

## 'BEING AMERICAN': REPRESENTATIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

In recent years, notions of 'national identity' have been subject to far-reaching criticism. Some observers are fearful that attempts to assign particular cultural characteristics to different nationalities will inevitably lead to the use of crude stereotypes. Others assert that studies structured around the nation always underestimate or disregard cleavages within nations, such as those derived from class, gender, ethnicity and race. Furthermore, recent critiques have suggested that although notions of a national identity may have had a degree of validity in the past, this has now been lost. In the contemporary era, it is said, individuals have multiple identities tied to a myriad of lifestyles and cultural enclaves. These exist 'below' and, as the globalisation process has advanced, 'above' the nation-state. Stuart Hall has noted the ways in which they mesh together and overlap:

'identities are fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (quoted in Isin and Wood 1999: 16)

However, despite all of these claims, the belief that there is a distinct American identity has shown a striking degree of resilience. In recent years, it has informed rhetorical appeals, popular commentaries, and scholarly discourse. There were, in particular, repeated invocations of the American character in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 when both journalists and politicians recalled the writings of Samuel Huntington, particularly *The Clash of Civilizations*. Although now threatened from both without and within, Huntington argued that the US had traditionally been defined by its role as a standard-bearer for the universal values associated with western civilisation (Huntington 1998: 305).

However, although there is a continuing faith in the concept of a discernible American identity, there is little agreement about its basis. While the dividing lines between them lack precision, three distinct definitions or *models* can be identified. Whereas some regard 'Americanism' as a set of political principles, others assert that it has a cultural character and rests upon clusters of *folkways* or *mores*. There are, furthermore, those who argue that only those of European origin - who share the US's cultural roots - can be 'remade' as Americans.

### The political model - an 'ideas nation'

Both Samuel Huntington and Seymour Martin Lipset suggest that American identity is derived from adherence to particular beliefs and principles. The US is a propositional or 'ideas' nation. This distinguishes 'Americanism' from the forms of identity found in nation-states or countries represented as nation-states. It breaks with the tradition of *jus soli* - or 'the right of soil' - that ties identity to an individual's associations with a particular or place. The notion of the US as an 'ideas nation' is also a departure from those conceptions of national identity that are derived from *jus sanguinis* or 'the right of blood'. There is, for example, a sharp contrast between the US and Germany. Although Germany's 2000 Citizenship Law Reform Act provided a limited extension of citizenship rights to the children of some immigrants, the principle of blood descent remains embodied in German law. The descendents of Germans who settled in eastern Europe centuries ago can still claim citizenship of the Federal Republic. In contrast, although the US confers citizenship on the children of US citizens born abroad, lines of descent or shared cultural traditions are said by those who represent American identity in political terms to have little place in the US. As Nathan Glazer puts it: 'we are a nation based not on a common ethnic stock linked by mystic chords of memory, connection, kinship, but rather by common universal ideas' (Glazer 1993: 17). Instead, paradoxically, the US has some similarities with the former Soviet Union insofar as, in both, identity is a function of loyalty towards particular beliefs. Those who question such ideas are - by definition - guilty of disloyalty towards their own country.

'It is possible to speak of a body of political ideas that constitutes "Americanism" in a sense in which one can never speak of "Britishism", "Frenchism", "Germanism", or "Japanism" ... "Americanism is to the American ... not a tradition or territory ... but a doctrine ... To reject the central ideas of that doctrine is to be un-American' (Huntington 1982: 25).

Others speak of 'Americanism' in broadly similar terms. In a celebrated phrase, Richard Hofstadter noted that 'it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one', (quoted in Lipset 1991: 16).

What ideas constitute 'Americanism'? Some accounts echo Louis Hartz's 1955 critique in depicting the US as a 'pure' bourgeois formation structured around untrammelled liberalism (Hartz 1964: 71). Huntington echoes the Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal, in talking of an 'American creed'. He emphasises the place of constitutionalism, individualism, liberalism, democracy and egalitarianism and their roots in the Declaration of Independence, Protestantism, and Enlightenment beliefs (Huntington 1982: 14-15). For his part, although Lipset argues that Americanism is based upon liberal values such as liberty, egalitarianism, individualism and laissez-faire, he also identifies populism - or democratic anti-elitism - as a defining feature of Americanism (Lipset 1997: 19). To all this, commitment to other core liberal virtues might be

added. Firstly, there is an assurance of individual rights which rests upon a dividing line between the public and private spheres (Morone 1996: 425). From this perspective, there is a realm into which neither the state nor civil society can venture. Secondly, American identity is tied to a faith in self-reliance and the prospect of upward mobility. The notion of the American dream – exemplified in the novels of Horatio Alger and Benjamin Franklin's words to intending immigrants – has also long been at the core of 'Americanism'. As Franklin put it:

'If they are poor, they begin first as Servants or Journeymen; and if they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they soon become Masters, establish themselves in Business, marry, raise Families, and become respectable Citizens' (quoted in Bellah et. al. 1985: 33).

