fissures represent the collapse of the proceeding state fantasy and the evolution, or reshaping, of new ones – new forms of exceptionalism capable of regulating the relationship between citizen and nation. For the reshaped discourse of American Exceptionalism to be effective, the involvement of the citizens is imperative, that is, the legitimation of the myth is dependent on the citizens' acquiescence to it (Pease 2009, 3, Rose 1996). According to Pease (2009, 5) “[a] state fantasy successfully takes hold when it transposes these sites of trauma into the inaugural spaces within a newly configured order”, a statement that both confirms the metamorphic characteristics of the myth, and conveys the crucial importance of its function to absorb incidents into the new forms of national narrative. The blind acceptance of the myth(s) has other benefits – it offers citizens the structures of disavowal that allow
them to cope with the misalignment between American Exceptionalism as rhetoric and reality, while also endorsing the unconcerned construction of desire, as long as it takes place within the confines of the state fantasy (Pease 2009).

It is American Exceptionalism’s mutable character that promotes the citizens’ adherence to state-created fantasies, which are responsible for mediating their comprehension of reality. The fact that the discourse has been able to survive this long relates in part to its politically independent nature, and also because it is simultaneously a convenient political and social strategy of disavowal. That is, it offers the perpetual possibility of denying a reality that becomes impossible to relate to. American Exceptionalism thus becomes a weapon or a shield depending on which purpose it serves better, especially when it comes to foreign policy.

Mariana Mesquita e Santos (2013, 9-10), in Os media e a política externa dos EUA. O caso da intervenção na Líbia em 2011, defines foreign policy as the reverse of domestic affairs, with distinct spheres of action in which an independent actor controls the decision-making process. That is, while the foreign affairs executive process acts outside the geographical borders of the state, domestic policy acts in reverse. The independent actor can be a state or a proxy, and can also be a single entity or a collectivity, such as the European Union (Santos 2013, 10). Foreign policy is supposed to represent the independent actor’s internal values and identities, that is, those of the nation(s) proposing the policies (Santos 2013). In an analysis of the foreign policies of multiple U.S. Administrations since Reagan, Santos (2013, 20) highlights, on the one hand, the significant amount of attention that the United States has given to affairs outside of its geographical borders in an attempt to secure global hegemony; on the other hand, how this hegemony was achieved by employing the American Exceptionalism discourse, or rather how the U.S.’ identity as a political and economic superpower was instrumentalized for this end. What this recount of external policy seems to determine is that the role the United States assumed was that of a global protector, conveying the notion of a selfless nation responsible for the safekeeping of others. Nonetheless, it also exposes the exportation of the American exceptionalist discourse throughout the world.

The period after the “9/11” attacks was one of deep paranoia, which uncovered many of the incongruences of the new American Exceptionalism. One of these incoherencies was the merging of domestic and foreign affairs, best exemplified by the increasing militarization of the Mexican-American border, for instance. As Heather Nicol (2011) confirms, in “Building Borders the Hard Way: Enforcing North American Security Post 9/11”, the likelihood of a terrorist threat reaching U.S. soil through the borderlands is minimal. Consequently, building physical and virtual walls as
power projection can be justified as a measure of incorporation of neighboring states into the homeland security measures, rather than excluding them. This is obviously a hegemonic action affecting the entire northern continent (Nicol 2011), since, motivated by the fear of lack of access to U.S. markets (NAFTA agreement), Canada and Mexico willingly complied. These security initiatives have already fallen under the rule of the Department of Homeland Security, which is responsible for domestic, rather than foreign affairs (Nicol 2011). Before Nicol, also Fabian Hilfrich (2012, 5), in Debating the American Exceptionalism: Empire and Democracy in the Wake of the Spanish-American War, claimed that it was possible to destroy the boundary between foreign and domestic policies as early as the Spanish-American War, although the same argument could be made to include the Mexican-American War (1846-48).

**U.S-Latin American international relations: the case of Guantánamo Bay Naval Base**

As mentioned in the previous section, Cuba was the focal point of the Spanish-American conflict, where Spanish merciless rule had for years fomented revolts and insurgency. These events, which had mostly been ignored by the United States and the European powers because they did not want to endanger the investments on the island’s sugar and tobacco economy, caused the U.S. to abandon the isolationist ideology that had guided its foreign policy and sponsored the U.S.’ entrance onto the world stage.

By 1896, a violent civil revolution led to the Cuban War for Independence (1895 – 1898), a conflict that endangered all foreign investments and, more worrisome still, if Cubans were successful in expelling the Spanish and attained independence, they would be a vulnerable nation at the mercy of other foreign powers. If conquered, not only could the U.S. lose the investments in the island, as it could also lead to the closure of the Windward Passage – a crucial point in the economy of the Western Hemisphere – and of similar economic interest as the Panama Canal (Williams 2012).

