

Lecture One: An Introduction to the American Civilisation

The American Context

INTRODUCTION

People inside and outside the United States of America (USA) have very varied and conflicting views about the country and its people. Some opinions are based on quantifiable facts. Others are conditioned by ideology, hatred or prejudice. American self-images have historically often stressed the nation's supposed ‘exceptionalism’ (its unique mission in the world, idealism, high aspirations and sense of destiny). However, there have also been internal disagreements about the country's values, institutions, policies and national identity. Debates center on whether the vaunted ideals match American reality or if there is an irreconcilable gap between the two. US society is split politically, economically, ethnically and socially to varying degrees, although considerable attempts are made to reconcile differences and to unify the country.

In order to understand the contemporary USA and appreciate how it has developed historically, **FOUR MAJOR CULTURES** need to be emphasized and analyzed, which are:

- A Diverse Ethnic Culture.
- A Multi-Faith Religious Culture.
- A Political-Legal Culture.
- An Economic and Consumer Culture.

I- Ethnic Culture:

In terms of ethnic culture, initial US colonial settlement was largely composed of British arrivals, who shared North America with indigenous **Native-American** communities and other Europeans, such as the French and the Spanish. Until 1776, over half of the population came from the British Isles. These people gradually assimilated other early European settlers into a white, mainly **Anglo-American, Protestant** dominant culture.

After the colonial period and American independence from Britain, northwestern Europe supplied over two-thirds of episodic US immigration for most of the nineteenth century. There were also many **Asian immigrants** (particularly Chinese) during this time. At the end of that century there was a shift towards newcomers from southern and eastern Europe. Much of this later immigration was neither Anglo by descent nor Protestant in religion, and it significantly altered the demographic composition of the USA.

Immigrants and imported **black African slaves** have considerably affected public life at different times in US history. But they have also experienced difficulties of integration into the existing society due to language problems, social position or cultural practices. There have been conflicts and racial tensions between settled groups, Native Americans, African Americans and immigrants, which have sometimes erupted into violence. These factors have revealed **Nativism** (discrimination towards others by the majority indigenous population) and racism in many areas of American life, frequently in institutionalized form.

Today, the biggest minority immigrant population is **Latino**. It is found in southern states such as Florida, Texas, New Mexico and California, in the cities of New York and Los Angeles and in smaller towns throughout the country. The US Census Bureau estimates that white people (66 percent of the population in 2008) will make up less than half the total in 2042. By 2050, non-Whites will account for 54 percent of the population and non-Latino Whites for 46 percent and will include increasing numbers of people who classify themselves as mixed-race. Diverse ethnic groups have had to both coexist and struggle for individual expression in the USA.

II- Religious Culture:

Religion is the second major American culture and has its roots in the many faiths that colonists, slaves and immigrants have brought to the USA over the centuries. Some early settlers escaped religious persecution in their homelands and hoped to establish communities based on what were often nonconformist beliefs. Others brought established native denominations with them. The religious motivations of many initial arrivals were clear and provided institutional and moral bedrock for the new nation. Many later immigrants also often strongly identified with their home faiths and preserved them in the new country.

However, not all settlers or immigrants were religiously inspired. Some traveled for adventure, new experiences, and escape from European habits, material gain and the acquisition of land. The USA underwent periods when religiosity was very low and periodic Great Awakenings

and missionary activity were needed to restore the faiths. Generally however, religious belief, observation and a diversity of faiths became defining features of American society, when compared with other countries.

Although religion is a private matter and constitutionally separate from the state, it informs aspects of social, economic and political life beyond the purely denominational. The precise influence of religion on many areas of American life, such as education, politics and ethics, continues to be hotly debated. Despite a desire to keep religion out of politics, some critics question whether it is realistic to deny religion a full and active part in public life.

II- Political-Legal Culture:

The third major American culture consists of political-legal elements; its nature has been largely shaped by the Constitution. The Constitution is central to this structure, but it has to be interpreted by the judiciary (particularly the US Supreme Court in Washington DC) to determine whether actions of government are constitutional or not. The political system has layers of institutional **checks and balances** at various state and federal levels, which can sometimes result in **stalemate**.

However, these features do help to solidify the society and move it towards consensus or centrist policies. Idealized versions of ‘America’ constructed through its federal and state political bodies and a general respect for the law can potentially minimize conflict.

The need in the political-legal culture for balance and compromise illustrates the degree of abstraction that is involved in defining ‘the USA’ and ‘Americanness’. The notion of what constitutes ‘America’ has had to be revised or reinvented over time and reflects the tension between a materialistic practical reality, with its restrictions, and an idealistic, abstract image of the nation.