For his part, Dick Arme, Majority Leader in the House of Representatives, emphasises the role of individual liberty as a defining characteristic:

'You could move to Japan and never become Japanese. You could move to Germany and never become German. But any lover of Freedom can come to America and become an American. That is the mark of a great and powerful nation' (quoted in Ashbee 1998: 75)

This perspective has two consequences. Firstly, American identity has an open and inclusive character. The US is willing to embrace all outsiders and newcomers – irrespective of race or ethnicity - who endorse the defining principles upon which the country was constructed. Institutionalised forms of oppression and injustice, such as slavery, segregation, and the use of race-based quotas for immigration, are all considered alien to American political traditions. Indeed, David Hollinger describes President Woodrow Wilson's support for both the imposition of segregation in Washington DC and the division of Europe on the basis of language and descent as deeply unAmerican (Hollinger 1995: 135).

Secondly, in some accounts, the political basis of the US has imbued it with a sense of national purpose. The Declaration of Independence upon which, from this perspective, the US was founded, was committed to the universal and unalienable rights of humankind. The US is not an end in itself, but a means through which these values can be realised across the globe. It is simply a first step. As John J. Miller argues: 'Securing the universal rights of humankind requires supporting a nation that is dedicated to them' (Miller 1998: 31).

Thinking such as this is closely allied with some forms of *American exceptionalism*. A number of studies have argued that the US has long been committed to a mission that was bequeathed by the first Congregationalist settlers. Some observers have claimed that this led the US towards global responsibility and intervention in southeast Asia. Michael Hunt records that 'by 1967, half a million Americans, moved by dreams and fears as old as their nation and yet still as fresh as yesterday, were fighting in Vietnam (Hunt 1987: 170).

#### *The decline of the 'ideas nation'*

Despite the immigration reform act of 1965 - which dramatically extended the basis for admission to the US - the concept of the 'ideas nation', structured around liberal principles, was progressively undermined. There were two principal reasons for this. Firstly, there was a broad paradigmatic shift. Although both Lipset and Huntington always acknowledged the gap between American ideas - and their promise of democratic universalism - and the reality of the country's institutions, the phrase 'ideas nation', and the claim that the US is governed by a democratic 'creed', began - in themselves - to seem increasingly anachronistic. In contemporary eyes, phrases such as 'ideas nation' or references to a democratic creed appear to disregard the systematic denial of the values associated with liberalism to particular social groupings and underestimate the extent to which these values – in themselves - brought forth institutionalised oppression. Citing an earlier publication of his own, Rogers Smith has asserted that:

'.. it is "normal not anomalous" for the pursuit of liberal democratic policies to generate political, economic, social and psychological conditions that foster the periodic resurgence of traditions of ascriptive inequality' (Stevens and Smith 1995).

Furthermore, in the aftermath of Vietnam, representations of US foreign policy as the fulfillment of an idealist national mission seemed to have the aura of crude Cold War propaganda. Economic mobility and the promise of the American dream were displaced by talk of an underclass and entrenched socioeco-

conomic cleavages.

At the same time, the political and philosophical underpinnings, upon which the 'ideas nation' had been constructed, also began to weaken. The scholars and intellectuals - principally historians - who are most closely associated with representations of the US in political terms occupied a relatively narrow tract of political territory. Their thinking - and the conception of the US as an 'ideas nation' - was rooted in mid twentieth century liberalism or neo-conservatism. However, as political traditions, both progressively lost ground. From the late 1960s onwards, the liberalism that had underscored the New Deal, the Fair Deal and the civil rights movement was challenged from both left and right. Liberalism became more closely associated with redistributive justice, opposition to US foreign policy, and a commitment to group rights. Neoconservatism emerged in response, but was absorbed by the broader conservative movement and lost much of its initial distinctiveness as an ideological current.

However, despite this, and although it assumed a profoundly different form, the political model of identity was reinvigorated during the 1980s and 1990s. The basis for its re-emergence lay in the character of the model itself. By confining 'Americanism' to the political realm, political definitions of identity were consequentially silent about civil society and different cultural forms. As Lawrence Auster - a member of the American Immigration Control Foundation - argues, the representation of identity offered by the political model has a minimal character. Little - beyond faith in particular principles and commitment to the rigours of the market economy - is required from the American. As Auster asserts:

'.. it makes no difference whether a person can participate in the culture of this country or even if he speaks English; holding a job and paying taxes become the sole criterion of being a good and useful citizen' (Auster 1990: 51).

Although posed in polemical terms, Auster's comment has a degree of legitimacy. By adopting a disinterested approach to cultural formations and folkways, the political model of American identity has been able to coexist with mid-century liberalism, neoconservatism, and contemporary multiculturalism.

### *Multiculturalism*

From a pluralist or multiculturalist perspective, American identity - which rests largely on the formal trappings of citizenship and the rights assured by the Constitution, courts, and the political process - can coexist with an almost unbounded range of cultural traditions and expressions of ethnic diversity. For some, cultures are considered in relativistic terms and, insofar as a conscious process is involved, a matter for individual choice. 'Hyphenated-Americans' such as Irish or Italian-Americans can - through their lived experience - place the emphasis on either side of the hyphen and define their primary attachments in terms of an ethnicity or as American. Against this background, the apparatus of government should remain neutral. Others assert that American identity rests upon the conscious celebration of diversity. From this perspective, government should facilitate and promote cultural expression among the groupings that have traditionally been disadvantaged by economic and political processes.

