

Defining America: An Examination of Identity¹

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Abstract

America's change into a Minority-Majority country has presented its citizens with the challenge of redefining their identity. As the demography of the country changes, many are left to question whether the traditional views regarding the American Identity are still valid in light of the changing population of the United States. Written from the perspectives of a Turkish citizen, a naturalized American citizen, and a native-born American citizen this work examines American identity from three different lenses. Exploring ideas from the romantic and idealistic to the conflicts of trying to reconcile the complexities surrounding the American Identity, we examine how America is changing and how its identity is being manifested given the undergoing demographic and political changes.

Keywords: American Identity, Individual, Citizen, Color, Outsider

Introduction:

“He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds...” J. Crevecoeur

This new man Crevecoeur speaks of is now over 230 years old has undergone many changes since he wrote his work *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782. Now the United States has become one of the most diverse nations in the world, especially with regards to religious diversity. The influences of many groups in addition to Europeans are felt throughout the country and challenge the traditional definition of what and who is American (Alesina, et al. 2003). This work will discuss these challenges to traditions and their implications in American society through three different lenses; from a natural born American citizen, an American immigrant, and a Turkish citizen. Our backgrounds and experiences shape our unique perspectives and ideas about identity and what it means today to be an American. However, before we can discuss what it means to be an American today, it is important to discuss the traditional views about the American identity.

The United States was founded by individuals who were white, British, and Protestant. The principles that these characteristics entail served as the foundation for this new society. Things such as the subjugation of Africans under slavery and the “Protestant work ethic” shaped early America and provided the U.S. with its identity defined, “...in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and religion. Then... they also had to define America ideologically to justify independence from their home country which was also white, British, and Protestant (Huntingdon, 2004).” In the attempt to find justification for independence from Britain, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence that provided an insight into values which became a sort of creed defining what it means to be American. This statement and, “its principles have been reiterated by statesman and espoused as an essential component of American Identity (Huntingdon, 2004).” The principles helped the colonists to separate themselves and their identity from that of their colonial power and set the course for a uniquely American experiment to begin.

At the core of these traditional values set forth in this document are, “individualism, property, contracts and law, freedom, equality, and democracy (Dolbeare and Medcalf, 1993).”

¹ This paper was presented at the 13th International Cultural Studies Symposium, May 4 – 6, 2011, Ege University.

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Branching out from these core values come the social values which helped Americans to define themselves namely, as Ralph H. Gabriel writes, “the dignity and importance of the individual person, freedom of thought and action of the individual person, freedom, and so far as possible equal opportunity, of the individual person to make of his life what he can in accordance with his abilities, family as the basic social institution and regard for the group and for group activity as a means to the ends of developing individual personality . . . (Gabriel, 1974)” This list is by no means exhaustive and did not represent the true reality, but rather these values served as the ideal American society providing a paradigm by which to examine and judge the actions of individuals and governments (Gabriel, 1974).

However the question which presents itself in looking at these values, which may have been relevant in defining Americans years ago, is whether or not these values continue to retain their relevance in shaping the American identity today. Especially in examining the transition of the United States into a more religiously, ethnically and linguistically diverse country with new relationships between the majority and minority groups, the question becomes whether or not these values are relevant in light of these changes.

These issues have become increasing more important as the changing demographic landscape of America has implications that are rippling through American society. Most notably the questions of who and what it means to be an American. The 2010 U.S. Census predicts that America will become a Minority-Majority country by 2050 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). Moreover, recent immigration groups have resisted assimilating into American society, instead forming their “linguistic and political enclaves (Huntington, 2004).” This reality has provoked critical reflection about this demographic change will impact other facets of American society.

In fact, nowadays, nearly 1-in-5 Americans speaks another language (Bruno & Shin, 2003). In at least ten states, the share of children who are minorities has already passed 50 percent, up from five states in 2000 (Yen, 2011). Additionally, since the past decade, the Latino population grew nearly 43% — of which the fastest growth occurred in the South. For the first time, Hispanic population growth outpaced that of blacks and whites in the region, changing dynamics of South’s traditional “black-white” image (Kochhar, Suro, Tafoya, 2005).

Compare this reality with the situation in the early 20th Century when writers like Israel Zangwill in his 1908 play *The Melting Pot* wrote, “Germans, Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the crucible with you all!” In this sentence Zangwill blatantly disregarded minority groups like African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. Now, these minority groups can no longer be ignored, expelled or subordinated from facets of American life. Mark Mather, an associate vice-president of the Population Reference Bureau added, “There is going to be some culture shock, especially in communities that haven’t had high numbers of immigrants or minorities in the past...By 2050, we may have an entirely new system of defining ourselves (Yen, 2011) [or how to *define an American*].” Nevertheless, this paper will examine of what it means to be an American from three different lenses: a native born American, and a naturalized American, and a Turkish citizen.

