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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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16.03.2025

American Destiny?

When Donald Trump invoked ‘manifest destiny’ in his inaugural address, it was in its oldest meaning as territorial expansion: the predestined, God-given American right to claim and acquire new land – more extravagantly than ever in this case, by putting an American flag on Mars (a sop to Elon Musk). The term in this sense was coined in the hyper-expansionist 1840s, when the Union was poised to swallow up the territory from Texas to California in the southwest and Oregon in the northwest, the manifest destiny being ‘to overspread the continent’. Trump also pictured the nation restored under his leadership as brimming with ‘exceptionalism’, indeed ‘far more exceptional than ever before’. America, down in the dumps, would become even more of an American America, making it brilliantly adequate to its concept. His State of the Union peroration to Congress six weeks later predicted a glorious future for ‘the most dominant civilization in history’, now that ‘the unstoppable power of the American spirit’ had been recaptured.

These were occasions for rhetorical excess, to which Trump is inclined anyway. But I was nonetheless surprised by the reference. I didn’t have him down as much of an exceptionalist or for that matter a destinarian. To put the question in that way may indeed impute a coherence and depth to Trump’s politics that it doesn’t have. Scratch the surface and the ideological essence seems to be the person of Donald Trump himself. Whims, lies, cheats, illegalities, egocentrism, revenge, brutality, boundless cynicism and a whole slew of appalling prejudices – does this add up to a ‘position’? Scarcely so – it appears. And yet. . .

When I first began to think about Trump ten years ago, he was still a shady celebrity of sorts in New York, an *arriviste* with a chequered career in real estate development, built originally on his father’s empire of drab apartment buildings in the outer boroughs and then transferred

into the glitzy environs of the City (meaning Manhattan); a venture capitalist who had failed more often than not and only found his niche (after turning himself into a licensing ‘brand’) as the maestro of a game show on television premised on the fake notion that he was the most successful dealer in real estate history, or words to that effect. But now, despite having no political experience whatsoever, Trump had got into his head that it might be to his benefit to run in the overcrowded Republican primaries for presidential nomination.

It was hard to take him seriously and it was not obvious that he did so himself, given the stream of outrageous opinions and putdowns he unleashed. I thought him a humbug, a demagogue whose natural element was not politics but the theatrical business of professional wrestling and the competition for Miss Universe (he had had a financial interest in both). That he would make it to the nomination I thought very farfetched. The Republican elite, surely, would put a stop to it. Trump put paid to that illusion. Despite some hiccups, he proceeded to pulverize the bevy of rivals (Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz among the more prominent) with bombast, bullying and ridicule, thus beginning his astonishing subjugation of the Republican Party. A decade later we find ourselves, fantastically, with the ailing and soon-to-depart Mitch McConnell a solitary figure of opposition.

Trump’s second presidency, unlike the first, is well prepared, disruptive and quite dangerous. After four years in legal no-man’s land, Trump has honed his performance: he is confident and in control, deploying power decretally as he sees fit and often sans constitutional grounding, one eye as always on what works onscreen. His spontaneous remark after the dust-up with Zelensky in the Oval Office – ‘it will make great television’ – was spot-on, symptomatic of a figure geared to the media image and not given to reading. What interests me about his initial moves and forays in foreign relations is how they square with other offensives in US history. ‘America First’ is of course not ‘isolationist’, shutting up shop abroad and retreating into some introspective devotion to an America restored to proper ways. Trump’s congressional address reiterated earlier talk of buying or ‘taking’ Greenland from Denmark, retaking the Panama Canal Zone, making Canada the 51st state and turning Gaza into a Jared-inspired resort cleansed of Palestinians. Mexico, by contrast, is to be walled off, marked as it is in Trump’s mind by rapists, drug cartels and millions of undesirable people. Mexico and Canada would both be hit simultaneously with heavy tariffs – the two nations which are most economically reliant on exports to the US. Ukraine, meanwhile, will be menaced into signing some ‘peace’ deal and offering up suitable mineral resources for the US. Russia will enjoy elimination of sanctions and normalization of relations. What of

Europe – or what counts for it? Not very important and in any case severely in arrears in their defence spending.