The antecedents of the multiculturalist approach lie in Horace Kallen's 1915 call for the US to be reconstituted as '.. a democracy of nationalities' (quoted in Gleason 1982.: 97). While remaining united at a political level, there was to be cultural diversity. Hyphenated-Americanism should not be regarded as a threat to the integrity of the US, but should instead be celebrated. Contemporary multiculturalism gives this a more polemical edge by depicting the US as an imperialist power and asserting that traditional representations of the American nation have masked the hegemony of a white Anglo-Saxon elite. As Amiri Baraka, the African-American poet and playwright, puts it, 'the Eurocentric construct of so-called official Western culture America is a racist fraud.' (Baraka 1998: 392). It has also attracted vigorous criticism. Multiculturalist thinking, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. has argued, is leading the US towards fragmentation. In his eyes, it 'belittles *unum* and glorifies *pluribus*' (quoted in Morone 1996: 425). However, despite its radical associations, multiculturalism - or, at the least, a commitment to ethnic pluralism - has become institutionalised. As Nathan Glazer records:

"'We are all multiculturalists now' .. one would be hard put, if one works with black school-children, so many of whom attend schools in which they make up all or a good part of the enrollment, to find someone who is not' (Glazer 1998: 160)

The policy proposals that stem from multiculturalism have also been pursued with increasing vigour by industry and commerce. Affirmative action programmes - whereby particular efforts are made to ensure the composition of the workforce is broadly representative of American society - are now an established

feature of corporate life. They have, for example, been endorsed by the National Association of Manufacturers and the Equal Employment Advisory Council, which includes most of the Fortune 300 companies (Ashbee 2000: 19-20).

### **The cultural model**

Although the political model of American identity underpinned many scholarly discussions and popular commentaries during the latter half of the twentieth century - and informed American Studies during its early years as an academic discipline - it has been subject to sustained criticism. It is said to provide a weak and inadequate basis for national cohesion. It has little integrative power and the citizen's relationship to the US is relatively detached. Indeed, represented through the political model, the US appears to constitute more an imagined association than the 'imagined community' that forms the basis for Benedict Anderson's seminal study of nationalism (Anderson 2000). The political model also appears to underestimate the degree to which the American experience rests upon collective memories and attachments to place.

Cultural definitions of national identity stress these shared traditions and their role in shaping a sense of belonging. There is, it is said, more to 'being American' than mere principles, however forcefully these are asserted. However, although this is common ground for those who think of American identity in cultural terms, there are important differences among them. Some emphasise the British roots of American culture, thereby denying the claims of those who portray the US as exceptionalist. David Hackett Fischer's 1991 book, *Albion's Seed* gave the argument empirical foundations. He argued that the US is structured around four cultural regions, each of which was shaped by the folkways of the earliest settlers. These, in turn, owed their origins to cultural forms to be found in the British Isles. In the Massachusetts region, the Puritan families who followed in the wake of the first Pilgrims were disproportionately drawn from the eastern counties of England. The origins of the early communities in Virginia in the decades after the founding of the Jamestown settlement were markedly different. The colonists were drawn largely from the south and west of England. A majority of the 23,000 who settled in the Delaware Valley between 1675 and 1725 were Quakers. They came from the midlands and northern counties of England. During the eighteenth century - particularly between 1717 and 1775 - the early settlers were followed by other migrants from Scotland, the north of Ireland and northern England. They established communities in the 'backcountry' along the mountains of Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas.

Later generations of immigrants were absorbed into the four established cultural traditions. At the same time, the geographical territory occupied by these distinct cultures spread so as to incorporate much of the US. Thereby, the folkways of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have persisted to this day, moulding the character of contemporary America. Fischer offers countless examples of this. He cites different levels of educational achievement and attitudes towards work. He observes that the dialects of New England have their origins in eastern England. Similarly, he notes that the widely shared opposition to gun control in the south and west was shaped by 'the retributive and every-man-his-own-master principles of the border legacy' (Fischer 1991: 73).

### *An American culture*

Fischer's approach is, however, open to criticism. It says little about the place of later immigrants, native-Americans and African-Americans in forging distinctive and culturally separate folkways. It seems, furthermore, to underestimate the role of the physical environment in shaping American attitudes and beliefs. Those who talk in these terms assert that there is a distinctly separate American identity. It is:

'... a full-blooded nationality, reflecting a history and culture - exactly like all the other nationalities from which Americans have been, and continue to be, recruited. The ongoing immigration makes it difficult to see the real success of Americanization in creating distinctive types, characters, styles, artifacts of all sorts which, were Gene Kelly to display them to his Parisian neighbors, they would rightly recognize as "American". More important, Americans recognize one another, take pride in the things that fellow Americans have made and done, identify with the national community' (Walzer 1996: 41).