The United States, at first reluctant to interfere, soon began to mobilize forces to the Caribbean Sea when the conflict pointed in the direction of a Cuban victory. Although the tradition of isolationism remained at the root of U.S.’ initial behavior, the American citizens began to clamor for an intervention that would guarantee their position in the world, while also protecting the Latin American populations with a selfless U.S. intervention (rescue mission), not a conquest. To appease its citizens, the executive branch issued the Teller Amendment, which prohibited the McKinley Administration from annexing Cuba (Williams 2012, 96) but the explosion of the USS Maine, a
battleship anchored at Guantánamo Bay, functioned as the trigger for the U.S. intervention. The conflict was swiftly resolved (five months) and culminated with the Paris Peace Treaty between Spain and the United States. Cuba had been completely erased from the process – the United States had begun the unilateral government of the Western Hemisphere (Williams 2012).

The involvement and position of the United States in the Spanish-American War may be read under the light of American Exceptionalism, or, more precisely, of one of its appendages: Manifest Destiny. This, according to Barrera (1979, 13) “was essentially a manipulated appeal and attempt to secure broad popular support for an expansionist policy of particular benefit to certain political and economical interests”, although by this time and due to the influence of Henry Cabot Lodge and Teddy Roosevelt, Manifest Destiny was understood as the U.S. responsibility to bring civilization (democracy) to people beyond its borders, “whether by conversion or by conquest” (Williams 2012, 86). American imperialism thus followed in the footsteps of the French imperial tradition of the mission civilisatrice and the British “white man’s burden” (Young 2001, 89). This was the duty, generated from the humanitarian and liberal traditions of the 18th century, which modern societies had to endure: “to offer ‘backward’ populations the benefit of a progressive [...] culture which rested in an unquestioned supremacy of knowledge, technology and prosperity” (Young 2001, 88). These imperial powers successfully created a colonial paradox: universal values that had to be forcibly transmitted.

Cuba would have to wait until 1902 to gain its “independence” and its first democratically elected leader – Tomás Estrada Palma. This was however merely a farce of independence due to the imposition of the Platt Amendment: inscribed in the Cuban Constitution, it granted U.S. hegemony over Cuba (at least until Fidel Castro emerged), in its very wording: “The government of Cuba consents11 that the United States may intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence, and the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty” (Williams 2012, 95). Ironically, the Platt Amendment became the source of many U.S. interventions in Cuba in succeeding years: realizing that it could be employed as a weapon against political adversaries, Cuban political parties would deliberately endanger U.S. investments in the island in order to provoke an intervention and the collapse of the government. Also inscribed in the Amendment, the seventh article stated the creation of today’s Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, the only article that the U.S. refused to forego and was actually reinforced in the 1933 Amendment (Kaplan 2005). The Platt Amendment also brought to the fore what Nicol (2011) and Hilfrich (2012)

11 Italicis in the original.
supported, the document revealed the further entanglement of domestic and foreign affairs, since it dictated how Cuba was to socialize with international powers, in terms defined by the U.S. (Williams 2012, 97-98). By the 1930s, the Platt Amendment had run its course, but not before fueling a deep nationalist feeling in Cuba that would prove disadvantageous to the United States in years to come. The Great Depression and the economic strife that fell upon the world may also be at the core of the “independence” of several U.S. occupied territories.

Guantánamo Bay Naval Base (GITMO) came into existence in the years after the signing of Platt Amendment. Between those intervening years, the base had slowly expanded and had become a representation of the United States in Cuban soil, combining military services with familiar neighborhoods (Hansen 2011, 146-147). Indeed, the base was the representation of the process of colonization by U.S. forces, which was explicit in the first article regarding the base. Published in the *National Geographic*¹⁴, the text focused mostly on racial and cultural differences, as well as on the juxtaposition between the American male and the colonial female, thus reducing the colonial to the role of prostitution (Hansen 2011, 148). Cuba in the Prohibition Era became a squalid place without redeeming features, especially the towns surrounding GITMO, that were no more than “watering holes” where lazy Cubans perverted young American sailors. In such narratives, it becomes clear that Cuban nationals occupied the spaces of the *enemy other* – a disease-ridden location pervaded by licentious women and unreliable bootleggers. This was the dominant narrative for U.S. citizens’ consumption until the rise of Castro, which eventually ended all liberties enjoyed by ‘Americans’ in the island (Hansen 2011, 149).