The immediate targets of hostility here are chiefly ‘allies’ – allies who allegedly enjoy US protection on the cheap while feasting on the goodies of an open American economy. The remedy of course is to put America First by making them pay; pay a lot more for their security and pay a lot more in tariffs. The era of free-riding will come to a ringing end. Beyond the thematic of ungrateful, scheming allies and the seeming capriciousness of the list, the frame here is really an attack on ‘the liberal world order’, as it has come to be known retrospectively in the last decade or so. More particularly, it is an attack on the role of the US as the condition of possibility, the crux, of that order.

Defenders and Trumpians alike thus think that the whole postwar era (say, 1947 to 2017 or 2025) can be periodized accordingly: the order was constructed, oiled and protected by the US. Liberals applaud this world system of capitalism, fairly open trade and sometime democracy while Trumpians think the nation has been shooting itself in the foot. Another way of delineating the contrast is to say that liberals consider the US ‘the indispensable nation’ – a term invented during the Clinton administration in the late 1990s, but which is a pretty good condensation of how the foreign policy establishment has seen itself in a bipartisan spirit ever since the Marshall Plan and the founding of NATO – while the Trumpians, having no interest in fuzzy norms, nominal democracy or running an open world system, avowedly put America first and cultivate cosy relations with likeminded elsewhere such as Putin.

The liberal credentials of the liberal world order are subject to historical question – the periodization subsumes the Cold War for one thing, and the ‘Free World’ was often not very free. From the originary moment after World War II, however, the indispensability scenario and the notion of ‘the Free World’ can be seen as instances of the time-honoured American trope of an overdetermined national ‘destiny.’ Few across the political culture in the United States would challenge the proposition that ‘America’, from beginning to end, has always been about world-historical significance and eventual pre-eminence. World history ‘depends’ on what the US does and doesn’t do. One might differ on the ultimate source of this happy circumstance, whether God, Progressive History or history in the sense of contingent but undeniable fact. One might also differ on the appointed tasks and implications involved; most basically, intervention in world politics or removal from it.

Still, about *the world-historical nature* of the American project itself there could be little dissension. Here, liberal internationalists and Trumpians agree. They also agree on the

imperative of acting vigorously, though they disagree as to what form that vigour should take and to what end. Ultimately, however, there is no real need for the Trumpians to appeal to any transcendent, legitimating or governing power, whether religious or secular. What matters is the wielding of American power for such aims, narrowly defined, as one might see fit to pursue. Whatever we decide to do, in short, is right because we happen to think it's right and we have the power to do it. If pressed up against the wall, no doubt, Trump would assert that this right and power of America, its very greatness and splendour, is sanctioned (as is he) by higher authority, God or whatever. That, however, is self-evident and so not the operative factor. Destiny restored is merely whatever makes the space and place of 'America' competitively peerless, an America overflowing with 'exceptionalism.' The rest is fluff.

Trump's musings about 'exceptionalism' and 'manifest destiny' may therefore mean little beyond piety, if that. It's tempting to consider his conception here as a form of real-estate thinking, which (often) involves a zero sum game – either I own it or you do. No moral principle attaches to property ownership as such. It's about power, territorial control, projects and financing. His unapologetic gambit on Gaza for instance is its own justification. When asked on what authority he would 'take' Gaza and turn it into a resort, he responded without missing a beat: 'on US authority'. The target is a contingent opportunity. Destiny enters into it only as the world-historical right to act as one sees fit.

It remains true, nevertheless, that Trump's impulse is notably spatial and in some vague way connected with the erstwhile notion of 'manifest destiny' as continental expansion westwards, across the moving frontier. He has looked at the map and found Greenland in North America and available: 'a very small population but a very, very large piece of land', as he pithily described it to Congress. So one way or another Denmark, a NATO ally, will be divested of its (quite limited) power here and replaced by a benevolent US. Not that the less than sixty thousand citizens of Greenland will come to constitute a state in the Union, of course. Greenland will forever be an unincorporated territory, a vast version of Guam.

It is in the same context but in a different idiom that Trump is casting an acquisitive eye over Canada. Trudeau was right to take Trump's idea of annexation as a real proposition. It is after all an old one, going back at least to Thomas Jefferson in the early 1800s and intermittently up for imaginary projection ever since, even after Canada became a unified state in 1867, the year that Secretary of State William Seward purchased Alaska from Russia. It may seem a little awkward to acquire a state of forty million people of uncertain political allegiances and an area bigger than all of the US. One doesn't add a state and two senators unless it is fairly clear whom they will support. It would be even sillier from a Republican viewpoint to turn

the ten individual territories of Canada into ten states. Would it/they not go Democratic? Alaska and Hawaii were brought in together, finally, in 1958-59 because one was supposedly Republican and the other Democratic, which indeed turned out to be the case though unexpectedly with their political labels reversed.

