

Some Observations on Minority Integration in American Mainstream

Tamar SHIOSHVILI *

Abstract

Many Americans believe in the melting pot, but in practice they apply the cookie cutter. For those who could fit the mold, socio-economic advancement in a class society was possible based upon one's individual efforts. Status was earned or determined by what one did.

After the changes of 1960s assumptions retained by Americans for hundreds of years were examined by the great majority. At the peak of the questions was the letting pot assumption of how one enters the mainstream of the American society. Laborers and blacks wanted the equitable share or quality of the socioeconomic pie. However, they could not give up their differences to fit the cookie-cutter mold as white laborers did. The price of entry was extremely high and impossible. With the assertion of black identity the civil rights movement of 1960s became qualitative and is the basis of all identity movements since then. Women's Liberation, Chicano Liberation, and all other such movements affirm the right to be different and still have their fair share of the American pie.

Keywords: civil rights, cookie-cutter, equitable, identity, mainstream, mold

Introduction

Americans regularly explore their own culture. Mostly anthropologists write papers on Africans, Asians, subcultural groups within the United States, and much is written about the mainstream or dominant culture WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). Magnificent studies of American culture have been written by foreign scholars such as Alexis de Tocqueville. (Tocqueville, 1948; Myrdal, 1944)

The formation of the New Nation was not like that of European states. There was no developmental phase during which the nation emerged from a feudal period, developing from villages and city-states. The American nation developed abruptly with the immigration of northern Europeans from the Old World who left their motherland, extended families, titles, cultures to enter the new world. During this period they were detached from the rest of the universe by the two oceans. This was not the case of geography. Settlers wanted to be removed from the tough class system, political and religious oppression, corruption and violence of the Old World. This was enunciated in George Washington's Farewell Address where he stated that the U.S. wanted to remain extricated from the wars going on in Europe. In the 1820's, the Monroe Doctrine warned that European nations should stay out of the Western hemisphere. Isolationism became a matter of public policy.

At the early stage the habit of not studying the American culture was the accepted custom in the national psyche. While immigrant children entered the public education system, they abandoned the culture of the Old World involving

its languages, class assumptions, perceptions.

Many studies of Peace Corps volunteers, businessmen often say, that the crucial result of their experience is that they become more aware of their own culture.

I can bring my own example: As a Fulbright professor in the George Washington University for quite a lengthy period, I started scrutinizing my own culture more, and when I was asked to prepare something Georgian for the international dinners organized by the State Department, I got more attached to Georgian dishes, like beans with walnuts and spices.

Few Americans are conscious of the impact their own culture has on personalities of other cultures. Like Western psychology assumed that the individual exists outside the context of a community culture, (Doi, 1971) Americans often fail to appreciate how one is affected by cultural experiences. This is in consistence with a philosophy of political and economic liberalism, individualism, self-reliance and independence.

What is Mainstream American Culture?

The mainstream, or dominant, American culture is Anglo-American from the point of view of socio-economic and political power, accepted norms of behavior, values, beliefs, and ways of thinking. The average American is white, middle class and urban. And the accepted behavior is that of the mainstream. American Schools and child care centers delib-

* Prof. Dr., Faculty of Education and Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia
 E-mail: tshioshvili@ibsu.edu.ge

erately or unconsciously embrace and enforce the norms of the dominant culture notwithstanding the impact on the non-mainstream child. In reality the cookie-cutter works daily in these organizations. There has been a cultural “cookie cutter” with a white, male, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon mold. The price one paid to enter the mainstream or dominant culture was to reject those cultural characteristics which did not fit this mold.

According to scholars this is not a process of “cultural pluralism” but, instead “cultural homogenization” or, in political terms, “cultural imperialism”.

While every person might be free to acculturate, or acquire the norms and behaviors of the mainstream, the potential to enter was controlled by dominant culture. Acculturation is a process of learning or acquiring another culture while assimilation is a matter of being accepted as a member of another culture. Assimilation was determined by those with political, social and economic power as in many colonial societies. (Rich & Ogawa, 1982, pp. 43-49)

We acknowledge the definition of the American culture without denying the insurmountable diversity which exists in the U.S. and the changes that have taken place over the past three decades. In the 1984 Presidential election, a black –Jesse Jackson ran for president, and a female Italian Catholic ran for Vice President and moreover, in 2008 African American Barack Obama became president of the U.S.A. Nonetheless, the average American fits the cookie-cutter mold. Classified ethnic minorities are considered sub-cultures, as they are by the mainstream culture.

