

1. INTRODUCTION: AMERICA DOES NOT EXIST

The original motivation of the present book goes a long way back to my childhood years, which therefore explains a somewhat naïve outlook on the world. I was born and spent my childhood in the final years of Romanian communism, an era of grotesque socialist ideology, harsh violations of human rights and severe economic deprivation. My contact with anything that America represents was extremely limited at the time. It mainly consisted of the official representation of the United States by the communist propaganda in an overwhelmingly negative light, as the epitome of ruthless capitalism; a space of promiscuity, drugs, violence and contempt for the people, unlike glorious socialism which was the world's last and only chance of salvation. The effect that this type of black-or-white propaganda had on my crude judgment was that I ceased to believe in either of the two.

This led me to the formulation of a postulate endowed with the value of an ultimate truth: America does not exist. Apart from the effect of the propaganda which I previously explained, a whole series of factors contributed to the formation of this personal belief. It started from the ambiguity created in my mind by the country's two names, randomly and confusingly used – either “America” or “The United States of America”. Not to mention that, in my childish perspective, the acronym “U.S.A” (“S.U.A.” in Romanian) had very little to do with the name of a real country, being closer in resonance with other, pervasive at the time – though equally ambiguous to me – concept of “P.C.R.” (“Romanian Communist Party”).

In parallel with the official negative image of America, there was an opposing picture, equally implausible, which began to gain shape in my mind. It emerged from secret, underground, sometimes illegal sources such as forbidden radio stations, rumors

about acquaintances who decided to emigrate in an ambiguous “West” or fragments of interrupted, whispered conversations among grownups. This new picture was that of America as a land of plenty and liberty, the source which inspired my fascination for blue-jeans and Coca Cola, but also the one which nurtured my people’s dreams of a better life, epitomized in a half-century long “wait for the Americans.” Just as the communist propaganda was too bad to be true, the existence of this country of “milk and honey” also seemed questionable.

My final argument: American movies. America had to be an invention designed to entertain masses; there was no way that the movie images all Romanians inevitably watched on Saturday night could reflect an actual country peopled by actual individuals. The contrast between my idea of the real world and what was broadcast on the screen was too stark.

As an adult, I continued to doubt the existence of what I perceived, via different media, as “America.” My constant interest in Americanism, reflected in both BA and MA studies, led to the approach of this domain in a PhD project which was completed in the year 2008. The title of my PhD thesis: *American Exceptionalism between Utopian Dream and Reality* resumed my old childish dismissal of American reality, this time in a scientifically explained form.

As I began to study the American phenomenon, I was happy to find a series of theories which accredited and explained in rigorous form my intimate convictions about American unreality. From theories such as the one advanced by O’Gorman, who speaks of the “invention of America”, to Myra Jehlen’s claim that “the New World was a future so far from being already imagined, it had to be invented” (13) and Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality with reference to the American space, I obtained a scholarly exposure to the principles which facilitate the imaginary representation of America.

The claim contained in the title of this introduction, purporting to the non-existence of the country commonly referred to as “America”, addresses the ambiguity and the contradictions which are inherent in the imaginative construction of America and in what Peter Conrad calls “the country’s versatile reality” (4).

The reality of America is “selective, optional, fantastic” (Conrad 4) in virtue of its specific mechanisms of constructions, dictated by the prerequisites of an innovative notion of identity. As the premise of exceptionalism is the core attribute of the American identity, its composing traits imply a national image built upon an exceptional view of its position in the world, which does not exclude utopian patterns. Ian Dougal refers to this process as a “search for a utopia”, which is “one of the characteristics of America’s exceptionalist identity” (8). The composition of the American defining traits therefore resorts to the working of the imaginary rather than to a lucid and objective analysis of reality.

The question of the nature of American exceptionalism has been a constant source of debate, given its relevance for the study of Americanism and the important role that the United States of America assumed on the world stage starting from the previous century. Moreover, in the light of the events caused by the ideological reconfiguration of the world that the American anti-terrorist crusade from the beginning of the 21st century triggered, an approach to the notion with which many Americans choose to identify finds further justification. While there is no doubt with respect to the essential role that exceptionalist attitudes play in the articulation of the American national identity, what is still questionable is the extent to which these attitudes are an accurate, demonstrable reflection of reality. By mythologizing components of identity based on an idealist foundation, the resulting environment facilitates a line of thought conceived in strictly exceptionalist terms, whose rapport with the world can be described as “purely symbolic reaffirmations of America’s self-image” (Davis and Lynn-Jones 37).

America as “the creation of collective imagination” (Cullen 6) is the object of the present book, in an attempt to identify and analyze the original background which led to such a peculiar definition of Americanism.

The second chapter, entitled “The Root of Illusion: Particularities of an Idealistic Definition of Identity” contains an analysis of the concept of American identity from the perspective of its ideological foundation. David Sadler’s “idea-based” identity is perceived as the fundamental differentiating factor of the American

character and the one which is responsible, at the same time, for its endurance and strength on the one hand and, on the other hand, for its permeability and elusiveness. After reviewing a series of theoretical aspects related to the problem of identity which are relevant for the specific case of the American definition of identity, the focus is directed on the American specificity of constructing an identity. Contrary to the traditional way of forming national identities, based on ascriptive criteria such as: common ancestry, sameness of language, and ethnic background and on the sense of sharing a historical and cultural past, the American definition of identity is based on a commonality of principles. Popularly assimilated as the "American Creed", these principles confer a homogenous line to an otherwise extremely heterogeneous nation and are the primary justification of the nation's claim to exceptionalism. George Shultz asserted, in this respect, that "unlike most nations, we are not defined by an ancient common tradition or by ethnic homogeneity. What unifies us is not a common origin, but a common set of ideals. We Americans thus define ourselves not by where we came from, but by where we are headed: our goals, our values, our principles, which mark the kind of society we strive to create" (7). This common set of ideals serving as defining basis, assimilated and mythicized by people, is seen as the source of an illusory perception of reality due to the fact that "ideals are intrinsically less concrete than other indicators of national identity" (Dougal 3).

