IDENTITY(IES)
A MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

ANA PAULA ARNAUT
(ORG.)
‘Who Do You Think You Are?’: A Critique of the Concept of Exceptionalism in the Construction and Analysis of American Identity

Stephen Wilson
University of Coimbra

Abstract: The view of America (and later the United States) as a place apart, essentially different, and the corollary tendency to see it as defined by that difference, is a longstanding one; it can be traced back to the discovery of the ‘New World’ (and arguably beyond). In 1630 the Puritan leader John Winthrop described the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a ‘City upon a Hill’ and warned the colonists that ‘the eyes of all people are upon us.’ Winthrop’s words, and the entailed world view, have become part of American public discourse, and have persisted, with appropriate inflections, in the age of American empire and world hegemony. Such thinking is common to those who see themselves as pro- and anti-American, to the left and the right, to those who see the United States as the ‘the world’s last best hope’ (the phrase is Abraham Lincoln’s) and those who hold the United States to be ‘the Great Satan.’ My paper contests the usefulness of the concept of exceptionalism as an analytical tool and suggests that greater attention should