*Harper's Magazine* has periodically explored the character of American identity and the culture on which it is constructed. In a 1956 essay, John A. Kouwenhoven suggested that the country's culture was structured around a number of dualisms, some of which were originally noted by Tocqueville during his journeys in the 1830s and 1840s. Americans were, Kouwenhoven argued, both materialist and idealist, conservative and

revolutionary, individualistic and gregarious. The Manhattan skyline brought together seeming chaos yet, at the same time, had a structured order. The structure of jazz was similarly 'a tension of cross-purposes ... yet the outcome is a dazzlingly precise creative unity' (Kouwenhoven 1956: 28). Furthermore, America is always in process. Both the past and the future are open-ended. The country is directed towards boundlessness:

'It does not, like the past of most other people, extend downward into the soil ... It extends laterally backward across the plains, the mountains, or the sea ... just as their future may at any moment lead them down the open road, the endless-vistaed street' (Kouwenhoven 1956: 33).

Those who describe American identity in terms such as these, and see Americanism as a cultural formation, attribute its origins and growth to different variables. Two forms of explanation have occupied a particular place in American historiography: the frontier and the melting pot.

### *The frontier*

In a celebrated study, Frederick Jackson Turner argued - in a paper presented to the American Historical Association in July 1893 - that the frontier marking the settlers' shift westwards across the continent or, as Turner put it, 'the meeting point between savagery and civilization', had imbued American society with its defining characteristics. 'In the crucible of the frontier', Turner asserted, '.. the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality or characteristics' (Etulain 1999: 31). Frontier life bred self-reliant individualism. It laid the basis for a restless impatience with accumulated experience, a firm conviction that barriers and setbacks could always be transcended, and a pronounced hostility to government officialdom:

'That courseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom - these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier' (quoted in Etulain 1999: 37).

The concept of the frontier has, however, been subject to sustained criticism (Ashbee forthcoming). In particular, there are significant silences regarding gender and race. It is, furthermore, a mono-causal explanation of American development that draws upon human geography alone.

### *The melting pot*

Although few would deny the overall significance of the settlers' interaction with their physical environment, others have emphasised the interaction of human variables in shaping American cultural characteristics. In 1782, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, who settled in America after serving as a soldier with the French armies, published his experiences in *Letters from an American Farmer*. He asked a celebrated question: 'What, then, is the American, this new man?' His answer asserted that American identity rested upon the abandonment of former nationalities, beliefs and attitudes that had formerly been held, and the embrace by immigrants of entirely new cultural forms. American character, he argued, rested on:

'.. that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. 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 ... Here individuals are melted into a great new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world' (Crevecoeur 1986: 69-70)

Over a century later - amidst mass immigration from eastern and southern Europe - Israel Zangwill built upon Crevecoeur's observations by representing the US in terms of a 'melting pot'. Both asserted that American identity rested upon a distinct national culture and tradition. It drew on cultures from across the

globe, but the lived experience of breaking free from the class structures of Europe and settling a continent had created new ideas and attitudes.

The melting pot has lost much of its former credibility. Some have asserted that it obscures the harsher realities of the Americanisation process insofar as it implies that the nationalities and races came together on broadly egalitarian terms. However, they argue, there was in practice a process of assimilation or 'Americanization'. Immigrants had to accept a culture shaped by British settlers and their descendants. In place of the 'melting pot', newcomers were subject to a process structured around 'Anglo-conformity'. As Benjamin Schwarz has noted:

"Americanization" was a process of coercive conformity ... various nationalities were made into Americans as ore is refined into gold. "Americanization" purified them, eliminating the dross. The Americanization movement's "melting pot" pageants, inspired by Israel Zangwill's play by that name, celebrated conformity to a narrow conception of American nationality by depicting strangely attired foreigners stepping into a huge pot and emerging as clean, well-spoken, well-attired, "American-looking" Americans, that is, Anglo-Americans' (Schwarz 1995).

### *The building blocks of a culture*

Nonetheless, although the concept of the frontier and the melting pot metaphor have few uncritical contemporary adherents, the belief that there is an American identity that extends beyond adherence to particular political principles has persisted. It is shared across the political spectrum. As Newt Gingrich, former Republican House Speaker has asserted:

'From the Jamestown colony and the Pilgrims, through de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, up to the Norman Rockwell paintings of the 1940s and 1950s, there was a clear sense of what it meant to be an American. Our civilization is based on a spiritual and moral dimension. It emphasizes personal responsibility as much as individual rights (Gingrich 1995: 7).

It also underpins Michael Lind's plea for 'liberal nationalism' and his claims that the US, along with the countries of western Europe, are contributing to their own demise. The lack of cultural cohesion, the low level of family formation, and the absence of 'martial courage' make countries unsustainable in the long-term (Gray and Lind 2001: 20-21). Lind therefore puts forward policy proposals that are directed towards assimilation and the reconstruction of a national culture. He emphasises the need to teach and use the English language. However, he asserts, other forms of acculturation are also important:

'There is more to the national culture than the national language, though the language is both the primary index of nationality and its major means of transmission. In addition, there are folkways – not abstract moral codes, but particular ways of acting, ways of dressing, conventions of masculinity and femininity, ways of celebrating major events like births, marriages, and funerals, particular kinds of sports and recreations, conceptions of the proper boundaries between the secular and religious spheres. And there is also a body of material – ranging from historical events that everyone is expected to know about to widely shared but ephemeral knowledge of sports and cinema and music – that might be called common knowledge. Common language, common folkways, common knowledge – these, rather than race or religion or political philosophy, are what identify a member of the American cultural nation' (Lind 1996: 265-66).