It is affirmed that Americans are basically underdeveloped northern Europeans because the early settlers were mainly from the north of Europe. Large numbers of southern European immigrants really did not come until the nineteenth century. I think this is a faulty assumption. According to some sources the first settlers were not northern Europeans, but Asians. The evidence (Faragher et al., 2004, p. 4) suggests that the migration from Asia began about 30,000 years ago – around the same time that Japan and Scandinavia were being settled. This evidence is based on blood type. The great majority of modern Native Americans have type O blood and a few have type A, but almost none have type B. modern Asian populations include all three blood types, however the migrations must have before the evolution of type B, which anthropologists presume occurred about 30,000 years ago. The study of the evolution of languages offers another kind of evidence. Linguists argue that it would require at least 35,000 years to develop, from a simple common base, the nearly 500 distinct languages of the Americas. About 25,000 years ago human communities were established in western Beringia, which is present-day Alaska. But passage to the south was blocked by a huge glacial sheet covering great part of what is today Canada. How did the hunters get over 2,000 miles of deep ice? The persuasion is that climate began to warm with the passing of the Ice Age, and around 13,000 B.C.E. (before the Common Era, which began 2,000 years ago) glacial meeting created an ice-free corridor – the original “Pan-American Highway” – along the eastern front range of the Rocky Mountains. Soon hunters of big game had reached the Great Plains.

The first settlers were not “typical” northern Europeans. They were rather mobile, wishing to travel to the New World knowing that about 20 percent would not survive. The average European was living in a small house, as did his parents and grandparents. It would have been a bit bizarre to start a journey knowing there was a good opportunity of dying on the way. They were high-risk takers. Most of them were Calvinists and Puritans who had a religious belief that God rewards those who work hard and it’s up to each person to earn status in society founded upon individual effort, not family background. Socioeconomic mobility was reckoned on without titles or nobility, monarchs, a rigid class system, extended families, or great disparities in wealth and opportunity. Early American colonists were refugees, fleeing religious and political oppression and persecution in Europe. Some left to avoid fighting the endless wars. And some were criminals who were exiled to the New World. So, to regard these settlers as simply typical northern Europeans would be defined as a misrepresentation of reality.

Many of their behavior and customs – external culture – looked like typical northern Europeans’ culture, but in connection with internal culture, they were atypical. The mainstream American values and beliefs observed today go back to these formative. As these values and beliefs were established in the American ground, they prospered and became even more essential than anywhere in Europe.

Colonial America was largely dissociated from the wars of Europe. The land had bountiful natural resources, a coastline with hundreds of harbors, and an incessantly expanding economy. There was a small population and great need for manpower. A psychology of abundance developed based upon the abundance of opportunity to prosper in the New World.

If a person was motivated to work hard, there was a great chance of economic advancement. Given the bounty of resources and opportunities, only the unwilling to work would fail. If God rewarded those who worked hard, those who failed were responsible for their own fortune.

This was the Protestant Work Ethic. The values and beliefs that are most important in any culture are always rewarded. This Work Ethic was highly reinforced in this environment. Had colonists landed in Antarctica, it is improbable that individual achievement, competition and hard work would have been important values and beliefs. Not only would they have gone unrewarded, affiliations with others, extended family to rely on, and cooperation would have been higher on their scale of values. Moreover, had the first settlers not shared the work ethic, it is improbable that American culture as it is today would have evolved. It was the combination of values and physical environment that gave way to the formation of a culture called “American”, so distinct from most other cultures around the universe. Americans had to expand themselves into the rest of the world to export their agricultural products and guarantee their economic growth. Subsequently Freedom of the Seas was added by Thomas Jefferson to the foreign policy of isolationism. According to many the New World was chosen by God. The evidence was the political, economic and social success of these Americans who were not dunked in corruption, war, tyranny, and controlling class system which confined most

in poverty.

The tendency to be unconcerned about the rest of the world and to view it as evil was instituted during these formative years. The histrionic good-guys versus bad-guys perception – the morally strong American against the immoral world – appeared with its dichotomies – Heavens and Hells, Angels and Devils and later the Free World and the Communist World.

