

What makes America different ?

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If we ask what differentiates most Americans from non-Americans, if we want to define American culture qua outlook and values transmitted by family, school, associates, etc., which perpetually underlie these peoples' approach to problems, moulds their intelligence and stirs their will-power, we must consider their past and their environment, as well as the living molecules of that culture itself. The very question may seem to be inappropriate, but not to a foreigner who has lived here for an appreciable time.

There were planned programmes of corporate English settlement in North America, not unlike the traditional pattern of human migration. But by far the greatest number of settlers came to America either as nuclear families and individuals, or, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, as distinctive sub-groups which had deliberately differentiated themselves from their earlier national ethos. Among these latter were the English Congregationalists or neo-Calvinists and the German Mennonites. Such groups set up townships or village colonies which for a time-- and in a few cases up till now retained a corporate character. But they were different from all earlier migratory enterprises in that the dominant factor that formed them as groups and brought them to the the new lands was religion, and a very particular kind of Christianity. They came because they had been persecuted at home, and they looked for a place where they could establish their own versions of the city of God on earth in peace and freedom from their enemies. Thus the word or concept 'freedom' was written on the sails and in the hearts of many of the early European immigrants.

The yearning for a distinctive type of religious community and corporate life-style, which had first showed itself crudely in innumerable breakaway movements and 'milleniarist' sects in Europe, and had now defined itself into a set of beliefs ranging from the tough regimes of New England to the gentler dreams of Penn and the Quakers, found in these regions at least an interim New Jerusalem, where the land could be cultivated by labourers who fed their minds on a neo-calvinist, neo-Anabaptist or Illuminist reading of the Bible. How they must have rejoiced at the opportunity to separate themselves by an ocean, and by their new constitutions, from their persecutors, the earthly representatives of Satan.

They found themselves among vast forests broken up by navigable rivers. The trees around them hung their boughs like genial dancers rooted in good soil. Within a generation, they could hack down pieces of this jungle, containing vegetable and animal species that mingled familiarity with novelty, and still the jungle remained at the frontiers of their cultivation.

Others came with primarily economic motives, to make a fortune or a living, or to buy their freedom. For some of these, the transition from the stockade to the forest mansion, an imitation of the genteel English country seat nourished by tobacco and acquiring all possible adornments of the old civilization, took only perhaps a couple of generations. The 19th and 20th centuries would bring in vaster numbers men and families whose main motive was to escape religious, political or racial persecution, and to acquire their own plot of earth, on which to live the settled and moderately prosperous life which most of us aspire to. The 19th century, then, witnessed the final domination of the individualist pioneer and entrepreneur.

The American character was first moulded by the kind of people who went there, by the reasons for which they went, and by the manner of their going. For the first time in human history, a nation, a continent, had been settled for the most part by individual men or families. The economic reasons for migration were as old as mankind; the religious and political reasons were new. For a long time some of the immigrants lived rather separate, lonely lives, compared with their ancestors. Ethnic groups, including the Africans, might bring with them remnants of an old culture, but they did not, with the exception of some of the early English and other 17th century settlers, intend to form a new ethnic state defined by the ancient values of the tribe. They came for individualist or group-particularist reasons. The first colonies, such as Massachusetts or Virginia, sustained their English mores. Pennsylvania was designed as an international community. After Independence, when a new nation in the full sense had been created, this was defined more than ever before by the conscious aspirations and ideology of the inhabitants.

If we ask what differentiates the USA from the other Europe-derived nations such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the South American countries, we must mention, as well as the factors already discussed, the fact that she became a nation in the age of Enlightenment, and almost, we might say, was baptised in the name of the Enlightenment. The various European traditions, with the English predominant, were given a new direction, welded into a new political machine, by men steeped in the writings of the French and Scottish Philosophes. Many of the leaders of the new nation saw themselves as creating that earthly paradise or new

model polity, which most advanced Europeans sighed for. Disciples of Machiavelli and Montesquieu, they sought to garner the heritage of Greece, Rome, Europe, England, and to create a new political machine without the defects that had ultimately ruined the others. The good life was to be no longer a peaceful sacred pilgrimage, nor an imitation, containing elements both harsh and bland, of the Old World; it was to be something new, vigorous, uncorrupted. The agony of the constitution-makers was the task of making it incorruptible. It was to be a realisation of certain historic promises, made by men or movements speaking in destiny's name to mankind. It was to be an earthly, secular city. No other new modern nation had quite this formation.