By the end of World War II, intense hostility began to surface between the two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union, which eventually derived into an international bipolar power system that fueled the development of alliances such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and the race to armament (in this particular case, nuclear weapons) (Williams 2012, 151). The economic and political differences between the two states were so marked that any semblance of mutual understanding or accuracy became impossible when reading each other’s political moves:

“The Cold War, therefore, brought the realist nature of international politics back into sharp focus. Its dynamics impeded collaboration on security issues within the Inter-American System, undermined the utility of the organization of American States, revised U.S. intervention and practices […] and reinvigorated anti-American sentiments through the [Latin American] region” (Williams 2012, 152).

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The U.S. Marshall Plan for Europe, for instance, was understood by a paranoid Soviet Union as an attempt on its sphere of influence on Eastern Europe and eventually precipitated the takeover of Czechoslovakia, which was in turn interpreted by the U.S as an imperialist rather than a defensive move. This conflict, as the previous ones, was also rationalized with the help of the state fantasy of American Exceptionalism, although now under the aegis of the Truman Doctrine, a revamped global Monroe Doctrine. In his public addresses, President Truman exhorted the North American people to a global campaign against communism, since the burden of protecting the world had fallen onto American shoulders (Williams 2012, 155). The U.S. had once again to assume the “white man’s burden”, reasserting its imperial role on the world stage.

Two other theories surfaced by this time that had particular importance for Latin American affairs – the Containment policy and the Domino theory. Whereas the latter stated that if one nation were to fall in the hands of communism, its neighbors were likely to follow, the former argued that the influence of communism should be limited by any means necessary (Williams 2012).

Because Latin American democratic institutions were perceived as weak, the U.S. began supporting especially aggressive measures towards the containment of communism in the region, sponsoring interventions in allegedly communist states – Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in 1961, the Dominican Republic in 1965 (Williams 2012). These measures for the maintenance of the status quo have soiled U.S.-Latin America relations until today. In the particular case of Cuba, the intervention sought to quench Fidel Castro’s Revolution, while Cuba strived to gain independence from U.S. hegemony and forged an alliance with the U.S. archenemy: the Soviet Union (Williams 2012, 178). By 1960, Cuba and the Soviet Union entered on a series of political and military agreements, which determined the collapse of Cuba-U.S relations, and posed a geopolitical strategic nuisance for the United States. In an attempt to remove Castro from power and rescue Cuba to U.S. interests, Kennedy acquiesced to the Bay of Pigs operation, which was not only unsuccessful, but also proved to be a tremendously erroneous move that would lead to an ever-expanding wedge between the two nations (Williams 2012, 162).

While Guantánamo Bay Naval Base was thought to be Castro’s initial target, it soon became clear that GITMO had more value as a source of anti-American propaganda (Hansen 2011). The Cold War and the Cuban turn to communism, at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, meant permanent distrust on both sides of the fence. Therefore, soldiers could no longer “enjoy” the neighboring towns bars and prostitution houses, and thousands of Cuban nationals were dismissed from their
menial jobs at the base, in which they were replaced with Haitian and Puerto Rican nationals (Hansen 2011, 203).

During this period, GITMO was transformed into the symbol of the crusade against communism. But, by the end of the Cold War the symbol had lost its significance, at least until the attack on the World Trade Center, on September 11, 2001 (Hansen 2011, 304). The start of the Afghanistan War, in October 2001, revealed the urgent need for a private interrogation place, one such as Guantánamo could provide. Located in an hostile sovereign state, it was the perfect tool of disavowal for the military personnel who would handle the enemy combatants (Hansen 2011, 306). GITMO thus found itself at the crossroad between a perpetual physical and legal black hole carefully crafted by the Bush Administration (Kaplan 2005) and another face of the prism that constitutes the American Exceptionalism of the American Empire (McClintock 2009).

The choice of Guantánamo as the future holding place of these detainees also reflected other important aspects of this location: the “9/11” attacks led to an internal restructuring of the United States state fantasies and their mechanical inner workings. Intelligence gathering, a task previously assigned to seasoned FBI and CIA operatives, was now to be executed by novices soldiers (Hansen 2011, 310). While the former had had training on how to collect intelligence, usually by establishing a relation of empathy with the detainee, the military would use “enhance interrogation techniques” designed to break the other’s essence and for this they would need a place outside the law that would grant them immunity (Hansen 2011, 310). In fact, the legal geopolitical situation of GITMO and of these detainees was carefully constructed, or deconstructed, by the Office of Legal Counsel. These cautiously manipulated Guantánamo’s unique situation in order to create a legal limbo, from which it would be seemingly impossible to rescue the prisoners (Hansen 2011, Kaplan 2005, McClintock 2009).

