

Negative Exceptionalism: Why is the Founding Mythos of Israel Worse than Every Other Nation?

by Jonathan Ferguson



The notion that there is something ‘mythical’ and ‘mystifying’ about the foundation of Israel is common enough. Either it is insinuated that the promise of the land is untrue, or perhaps even unfalsifiable; or else, it is suggested that founding a *secular* state on such a *mystical* premise, is fundamentally hypocritical and disingenuous.

There are two ways to critique these allegations. One is to deny their truth or validity; another is to question how one-sided they may actually be, in relation to how *other* nations are discussed. In this article, I would like to suggest that the allegation of an ‘ideological’ origin or foundation of the state of Israel is deeply contentious, when you consider that there is hardly a single state on the face of the earth who

could meet the unbearably high standards to which Israel is being held.

There are innumerable examples, both in ancient myths and in modern political discourse, of foundations of states or peoples that are 'untrue' at worst, or 'half-truths' at best. Whether flat-out lies or mystifying and illusory poetic conceits, human beings always like to justify the special status of their people or nation. Surely it must be recognized that to single out Israel is no less 'exceptionalist' of an attitude different than that held by those of us who truly love and honour Israel. This stance of 'negative exceptionalism' insults and degrades Israel, Israelis and (by means of typical antisemitic strategies of insinuation and conflation) all Jews.

There are actually plenty of examples of national narratives that people can find fault with. For example, Debito Arudou's *Embedded Racism: Japan's Visible Minorities and Racial Discrimination* (Lexington Books, 2015, p. 17) says:

Although an "outsider" could be anyone not from, say, one's own family or village, the concept was expanded as Japan morphed into a nation-state to make all "Japanese" into "insiders."

Clearly, this kind of insularism is an all too common phenomenon. And yet, it is all too easy for antisemites to sneeringly dismiss Jews as a 'chosen people.' Whether or not they accept the patient attempts of Jews to explain what 'chosen' means in the context of how Jews themselves have generally understood the term, they ought at least to not hold Jews to a higher standard than others. Is this not a fair suggestion?

And as for ethnocentrism, the scholar Frank Dikötter has written much about the history of racism in China; the purportedly Western and capitalistic construct of racism is

more universal than it may appear. See his *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (London, Hurst, 2015).

And here is yet another example of a contentious founding narrative from East Asia. The founder of modern China, Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-Sen) stated that his 'Three Principles of the People' *san min zhu yi* were designed for the 'salvation' of China.

To put this in context: in the late Qing and early Republican period of China (i.e., the final decades of imperial China, plus the Guomindang/Kuomintang period), the themes of 'salvation' and 'deliverance' were found in a number of writers. Among these were the radical Kang Youwei, who appears to have considered himself the new sage whose mission was to save China, if not the entire world as well, as expressed in his Utopian classic, *Datong Shu*

And yet, it is surely clear that the notion of 'saving' a nation is no less unfalsifiable or equivocal or semantically problematic than the purportedly mystifying or overly metaphysical rhetoric surrounding the foundation of Israel.

Has China been saved? Well, it still exists, certainly. But how would one know if it has really been saved? By what criteria would one judge this question?

Although, perhaps it is best not to be too literal. For perhaps, as Ludwig Wittgenstein might say, there is nothing to say... So this matter must be passed over in silence.

Or perhaps not!

Either way, who will have the evenhandedness, the equanimity and the generosity of spirit to do the same for Israel; and indeed, for anything in the foundational mythology and historiography of Israel that is not strictly a matter of literal fact?

But let us return to China for one more example. After the Communist revolution, Deng Xiaoping succeeded Chairman Mao, and then Jiang Zemin succeeded Deng. Jiang Zemin famously coined the 'Three Represents' (sic) *san ge dai biao*.

According to the notion of the Three Represents:

The party must always represent the requirements of the development of China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of the development of China's advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people in China.