

National Identity

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The national identity of the United States has been a topic of controversy and passionate declamation since the early 17th century when European settlers first invaded and set out to conquer the land and civilizations of the Native American inhabitants. Since its founding the United States has been for many, and perhaps most, as a city on a hill, the envy of many generations; for others the American dream has been a nightmare.

The progenitor of jazz and blues, pragmatism and process philosophy, as well as the largest and most radically diverse population in the history of humanity, the United States of America would seem to resist the concept of national identity. An attempt to articulate America's national identity must take account of a population comprised of tens of millions of immigrants, the mass movement of several generations of its citizens several thousand miles from the east coast to west, as well as modes of thought and culture that emphasize movement and innovation in direct opposition to definitions aiming to fix an identity or an essential character.

Both proponents and opponents of the concept of the national identity of the United States must also take account of its profoundly conflicted and paradoxical history. A beacon of the bright light of freedom for much of the world, America's history casts several dark shadows, including especially slavery of Africans and racism toward African Americans, as well as the direct and largely unacknowledged holocaust of millions of Native peoples. At the beginning of the 21st century, ever in denial of its shadow, America has again activated its latent penchant for military and economic imperialism.

On the positive side—and scarcely any historical event has been so universally acknowledged as unqualifiedly positive—the nation was founded in the last quarter of the 18th century primarily by a group of courageous, far-sighted, and gifted individuals—Washington (justifiably considered first in the hearts of his countrymen), Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison. They laid the foundation for an honored constitution and a governmental structure that has survived unbroken for more than two centuries. It must be acknowledged, however, that its founders imagined a nation by and for Protestant white males and not at all its current population that includes enfranchised blacks and women. America now includes more Muslims than Episcopalians (the dominant religion of the founders) as well as millions of Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and more than fifty million Roman Catholics—approximately one-sixth of the population.

Many of the texts considered distinctively American and profoundly influential on American thought and culture are to be found in the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps the most famous of these being the following: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" Prophet and exemplar of original thinking and the active soul, in the early to mid-19th century, Emerson gave to America, and thereby to

the world, a vision of a people creating a culture based on ideals thoughtfully reviewed and freely affirmed. When the pressure of conflicting value commitments proved unsustainable, Abraham Lincoln provided the language and the deeds that enabled the divided nation to refound itself. As Emerson is America's sage, Lincoln is its avatar.

To the extent that the United States has a national identity, it is surely characterized by its radical pluralism and evolving character. It is appropriate, and perhaps necessary, that these qualities should also characterize the philosophies of William James and John Dewey, the most representative of American philosophers. Cheerfully extending the Romantic vision and epistemology of Emerson, at the turn of the 20th century James celebrated every form of pluralism—varieties of religious experience, philosophical perspectives, and psychological types. Like America, James was open to possibilities and alternatives, determinedly resisting any one metanarrative that would exclude others. His definition of philosophy, "the habit of seeing alternatives," has a distinctively American ring.

For James's younger colleague, Josiah Royce, born in a mining town in northern California, America represented a sublime reconciliation of what he considered to be life's three great values—individuality, community, and the ideals by which a community of free individuals can render itself beloved. The preeminent philosopher of democracy, John Dewey celebrated the wisdom of shared experience. He exposed and opposed privilege and certainty. While the great arc of classical American philosophy, which can be said to include the third period of A. N. Whitehead's brilliant philosophical career, seemed to have come to an end at mid-20th century under the near total domination of British analytic philosophy, American philosophy (not merely philosophy in America) has been in a promising resurgence since the 1970s.

Perhaps the most distinctive and influential expression of American character and values, and hence national identity, is to be found in the brief inspiring life and enduring message of Martin Luther King, Jr. The Presidential Medal of Freedom, awarded to King posthumously, expresses the extent to which America is a work in progress:

Martin Luther King, Jr., was the conscience of his generation. A southerner, a black man, he gazed on the great wall of segregation and saw that the power of love could bring it down. From the pain and exhaustion of his fight to free all people from the bondage of separation and injustice, he wrung his eloquent statement of his dream of what America could be.

Steadily by the decade, the legacy of King, like that of Lincoln, can increasingly be seen to be at the core of America's national identity. King is the latest, and perhaps the greatest, in the tradition of American religious and social reformers—and martyrs—committed to the realization of the American mission on behalf of individual freedom and social justice.

America's national identity has been primarily a commitment to, if not yet an adequate realization of, the proposition that all persons are created equal. It has been an experiment in multi-ethnicity and a form of government intended to ensure the freedom of individual conscience and freedom from religious and government oppression.

References and Further Reading

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