The Office of Legal Counsel accordingly found legal ambiguities in the legislation that could pose a nuisance for the Bush Administration and produced memos that became known as habeas corpus, the Geneva convention and the torture memos (Hansen 2011). The first reassured the Administration that federal courts could not, and would not be willing to extend the right of habeas corpus to enemy combatants who were outside of U.S. territory; the second established Afghanistan as a failed state and Al Qaeda as a non-governmental organization (NGO), thus falling outside the Geneva Convention and other international treaties regulating the rights of prisoners of war; the third relaxed (almost ad infinitum) the scope of torture, in order to allow for enhanced interrogation techniques, all the while expanding the range of power of the Executive branch (Hansen 2011).
GITMO’s legal peculiarity hence allowed the US to refuse simultaneously the protection of both international and Cuban laws to detainees (Kaplan 2005). This also set the precedent for multiple stages of war to flourish under what McClintock (2009: 53) has named “the imperial déjá vu” in years to come, and further deepened the group mentality (Jones 2011) that fostered the creation of a series of agencies aimed for the restriction of liberties, under the Homeland Security Agency (DHS) (Neal 2010).

From 2001 to 2006, President Bush passed acts and created agencies bound to the DHS that intended to ensure the security of national citizens against the enemy other, initially understood as the Arabic threat, and later revised to include non-citizens (Jones 2011). What these reveal is a concern with the maintenance of a consensual national identity, the construction of an enemy other and the strengthening of the binary “us versus them” revealing the US groupism mentality, that is the homogeneity within one group contrasting with the sharp differences among groups (Brubaker 2009).

The memoranda regarding the detainees and their existence in Guantánamo constructed them as the apex of the Homo sacer, a figure described by Giorgio Agamben (1998), in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. This figure represents a wanderer in the shadows of the law, in limbo, neither belonging to nor being excluded of and who can’t even be touched for sacrificial purposes. The Homo sacer has no redeeming feature whatsoever, just like the enemy combatants at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base.

The fact that the United States could ascribe itself a place outside the scope of the International Criminal Court, with its actions regarding the Iraq war and Abu Ghraib’s torture scandal, did not sit well with the international community and was responsible for creating an international aura of distrust, curtailing initial demonstrations of world camaraderie. Nations like Brazil, Cuba (who had promised to return to GITMO escapees found in Cuban territory) and even Europe, which had invoked old treaties and united behind the U.S., found it increasingly difficult to support the U.S. action (Williams 2012, 327). Additionally, the unilateral decision of invading Iraq on the empty premise of weapons of mass destruction revealed that the sway the United States had once enjoyed was over. Indeed, the majority of its allies (in the Western Hemisphere and Europe) refused to endorse this campaign (Williams 2012, 330). These obstacles may pose as evidence that the global state fantasy of American Exceptionalism might be on the wane, with the international community starting to see the tears on the social fabric.
Conclusion

The previous sections make clear that American Exceptionalism is an extremely useful strategy in domestic affairs and in the foreign realm as well. The fact that American Exceptionalism can absorb different ideologies and accommodate practically every strand of the political sphere also transforms it into an extremely important mediator of reality. The additional capacity of perpetual transmutation transforms it in the perfect, and perpetual, veil (or lens) for the translation of geopolitical events to American citizens. In the international political arena, American Exceptionalism is employed initially in the form of the narrative of the “global protector” to justify an intervention on an external nation, quickly followed by its transmutation into discourses that validate its permanence in the invaded state. American Exceptionalism is hence a powerful tool of hegemonic validation.

The analysis of some instances of U.S-Latin America relations has allowed for the confirmation of the abovementioned, where multiple one-sided interventions, whether formal, informal or covert, have altered significantly the geopolitical landscape. The specific examination of Cuban-U.S. relations allows for a demonstration of the case in point: Cuba has never been a truly independent nation due to the political, and actual, overshadowing of United States hegemony, which has its exponential symbol in Guantánamo Bay Naval Base.

The hegemonic power and the rhetoric of American Exceptionalism have recently been under much scrutiny due to the U.S. unilateral intervention in Iraq and the torture scandal in the Abu Ghraib detention facility. Nevertheless, this hasn’t prevented GITMO from functioning as an “enhanced interrogation technique” prison for enemy combatants, which, as McClintock (2009) defends, has revived the aura of the empire, and exposed the colonial net connecting multiple geographies in the world, from Abu Ghraib to Diego Garcia.
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