### *Assimilation and acculturation*

There are policy consequences if identity is defined in cultural rather than political terms. Some assert that a programme of acculturation is required. Immigrants should undergo *Americanization*. They should be compelled to learn English, understand the structures of government, share the values, and come to share the folkways around which the US is constructed. Subgroup loyalties have to be subordinated to a common national identity. From this perspective, therefore, few first or second generation immigrants can be regarded as fully 'American'. Furthermore, from this, perspective, many of the policies adopted from the 1960s onwards undermined traditional assimilative mechanisms and should, therefore, be reversed. Bilingual education discouraged immigrants from learning English. The pre-1997 system of welfare provi-

sion, affirmative action programmes, and the growing emphasis upon 'group rights' cut across the spirit of self-reliance that had traditionally compelled newcomers to adapt to the American mainstream. Multiculturalism allowed - indeed at times required - individuals to maintain their former allegiances. It thereby obstructed assimilation and the adoption of an American identity.

Others put forward a cultural model of identity, but see the process of assimilation in less demanding terms. A number of commentators have argued that a significant proportion of the contemporary immigrant population already adhere to the values that one characterised mainstream American culture. Indeed, it is said, some are more committed to individualism, self-reliance and family values than a large proportion of the native-born American population (Ashbee 1998: 76).

Others also see the assimilative process in less rigorous terms than the proponents of Americanization. They talk of ethnic pluralism, but insist however that minority groupings should remain subordinated to the national culture and purpose. Michael Walzer draws a contrast between the US and republican conceptions of citizenship in revolutionary France. In 1791, the Constituent Assembly voted to fully emancipate French Jews. It, however, demanded their full embrace of a French identity. As one deputy said:

'One must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation, and give everything to the Jews as individuals ... It would be repugnant to have ... a nation within a nation' (quoted in Walzer 1996: 43).

From this perspective, American identity has little in common with French conceptions of identity. It does not demand unbounded loyalty or require an exhaustive commitment. Indeed, it differs from other national identities. Although structured around a culture rather than a mere creed, it is *exceptional* insofar as it is tolerant of ethnic pluralism. Walzer records:

'We have made our peace with the "particular characteristics" of all the immigrant groups ... and have come to regard American nationality as an addition to rather than a replacement for ethnic consciousness' (Walzer 1996: 45).

'Hyphenated' Americans such as Irish-Americans or Italian-Americans have not – according to Walzer - retained from former identities. Instead, these are amalgam cultures. Furthermore, individuals can either emphasise their original ethnicity or their status as Americans. They can make a voluntary choice that may not be a full commitment to their adopted country.

### **The ethno-racial model**

There is a further representation of American identity. It has traditionally been associated with *nativist* groupings and has – either implicitly or explicitly - informed many of the campaigns against immigration.

The ethno-racial model has four defining characteristics. Firstly, it vigorously denies the claim that nations can be constructed on the basis of principles or beliefs. An 'ideas nation' will necessarily fall apart as different ethnic groupings - which are rooted much more securely in family descent and associations with particular villages, towns or lands - reassert themselves. As John O'Sullivan puts it, 'almost all the ideological nations have collapsed, generally in acrimony' (quoted in Miller 1998: 29). Those whose ideas are informed by ethnic or racial definitions of identity are, therefore, amongst the most savage critics of 'nation building' and the belief that US foreign policy can be used to build nations that draw in and integrate a number of different ethnic groupings. The peace plan for Bosnia-Herzegovina agreed at Dayton attracted particular ire.

Secondly, while some cultural representations are associated with the claim that American identity rests upon a new or composite personality forged by immigrants from across the globe, those who adhere to the ethno-racial model insist – to a much greater extent than those who draw on the cultural model - that traditional American folkways were shaped by their British origins. However, many associated with ethno-racial definitions also stress the role of later 'white ethnic' immigrants who settled during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From their perspective, although American identity is built upon the early communities established in Virginia and the Puritanism of the first New England settlers, its essence as a nation also lies among the waves of later immigrants from the different countries of Europe. In the words of Thomas Fleming, editor of *Chronicles*, national identity rests upon a fusion of Jamestown, Plymouth Rock, and Ellis Island (Fleming 1995: 17).

Thirdly, although the US has been corrupted by both mass immigration from the other Americas and Asia, and the cosmopolitanism of the governing elites, it is in essence a nation-state that is defined by descent from these beginnings. As Anthony D. Smith records, the ethnic model is constituted on the basis of lineage:

'Its distinguishing feature is its emphasis on a community of birth and native culture ... Whether you stayed in your community or emigrated to another, you remained ineluctably, organically, a member of the community of your birth and were for ever stamped by it. A nation, in other words, was first and foremost a community of common descent' (Smith 1991: 11).