The immigrants, both before and after Independence, were to have their future life formed as much by what they could not bring with them as by what they actually did bring. They had chosen freedom, in any one of several senses, and they had thereby uprooted themselves, in certain ways, from society; not tribes or cultures, they were mere families or voluntary associations. They could not, without further character-changing development, create a culture, polity or tradition. We must now ask what filled this vacuum. Few men or women really want the kind of freedom so many Americans have spoken of as if they aspired to it; few need it or are fitted for it. Most men are not only sociable, they are communal. They do not want a great variety of choices in the fundamental matters of life, such as religion or conviction, spouse, friends, vocation, commitment, values. Perhaps I put it too strongly: they want some variety, but they also want some roots and permanence. Thus the Americans (who like the monastic fathers of old had chosen a kind of wilderness), or at least their children, had souls poor and blank, ready to be moulded into a new tribal or national way of life.

That this vacuum was filled by certain quite specific cultural values is obvious to any observer, and American authors have been quick to summarise and analyse these. Much was owed to the pioneering or 'frontier' situation; this gave rise to the 'equality' which De Tocqueville saw as the core element of America's newness, but which has to a great extent faded from the social ethic of 20th century America. The notion of 'priority' (brilliantly described by Daniel Boorstin), meaning that he with the first 'claim', though he had started off on equal terms, rapidly gained an extraordinarily privileged position, is partly responsible for this. A foreigner is struck by the extent to which certain qualities, such as gracefulness in females and astuteness in males, can quickly take their possessor to the top of a social scale which is characterised not by formal hierarchy but by social distance. Birth in itself still plays a relatively small part in determining one's posi-

tion, but being brought up in a certain way, inheriting some capital, and having certain openings pointed out or made ready for one can mean a tremendous advantage in a 'race' that is no longer run on anything like equal terms. A society that started with an amazing degree of equality (for whites) has developed precipitous inequalities. Blacks remain in a far less equal position than the unskilled working-class in Europe.

Thus 'liberty' rather than 'equality' has become the pass-word of American 'democracy', and 'liberty' here means the right of those who have staked a claim to pursue its advantages with a surprising amount of ruthlessness, and to transmit a substantial part of these advantages to their descendants. 'Free enterprise' has been made into a less compromising behaviour pattern in America than it now is in Europe. It is widely believed to be responsible for the present flourishing state of the GNP and of the 'average' citizen. Even fairly radical reformers say that what they want is to restore the 'true' free enterprise system, by which they seem to mean putting the clock back to the mid 19th century or so, when certain individuals had not yet acquired such unequal positions through this same free enterprise system.

'Liberty', like De Tocqueville's 'equality', involves an absence of ties. It means excluding a range of social controls which are also social bonds; it means separating man from man, family from family, by a kind of gulf of indifference, in the very act of rendering them independent of each other. Furthermore, as opportunities are taken up, the scope remaining for the 'free individual' in business becomes in reality increasingly constricted. More importantly, from the point of view of any ideal of freedom, a new social system has developed in the U.S. which determines what shall count as social success, and consequently what the great majority of individuals are likely to do with their lives and with themselves. Whereas other societies have viewed the prize of the good life as some spiritual condition, death in battle, the enjoyment of good wine, good books, good friends – the overwhelming consensus of the newly-formed public opinion in the U.S. has defined it as wealth, generally in the form of 'conspicuous consumption'. Another behaviour-pattern which differentiates most Americans from most other people is the love of new technological gadgets. These too appear to fulfil part of the original 'dream' in appearing to offer a radically better way of living or doing things.

Individuals or groups, such as the original immigrants, may at certain points in history have a real chance to strike out on their own. But now that a new social system has developed, it becomes increasingly hard to reject public opinion. Liberty, by its very definition, is not something which can be either transmitted by

genes or taught by socialization. What a Pole visiting Britain once said to me, 'To be an intellectual in this country is a kind of heroism', may also be said of the U.S.

