



# The Seduction of EXCEPTIONALISM

“New Orleans is like most other American cities.”  
“Louisiana is a typical Southern state.”  
How often do you hear statements like those? Rarely, I suspect. On the contrary, we usually hear—or hold—that this city and this state deviate from the norm, in various and fundamental ways. We’re different. Unique. *Sui generis*.

Call it exceptionalism: the view that Louisiana society emerged through different channels and finds itself today a place apart from the American mainstream. “Exceptionalists” see this society’s enduring uniqueness as traceable to our colonial origins, and maintain, explicitly or implicitly, that its ethos remains in the Franco-Hispanic-Afro-Caribbean world from which it spawned. They see evidence for this stance in everything from music and food to attitudes, race relations, linguistics, architecture, and politics. Exceptionalism is practically an article of faith in Louisiana; it seems to be strongest in the New Orleans and Acadian regions, and emanates across the Catholic South and up to Natchitoches before it peters out in the Protestant north. It even spills over into coastal Texas and Mississippi, and Mobile claims its share.

Exceptionalism is invoked proudly, sometimes defensively, and often axiomatically across a remarkably wide social spectrum. Louisianans—regardless of race, class, education levels, gender, and age—pay homage to it. Transplants, paradoxically, adhere to exceptionalism more adamantly than natives, probably because many of them (including myself) were originally drawn to this place courtesy its mystique of the exotic. Exceptionalism forms the bedrock of local civic pride, and merely questioning it can earn consternation and rebuke. Even when the points of distinction are problematic, such as political corruption, they still seem to generate a certain rustic swagger, perhaps because exceptionalism suggests authenticity, and in a world that seems increasingly affected and controlled, authenticity comes across as, well, exceptional.

All well and good. The sense that things are different down here does, after all, have a fair share of empirical evidence to substantiate it. What other city’s elevation has dropped by half below the level of the sea, surrounded threateningly by the very water bodies that created and sustain it? What other American state

counts hundreds of thousands of francophones among its citizens? What other region has so fine an example of a mixed legal jurisdiction, of multiple surveying systems, of diverse architectural traditions? Where else can you find such a natural resource-based economy, such a culinary canon, such a calendar anchored by civic festivity? If exceptionalism oftentimes proves valid, and boosts local pride, and draws tourists as *lagniappe* (where else can you say that?), what’s the problem?

The problem is this: researchers—that is, the documenters and interpreters of historical and cultural information—too often start out with the assumption that all is different here, before they analyze the data. So positioned, they usually end up confirming what they suspected all along. Uniqueness in, uniqueness out: the presumption of exceptionalism can become a self-fulfilling hypothesis. Rather than resulting from critical thinking, exceptionalist interpretations many times derive from not thinking critically. This is particularly unfortunate because it undermines the value of careful research that does validate exceptionalism.

The phenomenon is a common one in epistemology; it’s called confirmation bias. Sometimes it’s intentional, such as when



PHOTOGRAPH BY FREDY MARIAND

Though New Orleans prides itself on such unique attractions as the St. Charles Avenue streetcar, it still contains chain outlets familiar to all of America.

an “independent” consultant hired by a lobbying group (or corporation, political party, or activist group) invariably determines that the client was right all along. Historiography—that is, the ever-changing processes of producing historical information—is replete with examples of players, ranging from the unaware and the naïve to the calculating and the sinister, arriving to the archives with narratives already set in their heads.

Exceptionalism began to form in the Louisiana narrative starting in the colonial and early American years, and mounted

during the “local color” literary genre of the late 1800s, which, driven by a market that craved nostalgia and exoticism, delivered both ad nauseam. Teachers have since passed unchecked exceptionalism on to students, tourism operators inculcate it in visitors, and storytellers relate it to mass audiences. When was the last time you read a novel about New Orleans or saw a film about Louisiana that did not depict subjects as different in some flattering, intriguing, or belittling way? Even as I caution my students all semester long against presupposing exceptionalism, I nonetheless see it inscribed in their final research papers, oftentimes cheerfully declared in the opening sentence.

What gets lost in the exceptionalism argument are some realities that are anything but exceptional, yet nonetheless are major parts of the modern-day Louisiana story. For all the chanting of the uniqueness mantra in New Orleans, who can argue that most modern-day New Orleanians don't speak English, indulge in national popular culture, shop at big-box chains, and interact socially and economically with other Americans and the world on a daily basis? Most Louisianans are networked into the global economy, wired into the Internet, connected to cable television, and linked into social media in numbers that are perfectly comparable with peer states.

Unique foodways?—then who's buying all that Stouffer's in the frozen food aisle at Walmart?

Unique music?—then why do most commercial radio stations (i.e., the ones with the most listeners) play mainstream pop music, and those featuring local and regional music have so few listeners that they must rely on donations to operate?

Unique society?—greater social differentiation can probably be found between the Garden District and Central City than between New Orleans and other American cities.

For better or worse, Louisianans overwhelmingly lead lives that, save for some vestiges of dissimilarity such as Mardi Gras,

would be immediately recognizable, if not identical, to those of other Americans. Distinctions do exist, and they do go deep, but not, I suspect, as deep or as often as we frequently presume. (Need evidence? Look around your everyday life).

Exceptionalism can be seductively deceptive: it privileges for the picturesque; it over-tells that which is intriguing, scandalous, and charming; and largely ignores that which seems banal, quotidian, and monotonous. Thus its appeal to writers, movie-makers, and tourism marketers—and its danger to serious researchers. In fact, not all is picturesque and outrageous, nor was it ever. Much of ordinary life in Louisiana is just that: ordinary. Whatever the nature of the region's Franco-Hispanic-Afro-Caribbean inheritance, it is fair to say that assimilation and modernization have subsumed the lion's share of it into the modern American norm. Researchers would be remiss to ignore this, and fictional writers would be courageous to acknowledge it.

By no means do I suggest that we instead lunge toward assimilationist explanations and roll our eyes at exceptionalism. Rather, I suggest that humanist researchers, myself included, arrive to the archives, or to the interview, or to the archaeological dig minimally burdened by either preconception. We might benefit from the careful and judicious wisdom of the scientific method: start out presuming all is neutral (null hypothesis), gather data in a thorough and representative fashion, analyze it fairly, and let the chips fall where they may.

More often than not, the results will lie somewhere in the murky middle, and that is a perfectly legitimate—and refreshing—finding to report.

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