Fourthly, the ethnic model has a 'closed' character. Those who are culturally, or in some accounts, racially distanced from a particular 'community of birth' cannot be assimilated into it. Peter Brimelow's 1996 book, *Alien Nation*, is representative of this approach. It suggests that many of the immigrants who arrived in the US following the 1965 liberalisation of the immigration laws are, in practice, unassimilable. In particular, it is said, those of Latino origin have clung to their own language, folkways and cultural forms. Indeed, according to Scott McConnell of *National Review* - the foremost conservative journal - second and third generation Latinos have instincts that are more separatist than those of their parents and grandparents. He suggests that young Latinos '.. see themselves locked in irremediable conflict with white society'. The idea of *Reconquista* the absorption of the southwestern US states by Mexico - has, he suggests, gained increasing acceptance among them (McConnell 1997: 33). Some commentaries have cited the events on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 as a further illustration of this. They have noted that the hijackers appeared to have adopted many of the trappings of western identity. However, this can be deceptive:

'Some fiercely reject the new society into which they have moved ... Whatever the reason, some people reject an American future and ricochet backwards into their own tradition - except, of course, that the tradition they seek is no longer the uncomplicatedly comforting one of their youth but one subtly distorted by their rejection of American modernity' (O'Sullivan 2001: 42).

Those who insist upon the unassimilable character of particular groupings are going beyond the parameters of the cultural model. Their claim that particular folkways, attitudes and forms of behaviour are deeply ingrained or immutable meshes together with notions drawn from sociobiology. Critical observers suggest that those who have adopted an ethnic understanding of the American nation, and regard immigration as a threat to the cultural integrity of the US, have resurrected the racist sentiments that informed earlier anti-immigrant movements.

Ethno-racial representations of US identity are often depicted as a break with mainstream American thought. They are commonly represented as '.. deviant sidesteps in the otherwise forward march of liberal ideas in America's political culture' (Stevens and Smith 1995). For radical and Marxist observers, however, ascriptive values - most notably those tied to race - have long defined American identity. W.E.B. DuBois - the black intellectual who guided the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during its formative years - emphasised the place of caste, exploitation and, indeed, naked hatred in the construction of Americanism. He noted the:

'.. deep conviction of myriads of men that congenital differences among the main masses, of human beings absolutely conditioned the individual destiny of every member of a group' (quoted in Stevens and Smith 1995).

DuBois' judgement was echoed some decades later by those associated with the New Left for whom Americanism was synonymous with oppression at home and imperialism abroad.

### **Surveying public opinion**

All three definitions of national identity have appeared - either implicitly or explicitly - in a number of popular commentaries. They have also underpinned debate about the future of immigration policy. Insofar as contemporary public policy is rooted in a structured definition of identity, it draws primarily on political representations. The US Commission on Immigration Reform was established by Congress under the 1990 Immigration Act. Its 1997 report fused the liberal themes associated with political definitions of identity together with a belief in ethnic pluralism and diversity.

'We believe these truths constitute the distinctive characteristics of American nationality ... the principles and values embodied in the American Constitution and their fulfillment in practice: equal protection and justice under the law; freedom of speech and religion; and representative government; Lawfully-admitted newcomers of any ancestral nationality – without regard to race, ethnicity, or religion – truly become Americans when they give allegiance to these principles and values ..' (US Commission on Immigration Reform 1997: 25).

At the same time, the report also edged, albeit in very cautious terms, towards something more. In particular, it regarded language as an important consideration and asserted that the US would be strengthened by greater fluency in English, although it also emphasised that many would continue to speak, or learn, their own languages as well (US Commission on Immigration Reform 1997: 25).

However, although the three representations of identity are to be found in both popular and scholarly discourse, they have customarily been either asserted in *ex cathedra* terms or have rested upon an appraisal of the American historical process. There have been few attempts to consider and assess popular perceptions of American identity. However, in 1995-96, the General Social Survey (GSS) attempted to gauge the character of public opinion by including a national identity module in its ongoing work. The module formed part of a study of 24 countries across the world conducted by the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). The survey also included other G7 nations, a significant number of 'transitional' societies such as Russia, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Latvia, together with two Asian countries: Japan and the Philippines. Respondents were asked about the factors that allowed an individual to belong to a particular nation. What, for example, made someone 'truly' American or British? The exact wording of each question was adjusted so as to correspond with national circumstances. In Canada, for example, two languages were specified and those questioned were asked whether it was important to speak either English or French. Similarly, Question 3 was always posed in different terms so that it referred to the dominant religious faith, faiths or denomination within each of the countries.