The third and the fourth chapters: "American Spatiality: Elusiveness and Singularity" and "American Dreaming: Origins of the National Reverie" discuss two essential American myths whose contribution to the idealistic formation of identity is pervasive: the Western Frontier and the American Dream. In virtue of the accepted premise that "the frontier experience and the American Dream inform the American canon" (Stanley v), an analysis of these two highly symbolic concepts is meant to emphasize two inherent common traits. The first one refers to the image of America perceived as exceptional, in virtue of the singular traits of character singled out and reinforced by the assimilation of the two concepts and by their assertion at both personal and communitarian levels. The second trait is the sense of ethereality and illusionary perception

that the two concepts embrace. When referring to the concept of the American frontier, I explained its illusionary aspect by resorting to Foucault's concept of "heteropia" and to several scholarly studies approaching this myth. The evasiveness of the American Dream is explained by an approach to the duality of its origins: the pervasively religious aspect of the colonial Puritan experience and the transcendentalist influence which marked its specificity.

The fifth chapter: "The Exceptional American: A Distinctive Relation with Reality" is an attempt to distinguish and analyze the components of the particularly illusive aspects of the exceptional definition of the American identity. The combination of the traditional American myths presented in the previous two chapters finds articulation in the persistent sense of uniqueness exhibited by the American nation. The purpose of this chapter is to identify a constant sense of self-delusion in the features which traditionally accompany the exceptionalist attitudes: the idealism, the excessive optimism, the clear-cut dichotomy of good and evil, the sense of the mission. The identification of the sources of these features and the analysis of presidential exceptionalist rhetoric based on the recurrence of the same elements intend to conceptualize American exceptionalism as "a continuing national search for utopia" which was made possible by an evaluation of the country "according to pure ideals" instead of objective, measurable standards (Lipset 268).

The final chapter: "An Imagined Version of Reality" is a corollary of the previous chapters insofar as it advances the idea of America's special way of assimilating and representing reality. The idea-based identity, whose exceptional nature is explained by the inclusion in its intimate structure of principles endowed with mythological value, facilitates the representation of reality according to the utopian ideals lying at the foundation of these principles. The scholarly arguments brought by Edmundo O'Gorman, Clara Bartocci, Peter Conrad, Myra Jehlen or Tzvetan Todorov are accompanied by evidence from America's past and present. My intention is to demonstrate the existence of a pattern in representing a distorted picture of America, reduplicating itself throughout history for various "marketing" purposes. From the colonial strategies of promotion literature used by authors such as Richard Hakluyt,

Thomas Hariot, John Smith or Daniel Denton to the actual representation of America in the media, there is a manifest tendency of distorting the real image of America according to the specific interests and methods of the age.

The result of this trend in the representation of the country is a dual image of America in a unique blend of utopian imagination and realism. While the real side of America is harder and harder to find, the utopian America is constantly perpetuated, transmitted and promoted to the extent that its invented nature becomes imperceptible. The boundaries between the real and the imaginary are gradually effaced by the effective assimilation by people of the idea of America, an idea formed of mythical elements appropriated and assumed by an entire nation. It is this quite singular confusion of imagination and reality which forms the object of this book, a confusion perpetuated on multiple levels, one which allowed Sacvan Bercovitch to declare: "I crossed the border into the United States and found myself inside the myth of America... a country that despite its arbitrary frontiers, despite its bewildering mix of race and creed, could believe in something called the True America, and could invest that patent fiction with all the moral and emotional appeal of a religious symbol" (21).

The book is based primarily on my PhD research bearing the same title and defended at "A.I. Cuza" University in Iași, Romania, under the insightful guidance and expert supervision of Professor Ștefan Avădanei, for whom I have the deepest professional and personal appreciation. The revision of the book for publication purposes, years after the doctoral defence, was a confirmation of many of the principles developed in the thesis. Mainly, that the American dream is fluent and versatile, shaping and adjusting to the ever-changing economic, social, political and cultural conditions. That its versatility can paradoxically and tragically be a source of its extreme erosion. That nightmares are other versions of dreams. The last decade saw profound changes in the American society, and in the world at large. It witnessed painful economic crises, social unrest, political change. It was also symptomatic of deep, long-lasting conflicts in the American nation; never before did they seem more definitive and never before did reconciliation appear

more unlikely. The extreme polarization which marked the Trump administration on so many levels, the economic turmoil, the “Black Lives Matter” phenomenon, the critical dissensions with traditional foreign allies, the impact of “fake news”, these are all destabilizing factors. American society has changed dramatically; from this point of view, several PhD theses can still be written to cover the schisms in the American culture. The passage of time inevitably brings about alterations. Perhaps more than ever, the study of Americanism could use introspective, analytical approaches of its underlying principles, as the key to understanding present realities and manifestations. And while there are hard times when specialists and common people alike wonder whether the American Dream holding the people together still exists, the answer should be sought for not in current manifestations on the American arena, but in history. This book is an attempt in this respect.