Responses to pluralism have often resulted in consensus politics based on political and judicial compromise. US politics are not normally considered to be as oppositional as in other nations, although historically there has been an underlying 60 percent support for the Democratic Party and 40 percent for the Republican Party. In the 2008 presidential election, the Democrats received 53 percent of the popular vote, while the Republicans gained 46 percent. Differences between party policies on minorities, the economy, education, employment, religion and social issues can play a divisive role in US society. Voters may therefore register support and opposition across party lines on many single issues such as abortion, the death penalty and gun control. In non-party terms, exit polls in the 2008 presidential election found that 22 percent of respondents considered themselves as liberal, 44 percent were moderate and 34 percent were conservative.

IV- Economic Culture:

The fourth major US culture is the economic framework, which is also idealistic/abstract and materialistic/practical. Americans generally have a belief in individualism and a free-enterprise system, which is supposed to deliver goods and services demanded by the consumer market. The people historically have had to fight for their economic and social survival, a process which can result in exploitation of others, excesses and a Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality. The competitive nature of American life creates considerable disparities of wealth, social inequalities and varying life opportunities. In 2008, for example, 28 million Americans were dependent upon government food stamps (card debits) for their daily needs and 48 million could not afford health care insurance.

Although free enterprise and corporate domination of US economic life may deliver what the market requires, the system can also produce inferior products, bad service, incompetence, corruption and little variety or real choice for consumers. Americans have historically been skeptical of Big Business as well as Big Government. However, debates about the capitalist model often ignore significant economic cooperation, charitable organizations and volunteerism in American society. Furthermore, they do not always acknowledge the influence of a substantial public-sector structure in the national economy.

CONCLUSION

A historical dilemma for the USA has been how to balance a need for civic unity against the reality of ethnic diversity and, thus, to avoid the dangers of fragmentation. An emphasis was initially placed on ‘Americanization’, or the assimilation of different ethnic groups into a shared, Anglo-American-based identity or ‘melting pot’. This process was gradually seen as pressurizing immigrants to assimilate into an Americanized dominant culture, and values with a resulting loss of their ethnic identity. ‘Assimilation’ implies absolute national unity, whereas ‘integration’ occurs at levels of partial blending. Americans may generally appear to believe in the inherent validity of American values, but they continue to question what is meant by these values, how consensual they are and, consequently, what it means to be American.

EXERCICES:

1- Explain and examine the significance of the following names and terms:

Slavery - Individualism - Constitution - Ethnic - Exceptionalism - Diversity - Consensus - Culture - Civil Rights - Salad Bowl - Melting Pot - Multiculturalism.

2- In a short paragraph discuss some **characteristics** that you associate with **the American people and their society** and why?

REFERENCES

Campbell, N. and A. Kean (2006) *American Cultural Studies: an introduction to American culture* London: Routledge

Crowther, J and K. Kavanagh (eds) (1999) *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture for learners of English* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Classroom Activity: Melting Pot or Salad Bowl?

In 1908 Israel Zangwill wrote a play, *The Melting Pot*. The hero, a refugee from persecution in Czarist Russia, escapes to the United States. In the final scene he speaks with enthusiasm about the mixture of peoples in his new homeland:

America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming ! ... Here you stand in your fifty groups with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries, but you won't be like that for long, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to - these are the fires of God. ... German and Frenchman, Irishman and Englishman, Jews and Russians - into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American ... He will be the fusion of all races, the coming superman.

Zangwill's play was a great success. This was perhaps because many in the audiences who came to see it found its message reassuring. At a time when poor and uneducated immigrants from Europe were flooding into the United States in millions, it was comforting for Americans to be told that their country could turn the newcomers into Americans like themselves.

In fact this never really happened, at least not completely. The United States turned out to be more of a salad bowl than a melting pot. Groups from similar national and ethnic backgrounds often stayed together, keeping alive their old identities and many of their old customs. They lived in "Chinatowns" or "Little Italys," areas populated almost entirely by Americans of similar ethnic origins. Such districts can still be found in many large American cities.

Americans from different immigrant backgrounds do mix together in time. It has been estimated, for example, that about 80 percent of the great-grandchildren of early-twentieth-century European immigrants marry outside their own ethnic groups. Yet such third generation Americans often cling with pride to important elements of their ethnic heritage. So do many Americans whose immigrant origins are even further in the past.

The ideal situation would be a society where all citizens have equal rights and opportunities, but can also maintain their own individuality. It is not easy to put this ideal into practice, but multiracial society is now a reality and we must learn to live together in the best possible way.

➤ Match the beginnings and the ends of the following sentences:

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|---|--|
| 1. <i>Melting pot</i> societies ... | a. are different models of integration. |
| 2. <i>Salad bowl</i> societies ... | b. encourage total assimilation. |
| 3. <i>Melting pot</i> and <i>Salad bowl</i> ... | c. have different models of integration. |
| 4. Multicultural countries ... | d. find it difficult to integrate. |
| 5. Ethnic communities sometimes ... | e. respect cultural differences. |