United in Ideology

I was once told by an official working for the U.S. Department of State that if you want to find out if someone is American or not ask them, “What do M&Ms do?” or “Who is the quarterback of your favorite football team?” If the person can answer, “Melt in your mouth, not in your hands,” and “Tom Brady,” the chances are high that you are talking to an American. While these slogans and superficial vestiges of American Culture may not sound particularly meaningful, they underscore the point that the American Identity goes far beyond skin color and appearances. For me, this identity is made up of a group of shared values and experiences that allow us to make distinctions between who and who is not Americans.

This nation of immigrants depends on these values to form a national consciousness, we cannot call the typical American Christian or White instead we need to look at the bigger picture and see it as an acceptance to the values of freedom, liberty, and individualism laid out by Thomas Jefferson in the American Creed known as the Declaration of Independence. In addition, the American belief of Exceptionalism has shaped our policies and beliefs since our inception. In the words of de Tocqueville, ‘For 50 years, it has been constantly repeated to the inhabitants of the United States that they form the only religious, enlightened, and free people. They see that up to now, democratic institutions have prospered among them; they therefore have an immense opinion of themselves, and they are not far from believing that they form a species apart in the human race (Owen, 2005)’ To put it in other words, “...being an American is more an ideological commitment rather than a matter of birth (Owen, 2005).”

Especially when we consider the fact that the only individuals who can claim American Identity as a birthright, American Indians, had been forcibly displaced, killed, and pacified by Anglo-American groups, we need to turn now to ideology to form the American Identity (Loupe & Ojeda, 2007). There is evidence to support the fact that many of the different ethnic groups in America choose to identify themselves as American. In a 2003 survey 64% of people with Middle Eastern heritage, 61% of people with Latin American heritage, 54% of people with African Heritage, and 33% of people with Asian Heritage claimed to be “purely American” (Owen, 2005). Backgrounds and skin color aside it is through shared values and cultural norms that people with such diversity can claim the same identity. Even though the demography of the country is changing the core values of Americans remain the same and may even be increasing in importance and purity as, “...members strongly embrace the values of freedom, equality, and individualism...and exhibit greater tolerance for nonconformity than previous generational cohorts, and express more progressive political views on hot-button social issues (Owen, 2005).”

Some may consider this a victory for the melting pot theory of the U.S. and the ability of immigrants to assimilate. However, I see this as a testament to the flexibility of this identity. One does not only need to identify themselves as American, although many choose to do so, due to the heavy importance placed on individuality people can define themselves any way they want, as African-Americans, Filipino-Americans, etc. and there is room for them to maintain whatever identity or traditions they choose or even create new ones as individuality and freedom allow this to take place. While the U.S. has faced (and faces) challenges to these obstacles namely slavery, discrimination, and racism there has been progress in overcoming them as we strive towards fulfilling these ideals. Despite facing this discrimination very few believe they are outsiders in the country with only 28% of people with Asian Heritage and 22% of Hispanics claiming this was the case. (Owen, 2005).

For myself being of Hispanic Heritage, I can express and feel pride for this part of myself while simultaneously calling myself an American. That is the uniqueness and beauty of the American Identity and Ideology. Since identity and ideology are linked as such it makes it possible for many to call themselves American no matter what background they have and not as an exclusive identifier. The changing demography of America underscores this idea and should be embraced as a way to create a stronger nation united both through the similarities and differences amongst its members.

Who am I?

In Egypt, I'm Ethiopian. In Turkey, I'm both a foreigner and an American. In my native home, I'm a *farengi*, a Westerner. Although I have been blessed with the awesome privileges of growing up in America, especially the educational system, I feel troubled anchoring my *identity* to a singular and meaningful idea.

Growing up with many cultural influences have blurred my sense of patriotism and pride in a national cause. As a Muslim-American born in Ethiopia, I feel this concept of an American identity to be too limited. I accept being an American, but I believe as a human being that I'm greater than just being one national group. This is another reason why nationalistic sentiments fail to stir or motivate me.

Moving to America as a toddler, I quickly suffered with being an “outsiders.” So for much of childhood, I struggled and forced myself to act like an American. In my family's context, being American meant being and acting like white Americans. Even this concept of being an American was seriously flawed. Partly because of this constructed view among many foreigners and recent immigrants that Americans is the land of the white man and everybody else is an immigrant.

Even living in a predominately Mexican-American and African-American neighborhood, my concept of being an American was acting and becoming like white Americans. It is worth noting that as the majority, white Americans are easily and unconsciously accepted as Americans while other minority groups have to struggle to prove they're true Americans. “More precisely, we hypothesized that white Americans are unconsciously viewed as being more essentially American and as exemplifying the nation, whereas ethnic minority are placed psychologically at the margin (Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997; Sidanius & Petrocik, 2001).”

