BOOK REVIEW
What’s New about Exceptionalism?


In the recent past the two moments that have elicited the most periodizing impulses are 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin wall, and 9/11, the date of the destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001. To these two dates might be added a moment that is still being processed: the election of Obama in November 2008. The year 1989, the moment marking the end of the Cold War, has generated well-known narratives such as Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” and Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” as well as numerous treatises on globalization, including Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire. September 11 has been seen as a rupture inaugurating the War on Terror and paving the way for a new U.S. imperialism. Commentators such as David Harvey, Michael Mann, and Chalmers Johnson have variously characterized a post-September 11 imperialism based on unilateralism and militarism.1 Many historians and cultural critics have also seen continuities between the Cold War and the War on Terror,2 while the culture and politics of 9/11 have been the subject of a number of works, including Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia’s collection Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11 (2003) and Mary Dudziak et al.’s September 11 in History (2003). Most recently, U.S. culture between the end of


2. Noam Chomsky in Hegemony or Survival (New York, 2003) sees the idea of preemptive war as continuation of the last fifty years of U.S. foreign policy; Gabriel Kolko in Another Century of War? (New York, 2002) argues that the juggernaut military-industrial complex built by the United States during the Cold War pushes the country to substitute militarist adventurism for diplomatic solutions to political crises. Elaine Tyler May sees post-9/11 policies and rhetoric as a continuation of Cold War ideologies. Bush’s term “axis of evil” for example combines the language of World War II (axis) and that of Ronald Reagan (evil empire). See “Echoes of the Cold War: The Aftermath of September 11 at Home,” in Mary Dudziak et al.’s September 11 in History (Durham, NC, 2003), 42, 45.
the Cold War and the inception of the War on Terror has been the subject of Phillip Wegner’s *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989–2001*.

To this body of work attempting to understand the post–Cold War period, Donald Pease has added *The New American Exceptionalism*. Integrating cultural history, political theory, and psychoanalysis, Pease examines the different political doctrines that were presented to the American public, and in which the public was invested. Pease calls these doctrines “state fantasies” by which he means the “dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity” (p. 1). Prior to the end of the Cold War, Pease argues, the dominant state fantasy was what scholars have called “American exceptionalism”: as a moral exception/exemplar, Winthrop’s “City on the Hill”; as a nation with a unique “manifest destiny”; and as exception to the laws of historical progress (pp. 8–9). During the Cold War, the state’s transgressions of its own laws, the entry into a “State of Exception,” were explained as mechanisms necessary to defeat the Soviet empire, but at the end of the Cold War the incompatible political positions of the United States came into the open, and a number of different state fantasies appeared. The bulk of the book examines the state fantasies underlying a variety of media: cinema, journalism, state declarations of war, and political spectacle.

Chapter one examines the government-controlled visual representations of the Persian Gulf war as a means of buttressing George H. W. Bush’s New World Order, diverting the national public from witnessing shameful spectacles in Vietnam and returning it to the moral positions it occupied in the aftermath of World War II. Opposition to the war, Pease argues, occurred in displaced form through protests about the Rodney King affair, which opened up national traumas and questioned the legality of state actions going back to Hiroshima. The next chapter takes up the America of the two covenants—Bill Clinton’s New Covenant, which inaugurated a multicultural state fantasy that concealed the structural violence of sacrificing welfare institutions to market imperatives, and Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America, with its constituency of talk radio listeners committed to Cold War state fantasies. Pease analyzes the legitimation of state violence at Waco, Texas, through Clinton’s complete dissociation of Waco from the Oklahoma City bombing. While chapter three suddenly turns to a consideration of the uses of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* in the nineties, chapter four tackles the relationship between cultural artifacts, state fantasy, and state policy. Taking the Patriot Act as the context for the reception of Roland Emmerich’s 2000 film, *The Patriot*, Pease demonstrates how Emmerich produced a fantasy that turned the South into an “exemplary geographical space” from which to celebrate national origins and represented family values as the means “for the National Security State to reproduce itself” (p. 52). The next chapter moves on to 9/11 and the creation of a new state fantasy with the emergence of an enemy and analyzes how the George W. Bush administration used the theme of “Virgin Land” as attacked on 9/11, and replaced it with “homeland” and “ground zero,” to mark an emergency state necessitating the
violence that the myth of Virgin Land had disavowed. In turn, the Homeland Security Act cast the population into a condition of “dependency upon the state for its biopolitical welfare” (p. 171). The final chapter analyzes the challenges to Bush’s biopolitical settlement and the state fantasy of the Homeland posed by the Abu Ghraib photographs, which opened up a space between the War on Terror and its inhuman violence (p. 186); by Cindy Sheehan, who refused to mourn in the terms sanctioned by the state; and by the representations of the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the vulnerable people abandoned by the homeland. Pease ends by briefly examining Obama’s call to multiple constituencies to migrate from the homeland to an unimagined America through a fantasy of the grand themes of American exceptionalism, implicitly suggesting that Barack Obama can move beyond Cold War state fantasies.

*The New American Exceptionalism* is exemplary in its analysis of a wide range of contemporary events and political doctrines. Pease reads these events and doctrines in Jameson’s sense of ideological acts or Levi Strauss’s of myths which invent “imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions.”

Pease is at his best when he draws connections between events often seen as disparate: the L. A. riots and criticism of the Gulf War; Khatami’s use of Tocqueville and C-Span’s restaging of Tocqueville; Hurricane Katrina and Cindy Sheehan’s vigil in Crawford, Texas. About the latter two events, Pease writes, “New Orleans also ‘proved’ the accusation that Cindy Sheehan had directed against the Bush administration: the state had indeed produced the traumatic site against which it purported to defend the Homeland” (p. 203). Pease also brings into conversation a wide range of theorists, from psychoanalysts such as Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, Jacqueline Rose, and Luce Irigaray to political theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, Antonio Negri, Ghassan Hage, and Giorgio Agamben, and theorizes important concepts such as nationalism, state power, fantasy, and national identity.

What remains unclear in the book, despite the author’s explicit claim early in the book, is how the contemporary state of exception is different from the American exceptionalism that purportedly defined nationalism prior to the Cold War. The spectacular acts of violence that Pease attributes to a post-9/11 state of emergency (p. 168) have surely occurred before in the nation’s history as have the abridgment of rights through which the citizenry were made to “identify with the security priorities of the Emergency State” (p. 183). Readers wary of dense theory might also wonder how the concept of state fantasy (arrived at via Jacqueline Rose, Freud, and Slavoj Žižek) is really different from ideology or why there’s no mention of Huntington in the discussion of Islamic extremism.

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created as official state enemy. Despite the difficulty of some of the readings, however, *The New American Exceptionalism* offers superb insights into the political and cultural shaping of U.S. national identity since the culmination of the Cold War and will be indispensable to American studies scholarship.