**Some people say that the following things are important for being (e.g. truly British). Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is ... (in percentages)**

**Table 1: Language**

**How important is it to be able to speak (dominant language[s] in the respondent's country)?**

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Not (N)
important at all				
US	71.3	21.6	5.1	1.9
Canada	48.7	32.2	11.5	7.6
Britain	65	23.4	7.8	3.8
W. Germany	54.9	34.9	8	2.2
Netherlands	67.4	28	3.5	1.1
Hungary	79	17.9	2.3	0.8
				1340
				1502
				1023
				1245
				2075
				991

**Source:** adapted from International Social Survey Program 1998: 16.

**Table 2: Length of residence**

**How important is it to have lived in (respondent's country) for most of one's life?**

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Not (N)
important at all				
US	44.3	28.8	20.4	6.5
Canada	23.3	28.8	32.6	15.3
Britain	41.8	33.7	19.5	5
W. Germany	27.9	35.5	27	9.7
Netherlands	21	38.3	32.9	7.8
Hungary	47.1	28.1	19.5	5.3
				1324
				1503
				1003
				1224
				2037
				983

**Source:** adapted from International Social Survey Program 1998: 15.

**Table 3: Religion**

*How important is it to be a (country's dominant religion or denomination)?*

	Very important		Fairly important		Not very important	Not (N)
important at all						
US	38.6	15.1	21.5	24.8		1309
Canada	14.7	9.8	20	55.5		1465
Britain	21.6	13.9	28.5	36		997
W. Germany	16.6	17.2	22.6	43.6		1213
Netherlands	3.3	4	24	68.8		2012
Hungary	19.7	16.2	30.3	33.8		980

**Source:** adapted from International Social Survey Program 1998: 17.

**Table 4: Place of birth**

*How important is it to have been born in (respondent's country)?*

	Very important		Fairly important		Not very important	Not (N)
important at all						
US	41.2	27.5	18.9	12.4		1325
Canada	24.7	20.7	28.5	26.1		1491
Britain	49.8	28.8	14.8	6.6		1025
W. Germany	26.9	23.8	31.5	17.8		1243
Netherlands	23.4	28.7	35.4	12.5		2063
Hungary	40.7	27.1	21.1	11		980

**Source:** Adapted from International Social Survey Program 1998: 13.

Although it would be a mistake to over-generalise from a limited range of questions, some initial conclusions can be drawn. Despite the claims of those who represent the US in terms of the political model, a sizeable majority of Americans perceive national identity in distinctly different terms. To be 'truly American':

- " about two-thirds of Americans assert that an individual must have been born in the US;
- " over half believe that adherence to the Christian faith is also required;
- " almost three-quarters argue that individuals must have lived in the US for most of their lives;
- " over two-thirds go further and say that they must have been born in the US;
- " and over 90 per cent believe that proficiency in the English language is essential.

These beliefs and values are associated with cultural and ethno-racial conceptions of the US rather than political definitions. They represent a rejection of both liberal representations of identity and, as Jack Citrin emphasises, a repudiation of multiculturalism (Citrin 2001: 300). The beliefs underpinning the responses to these questions are tied to a sense of identity that is structured around tightly drawn parameters. For example, the association between American identity and Christianity excludes those committed to the Judaic and Islamic faiths. These assertions about identity point to a belief that individuals must be immersed in the folkways of the country. Acculturation is a necessary corollary. Furthermore, the claim that an individual must have been born in the US if he or she is to be 'truly American' – an assurance of citizenship under the Constitution - suggests that ascriptive qualities have at least a partial role in determining national identity.

The statistics offer little to those who talk of an 'ideas nation', *propositional* forms of identity, and American exceptionalism. Although a greater proportion of Hungarians see their identity in culturally defined terms, there are other few statistically significant differences between the US and the European countries included in the survey. Furthermore, where there are differences, it seems that many of these other countries - rather than the US - lean towards a political definition of identity. Although, for example, British respondents

share some of the feelings towards identity that are evident in the US, there are marked differences in attitudes towards religion. Despite the Church of England's role as the established church, fewer of those in UK believe that adherence to the Christian faith is a defining feature of British national identity. Paradoxically, a comparison of the survey findings between the US and Canada could be used to bolster claims that Canada – rather than the US – is closer to the defining features of the political model.

### The break-down of American opinion

Alongside international comparisons, the General Social Survey also offers the opportunity to look at the relationship between attitudes towards national identity and different demographic variables including gender, income, age, and race. The findings indicate that feelings about identity are shared across most demographic cleavages. However, although the sample numbers are small, they suggest some significant racial and ethnic differences.

**Some people say that the following things are important for being truly American. Others say they are not important, (in percentages).**

**Table 5: How important is it to be able to speak English? (AMENGLSH)**

	Very important		Fairly important		Not very important	Not (N)
important at all						
White	71.7	21.9	4.7	1.7		1088
Black	73.3	18.3	5.6	2.8		180
Other	61.1	26.4	11.1	1.4		72

**Table 6: How important is it to have lived in America for most of one's life? (AMLIVED)**

	Very important		Fairly important		Not very important	Not (N)
important at all						
White	42.4	29.3	21.5	6.9		1080
Black	60.1	22.5	14.5	2.9		173
Other	35.2	36.6	18.3	9.9		71

**Table 7: How important is it to be a Christian? (AMCHRSTN)**

	Very important		Fairly important		Not very important	Not (N)
important at all						
White	35.5	15.4	21.9	27.2		1063
Black	62.1	14.7	16.9	6.2		177
Other	26.1	11.6	27.5	34.8		69

**Table 8: How important is it to have been born in America? (AMBORNIN)**

	Very important		Fairly important		Not very important	Not (N)
important at all						
White	38.3	28.2	20.4	13.1		1078
Black	64	18.5	11.2	6.2		178
Other	27.5	40.6	14.5	17.4		69

Source: adapted from General Social Survey Cumulative Datafile (1979-2000).