There are, in short, subterranean rumblings of destinarianism in Trump's scenario for a new map of North America and a hugely expanded US. It may be helpful to set those rumblings more precisely against the backdrop of pronounced moments when the American world-historical notion was articulated in expansive moves vis-à-vis the outside. I have in mind four such historical moments: the 1830s and 40s, climaxing in the Mexican-American War, 1846-48; 1898 – the War with Spain, Cuba becoming a protectorate, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines annexed, followed by counterinsurgency against native resistance in the last-named; Woodrow Wilson's project and failure (1917-1919); and the Cold War (1946-1963, 'leader of the free world'). In each case, different conjunctures and moves answering to different questions and objectives:

– In 1846, the target was continental expansion, not clear how far downwards and upwards, but essentially contiguous colonization westwards, 'destiny' (and destination) being domination and appropriation of a very substantial chunk of North America.

– In 1898, the target was getting Spain out of Cuba and the Caribbean, unexpectedly resulting in the US becoming a naval and 'civilizing' power in Asia Pacific, a different understanding of 'destiny' very much in tune (for a short while) with contemporary European imperialism, in the US case peddled as a civilizational empire of an allegedly unrivalled scale, competence and power. The new possessions were framed outside of the replication of the original sameness ('territory' becoming a new 'state') that was the brilliant concept of political expansion till then. No one in 1898 or henceforth thought Guam would become a state. It was, by virtue of a decision in the Supreme Court defined as an 'unincorporated territory', an instrumentality of the US Congress to be handled as the case may require. Imperial acquisition of territory then came to an end because the world was already divvied up and in any case World War I made it politically dubious, which is not to say that the possessions, the Philippines excepted, were then relinquished. Control of markets became more important than land itself in this period, though natural resources and strategic interests prolonged colonialism.

– In 1917-19, destiny was embodied in Wilson's futile attempt to transform the world order according to some simulacrum of 'American principles', which he took to be universal, 'self-determination' prominent among them. All of which would find organizational form in the

League of Nations, with the US meant to play a crucial part (which, famously, didn't happen). The destiny of the US (and of Wilson himself) was the destiny of the world as well, and it failed.

– Finally, in 1947-63 (with echoes ever since) there emerged the figure of a globalized hegemon resisting evil forces and maintaining the uneven progression towards a properly liberal world order (well, not perhaps if you're Nixon/Kissinger). The role of Leader of the Free World – not exactly free except insofar as it was beyond the immediate power of the Soviet Union (and the PRC) – was pitched in terms of duty and obligation: 'We know what happened after Wilson's failure. Only we can fill the role, etc.'

For the Trumpists, the only thematic resonance across the four figurations is the exceptionalist one. Wilson and the neo-Wilsonian role of securing the Free World are both obviously wrong, in fact spectacularly so, the very antithesis of America First. Continental expansionism and colonialism are more congenial: Canada on the one hand, the Panama Canal on the other; Andrew Jackson (ethno-racial identity and expansion by any means) and William McKinley (tariffs and colonialism) over Woodrow Wilson any day. Perhaps the 19th century is thus the time when America was really 'great'. If so, it's not an easy model to reinvent.

The focus of the first hundred days on territory as opposed to markets seems strange, but then again Trump thinks in terms of space and puts a premium on it. There is also the desire to put his name on things, or, failing that, rename them. But the most striking move so far is to be found elsewhere: fierce expansion of executive power domestically, applying the enormous might that has always been lodged potentially and actually in the presidential office with regard to foreign policy onto the often inert, molasses-like system at home, targeting it with a flurry of disruptive attacks that is helped of course by a pliant Congress and Supreme Court. Indeed, dissenting courts may have limited power to enforce compliance, should the White House decide to push matters to their extremity. We are not there now; but we have reason to worry. A state of exception is by no means inconceivable.

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Read on: Anders Stephanson, 'Neo-Impressionist Hegemon?', NLR 118.