Going back to my early years in America, I struggled to prove my worthiness as an American and tried to shed remnants of my Ethiopian roots. Specifically, I refused to speak my native Ethiopian language and avoided eating Ethiopian food. I stigmatized my Ethiopian roots and glorified being an American. I was in self-denial. I hid my Ethiopian roots and just wanted to “fit in” with everybody else.

I didn't want to be noticed; I didn't want to become conspicuous because of my Arabic name that none of my teachers could pronounce, or that my father was a taxi-driver like most Ethiopian men. Even though my darker complexion pronounced my physical difference, I still wanted to believe that I wasn't different. In fact, whenever my parents called or talked to me in my native language, I would either respond unnaturally in English (even though I knew my parents couldn't understand me), or I would quickly find the closest corner so I could whisper a response in my native language without raising the curiosity of my classmates.

When my parents forced me to speak my native language (Oromo) at home, I rebelled and questioned "how is this language ever going to help me in my future?" I was too shortsighted to realize that language is not only for practical or career needs, but also for cultural enrichment and preservation. This I learned far too late in my life. "By the third generation, the immigrant language is lost. Interest in the language on part of the third generation may resurface only as part of an attempt to construct a symbolic ethnic identity (Carnevale, 2009)." If languages are the gateway to culture, then refusing to learn my native language was cutting the links to my heritage and myself.

My viewpoint changed largely due to my Dominican classmate who openly and proudly spoke Spanish with her family and friends, unafraid or unashamed. Even though we had different backgrounds, we shared a similar experience of balancing the need to participate actively in American society while maintaining and enriching our connections to our homeland. Soon, I began to challenge why I lacked the confidence to speak my native language openly and why I was in self-denial. My curiosity to learn more about heritage coincided with when many people began to accept me openly as an American and as another piece of the American mosaic. However, this self-discovery moment ignited a reason for me to go back to my roots in Ethiopia. This epiphany even baffled my mother who would never have fathomed that I'd be eager to visit my village in Ethiopia.

"Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back for ever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart (Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835)."

It took the confidence of other Americans with a strong awareness of their heritage proudly speaking and celebrating their culture that inspired me to rediscover my own identity. Speaking another language other than English is a matter beyond Americanism, and I think it is a very good advantage.

Ironically, America's eager acceptance and tolerance for the multitude of cultures, languages, and religion, inevitably sets itself up to become an ideology more than a culture. The possibility that anybody can become an American dilutes the meaning of America as a unified entity—diversity is both the strength and weakness of America. Therefore, the definition of being American is sketched in such broad terms that it is almost universal.

Unfortunately, I wrongly believed that my identity had to be fixed both in public and private spaces. Later, I realized that I could be a productive and active member of American society and use English while using my native language to enrich my cultural heritage. I was worried that if I didn't learn my native language, I'd lost the last and tangible connection (my native language) to my ancestry. Moreover, I was troubled into falling in the confusion and vagueness of American culture. My language and my awareness of my native roots helped steer me through the complexities of this experiment called American culture. This is another example why I'm not just an American. As an Ethiopian refugee who fled the pandemonium of the 1990 Ethiopian Civil War, I have a dual responsibility and allegiance to both America for providing my family with a safety and opportunity, but also to my native region in Ethiopia (Oromia).

Frankly speaking, my life's journey was not of my choosing instead it can be summarized in the Latin expression "Ubi panis ibi patria." It translates, "where there is bread, there is my country." America, for me, a practical relationship that is mutually beneficial. However, a nationalistic connection with America is nearly nonexistent for me, because America as a cultural value is too elusive for me to anchor my aspirations.

My life journey have been blessed and graced by many people, so my allegiance is more to the great people who have helped through myself, irrespective of their country or nationality. Although my views might be flawed and probably illogical and perplexing, it is, after all, my human emotions. In this age of globalization, the boundaries and even the concept of a nation have become increasing murky and confusing. America as the product of nearly 200 years of social experimentation will have to reconcile its immense diversity into this pot called *e pluribus unum* and create an ideal that is still meaningful and understandable.

An Outsider's View on the American Identity

There have always been changes in the demography of the society and a challenge to keep it unchanged. But just standing against the changes is nonsense, and it is in vain. We must accept the changes and live harmoniously with newcomers because this is a changing world. Every single day something is changing. So far, America has done its best to harmonize the things inside the country and immigrants feel, or at least think that they are more secure in America than their native lands. They have more liberty, more freedom, and more equality. Of course, there are movements. And I think that the best way to understand the overall picture of any movement in America is to understand the physics law that for any action there is a reaction.