As Tables 6-8 suggest, disproportionate numbers of African-Americans seem committed to beliefs associated with a restricted definition of identity and the cultural model. Over 60 per cent regard lifetime residence, adherence to the Christian faith, and birth in the US as 'very important' in determining American national identity. Among whites, feelings are significantly less intense. For those categorised as 'others' - principally Latinos - the figures are lower still.

Only the most tentative and speculative forms of explanation can be offered for these findings. Although overall levels of religiosity are high, a much higher proportion of African-Americans than the white population considers itself to be 'very religious' (General Social Survey Cumulative Datafile 1979-2000). The attributes specified in the question – such as birth in the US and long-term residence - allow respondents an opportunity to 'belong' to the US in a context where other forms of 'belonging' appear to have been denied. The degree of identification with these particular components of national identity may be an expression of alienation and could correspond with the conclusions drawn in those studies of black opinion that have found a significant degree of isolation and detachment from the American 'mainstream'. For example, in her 1995 study of the black middle class, *Facing Up to the American Dream*, Jennifer Hochschild found that despite rising levels of material prosperity, there was widespread disenchantment with the American dream and its promise of upward mobility and individual success (Hochschild 1995: 72). There may also be an association between African-American sentiments and the competitive pressures that have been created in the secondary labour market by the dramatic growth of the Latino population. Between 1980 and 2000, the Latino share of the overall US population grew from 9 per cent to 12.5 per cent.

### Summary and conclusion

As has been noted, there are three principal definitions of American national identity. The political model - in both its liberal and multiculturalist forms - confines the locus of national identity to the political realm. It is, at least formally, disinterested in culture. In contrast, the cultural model insists that there is an American nationality resting on distinct folkways. These incorporate the speaking of English and the adoption of particular attitudes. Ethno-racial models go beyond this and assert that only some ethnic and racial groupings can be assimilated. Although many of the most celebrated studies of American identity draw on the political model and rest on liberal representations of the US experience, the 1995-96 ISSP and GSS surveys suggest that a disproportionate number of Americans are committed to ideas associated with the cultural model of identity. Furthermore, there is an implicit assertion that the assimilation process presents formidable obstacles to the newcomer. Indeed, as has been noted, over 68 per cent believe that immigrants themselves cannot be fully assimilated. They regard birth in the US as either 'very' or 'fairly' important in defining who is, or is not, 'truly American'.

The GSS findings have policy implications. Although suppressed by the economic boom during the latter half of the 1990s, immigration has long been a source of political controversy. While faith in the efficacy of unrestricted market forces also plays a role, those who call for significantly increased levels of immigration, or even open borders, also derive their arguments, either implicitly or explicitly, from a political definition of American identity. Correspondingly, opposition to an open immigration policy is fuelled and strengthened by perceptions of the US that rest upon cultural, or in some cases ethno-racial definitions. The degree to which these representations of the US have won popular acceptance suggests that - notwithstanding suggestions that the Bush administration might liberalise policy towards both legal and illegal immigrants from Mexico - the centre of political gravity will remain within the restrictionist camp. The security concerns about immigrants that arose in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks only added further weight to their arguments.

There are further consequences. Over the next half-century, the demographic character of the US is expected to change profoundly. Although there will be important differences between regions, the Census Bureau estimates that the US will have a non-white majority by 2060. Some observers are optimistic about the nature of the change. In a 2001 essay, Jack Citrin considers the GSS findings alongside other survey evidence, and suggests that there is still the widely shared commitment to an American 'civil religion' that Tocqueville recorded in the ante-bellum era. It rests, Citrin argues, upon a shared identity and a culture that draws Americans together, but at the same time permits a degree of diversity. Against this background, demographic change would have a relatively straightforward character.

'A common identity is a lubricant that helps a nation achieve collective goals. Liberal nationalism is a formula for fusing individual members of American society into a system that assures equality of status and a measure of commonality to all while, at the same time, allowing the maintenance of different cultural traditions' (Citrin 2001: 305).

However, the GSS and ISSP findings also point in another direction. While survey respondents generally acknowledge the importance of at least limited diversity as a policy goal, the widely shared commitment to cultural representations of national identity – in particular, the large numbers who do not see foreign-born or non-Christian citizens as 'truly American' - suggests a basis for division rather than consensus. The

growing numbers of Latino and Asian immigrants, and the increasing proportion of the population that is foreign-born, can only intensify resentments and tensions. In such circumstances, the task of coalition building – around which the American political process has long been structured – will inevitably become a more fraught and difficult process.

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