



American Exceptionalism Questioned

Malcolm A. Kline, February 7, 2013

That an Ivy League historian takes exception to the idea of American Exceptionalism may not surprise. That the skeptic is not a man of the Left is rather noteworthy.

“The term did not even exist until the middle of the Twentieth Century,” University of Pennsylvania historian Walter McDougall claimed in remarks at the libertarian Cato Institute.

“Alexis deTocqueville used it as an adjective but it did not get picked up,” McDougall said.

The Catholic Church and the Communist International used the term in the early 20th Century, according to McDougall. Both the Church and the Communist party fretted over it as they were seeking converts.

Similarly, as McDougall recounts, leftists in the 1930s used it as a term of derision. Only in the 1950s, as McDougall lays out the history, did AE get favorable mentions, coinciding with the Cold War.

McDougall is the author of several books, including *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era 1829-1879*.

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