I do not say as a reduction of its history of literature and philosophic movements but rather to help frame how the movements emerged and then impacted, until they either fizzled out or where they are met with an emergent reaction. It is probably safe to say that this is still how America ticks (action>reaction>action>reaction) in economics, pop culture, literature, art, politics, etc. Look at the new Tea Party that has appeared out of nowhere in the past one and a half years and may rock the next elections! Some people (in all fields) will adopt the attitude that they "stand on the shoulders" of the movement before, some violently insist on total change ... There is no need to look for an "American Adam" from my point of view. Everybody living in America is an "American Adam."

No matter how mixed America is, when America's demography is concerned we think that Americans are all white people. Black people, Asians or Spanish people are not Americans. They have to provide something to prove their American-ness. They are so-called Americans. But if we travel in time we'll find out that real Americans were Indians, white ones were the invaders. Thus, there is no certain race to put in the category of belonging except Indians.

When you move your house and start living in a different neighborhood you might feel a little bit an outsider at first. One may change his or her city because of job opportunities that will make the person feel an outsider. So what happens if you go abroad and stay there for the rest of your life? As a Turkish citizen and as a Turk by birth I feel this pride and hold this patriotism. I feel this sentiment without any hesitation. But what if I spent some years in another country, or if I was born in another country, how would I feel? I don't know the answer because, even in your own country, sometimes you feel like an outsider. So far I haven't had to deal with the White and the Black race issues. Adding the race issue into the identity and belonging, one needs solitary confinement.

In the past people needed a belonging, but in the 21st century there is no sense of belonging. With this global change and having a homogeneous lifestyle, the world is our country, and we are citizens of it. This may be too optimistic at the moment, but one day in the future this may happen. There will be no boundaries and no belonging. I just hope to see it and live it.

When we come back to reality in Turkey, I have this constructed view of an American, so far. According to the movie *Dallas*, which was a hit in Turkey in the 1970s, an American is someone who wears a cowboy hat, is well-built, muscular, and powerful. From the series of Rocky and Rambo, we have learnt that one man can defeat the whole army as long as he is an American and White. Rocky, on the other hand, smashed down all of his opponents. One outstanding thing in these movies was that they always had black assistants in them. White rulers, black assistants; white managers, black secretaries; white bosses, black workers. Black people have been showed as outsiders or second-class citizens even in these movies to the whole world. Therefore, it has been hard for everybody to accept their identity in the country.

Before two Fulbright Fellows came to our university, I had received a call from the Vice-Rector telling about these two new-comers. The Vice-Rector had told me that we have two new Americans. As a coordinator of the university, I went to meet them and to my surprise I saw two black people sitting in the International Relations Office telling me that they are Americans. At first I thought somebody had played a joke on me. But later I realized that nobody was joking or fooling around with me. They were Americans, and they were telling me the truth. One crucial thing I happened to understand right there sitting with these two new graduates. It was bad of me thinking the opposite of what these people told me. I must confess that I was waiting for two white people.

I could not hide my confusion. There were all these attempts of American movies, the media, even America itself behind my false judgment, and false categorization.

This means America has done great and has done its best not to include the blacks into the society even in the minds of all the people. And Americans have had the chance to deliver this message to everybody in the world. I, somehow, have still doubts, but one thing has been proved that these two young Americans are my friends no matter which nationality they belong to.

Conclusion

When attempting to define something as elusive as the American Identity the only certainty is that there is no certainty. With a population as diverse as the U.S., this question is bound to create more questions than answers. However through this work several patterns have emerged. First the confusion, vagueness, and flexibility of the American Identity represent the challenges to its discovery. Other nations or identities that pin their identity on linguistic, religious, or other more tangible qualities the American Identity is different, but this also makes it more challenging.

People of any religion, skin color, or language living in America can claim to be American; however, their self-identity may not be believed or respected as such. With so many different definitions of who and who isn't American it is hard to place people in this group. Luckily the growing trend has been towards greater acceptability of people with fringe beliefs or minority viewpoints (Owen 2005). While the high ideals the U.S. was founded upon are far from reality, this trend shows that at least America is moving in the right direction, and change is bringing progress not regression. In the end as the experiment runs its course, we may be witnessing something more significant, the dissolution of identity. This inclusive marker is capable of breaking down the borders of the many characteristics on which the foundations of many identities depend upon and as change and time marches on perhaps we are moving towards a global society where the attachment to groups dissolve and thoughts and ideas define us as Socrates once said, "I am a citizen, not of Athens or Greece, but of the world," and perhaps this is the end to which the confusion and unclear definition of who or what is American is leading us.

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