When opportunities diminished on the East Coast movement to the West started. The “population centers of gravity” moved westwards. Nuclear families in covered wagons survived due to their “cowboy values” – self-reliance, rugged individualism, and independence. Early settlers left the original British colonies along the East Coast and pushed westwards in thin lines along the rivers, and then through the mountain passages. The American frontier – that imaginary line dividing areas with more than two people per square mile from those with fewer – was at one time just on the other side of the Appalachian mountains. Then it shifted to the areas, today known as the Midwest. Soon it was across the Mississippi. By 1853 the U.S. had procured the entire western part of the country by purchase, conquest, and treaty. As more and more people got settled on these territories, new states were created. In 1890 the frontier was finally and officially declared “closed”. America’s “manifest destiny”, her mission to expand her territory all the way across the continent to provide room for future generations, had been completed.

This frontier experience, the gradual but steady opening and settlement of new lands to the west, had continued for about three hundred years. According to the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, (Stevenson, 2004, p. 28) this experience of first surviving and then cultivating the vast, wild land had a deep and lasting influence on the American character. It strengthened the spirit of independence: the frontiersmen went ahead of governments, not behind them. It demanded self-reliance and self-confidence. It encouraged a sense of equality: what individuals could do was more important than who they or their parents were. It brought forward a restlessness, that “wanting to move on”, which many observers still see in Americans today. It made Americans more willing to “get up and go” somewhere else in search of something better. It created a certain unforgiving atmosphere: those who were weaker, or lacking in will-power, did not do well on the frontier.

And it also helped to develop a characteristic that has been often noted among Americans. In bad times or good, they tend to move easily from one part of the country to another. They seem to settle in and feel quickly at home wherever they go. The romantic heroes of the “frontier” period were pioneer families and separate adventurers such as for e.g. Daniel Boone. Americans have always admired men of action who have achieved success through their own individual efforts. True success is individual success according to Americans.

Cultural Homogenization

Many Americans believe in the melting pot, but in practice

they apply the cookie cutter. For those who could fit the mold, socio-economic advancement in a class society was possible based upon one’s individual efforts. Status was earned or determined by what one did. Being male or female, black or white, Protestant or Catholic, is theoretically inapposite to one’s position in the society if, one could fit the cookie-cutter mold. The most standard American English is “to do”, probably because doing is so important in a society without assigned status or roles. If people asked the question “Who are you” at a party, most will tell you what they do, as if “what you do” is “who you are”. Unlike laborers in Europe workers did not blame their government for their desperate situation. They did not organize to change the government but instead strongly supported the Administration. Suicide, alcoholism suggest these victims blamed themselves.

Identifiable minorities, who could not fit the mold, were treated as castes within the class system. Nonwhites were ascribed status and identity based upon who they were, not what they did. It was not a matter of individual achievement or the acquisition of wealth. About 50 years ago, a black millionaire could not sit next to an illiterate white laborer in a southern diner.

While this apartheid-like system no longer exists, Americans moved to the opposite extreme and forced minorities to negate who they are, including their own cultural and racial differences, which is probably as overbearing to identifiable minorities as the apparent racism of the pre-1960s. If we go back to the changes of 1960s, many consider the Civil Right Act, the 18-year-old’ right to vote, and other such political accomplishments. Although, the most significant changes were primarily cultural. Assumptions retained by Americans for hundreds of years were examined by the great majority. At the peak of the questions would be the melting pot assumption of how one enters the mainstream of the American society.

The first sit-ins were actually efforts to get into the melting pot and for sure did not challenge the myth or the process. This was quantitative protest similar to the labor movement. Laborers and blacks wanted their equitable share or quantity of the socioeconomic pie. After workers established the right to outline fair salaries, benefits and practices, they blended into the middle class of America and proved that given equal opportunity, they could be successful. Blacks wanted the same right of entrance.

However, they could not give up their differences to fit the cookie-cutter mold as white laborers did. The price of entry was extremely high and impossible to pay. No one challenged the cookie-cutter process, or questioned the price of entry until the mid-1960s when “Black Powerism” originated. With the assertion of black identity the civil rights movement became qualitative. Blacks not only established the right to maintain their cultural and racial identities and still enter the mainstream; they also questioned the worth of the American pie if it meant continually earning identity and self-esteem in a dog-eat-dog society. (Jackson, 1979, pp. 17-45)

This was the first existential movement in American History and is the bases of all identity movements since then. Women’s Liberation, Chicano Liberation, and all other such movements affirm the right to be different and still have their fair share of the American pie. They refuse to pay the price of giving up or denying their cultural and group identities. Who they are is as important as what they do.

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