Thus a new public opinion - as De Tocqueville so vividly foresaw -- has arisen, not less constricting than the old. And this public opinion defines the goals of life, and the manner in which life is to be lived for the vast majority of Americans, who are not, therefore, in any profound sense more free than other people. Being human, they could only become one more particular cultural group. Certain norms, values, aspirations and expectations permeate society and, as much as do other norms in other cultures, determine the character of most Americans today. Behind the appearances of familiar speech, the friendly gestures, the concepts held in common by all Western or Europe-derived cultures, are the profound and mind-shaking differences engraved by the cataclysmic formation of the uniquely American mind: the unrelenting quest for a recognized superiority based on personal, 'individual' effort. This we find at the level of personal relations in work and the neighborhood, in commercial and intellectual activity, in foreign affairs, diplomacy and war. When most Americans sell goods or establish global industries, they wish it to be known that this is being done in the name of some noble ideal which other people should recognize. Their philosophizers even assert that this life-style is characteristic of the human species. Perhaps one day, if the human race survives long enough, the Americans will absorb something of the general culture of older peoples, will rejoin, in a sense, the human race. But for the moment they are out on their own, strongly redefining what it is to be a glorious human being in terms of their own cultural values. Small wonder that they are less adept than the British or the French at understanding such alien cultures as the Indo-Chinese or the Russian. The Russian people--as opposed to their government--have defined their own values and mores in emphasizing the exactly opposite elements in our common humanity to those emphasized by the Americans: togetherness, interdependence, suffering, and a certain kind of brotherhood. It takes a remarkable American, such as I believe Henry Kissinger to be, to appreciate this.

At this moment, many Americans-- but probably only a minority-- are reappraising their own national experience in a way that could conceivably lead to great changes. The most important factor here is the recognition that capitalism as practised in America is no longer in the public interest even of Americans. The system has over-reached itself by continually expanding down a single track, both mentally and materially, and needs to be pruned back to reabsorb the life-giving, variegated sap that lies in the

human heart. There are enough indicators in America's own culture and history, for example, the group-particularism of the early religious immigrants, the egalitarianism of Jeffersonians, the humane collectivism of the Africans, and the genuinely human insights of her own novelists and self-critics, to provide both internal justification and moral force for such a move. But the move is terribly discouraged by all but universal dependence of Americans—one might say the same to a somewhat lesser degree of other advanced nations—on the fruits of their own blight, the over-mighty, cynically profit-seeking, living-for-the-glory-of-my-last-great-earth-house, entrepreneurial corporations. These exercise, far more than in Europe, a general domination over the distribution of food, the production of the requirements for a comfortable life, the means of communication, and the decisions which so-called representative statesmen take on behalf of the community. How this can be broken, attenuated or transformed is for some American genius, some truly populist movement to discover. To reach beyond capitalism and technology to a truly human way of life would be the greatest achievement of the New World, and its most lasting contribution to mankind.

First-class Fellow-travelling: The Poetry of W.H. Auden Terry Eagleton

W.H. Auden died in Oxford a few years ago, leaving his reputation as untidy as his personal habits. There were those who believed him to be the greatest English-speaking poet of the century, after Yeats and Eliot; there were others who lambasted his work¹ as slick, brittle, cerebral, excessively *voulu*. Hailed as a poetic revolutionary, Auden was also pilloried as an intellectual flirt, a brainy exhibitionist whose scintillating technical virtuosity conceals a merely adolescent smartness. If Eliot and Yeats are the revered masters of 20th century English poetry (neither of them, significantly, Englishmen), Auden has been seen as the upstart, too clever by half, thumbing his nose at received pieties, pathologically incapable of resisting the private joke or smart crack even if it ruins a poem. Placed beside the rhetorical resonances of a Yeats or the cryptic metaphysics of an Eliot, Auden

¹Now available in W.H. Auden: *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, Faber and Faber, £8.50. This volume contains only the poems which Auden wished to preserve, in their final versions. A forthcoming companion volume will contain discarded pieces, and earlier versions of canonical works.