

How the American Identity Has Changed over the Course of Time.

Kari Thomas

Department of History, Ivy Tech Community College

HIST 101H ; Honors American History

Professor Lanette G Gonzalez

April 12, 2022

Abstract

When asked to explain in American History 101 what the American Identity means to me, I found myself with a lot more bold feelings than I thought that I would. That entire class actually bubbled to the surface feelings on politics that I never dreamed of having before. It allowed me a chance to explore new ideas and current issues that I had not before, and really discover how I feel about the American Identity.

How the American Identity Has Changed over the Course of Time.

The American Identity has grown and evolved over time. By this, I mean the "self-identity" of the typical American is ever-changing, and evolving to fit the necessary times they are in. For long stints of time, a person's "identity" can stay stagnant, and not evolve - perhaps even through several generations of people in a singular family or social unit; and then, on the flip side, that same "identity" can be a hair-pin-trigger, shifting in an instant to include, or disclude parts that do not, any longer, feel as important; or sometimes even just downright wrong. These "identity" shifts often coincide with wartimes faced by the people.

Before we were "Americans," the early colonists would identify as the countries they were originally from ; meaning, if a person came over on a boat from France to the New World, they would still identify themselves as Frenchmen. They still had the roots to tie them back to their old country. Same with the British, and all other newcomers to the "Melting Pot" that was to be the New World, or America. Following the French and Indian War however, and all of the new British taxes that came along with a British Win - the colonists banded together to ultimately form the American Identity, and wanted to stop conforming to the identity of their Mother Countries. This progressive mentality eventually led to the American Revolution, and a separation from the thumb that was holding these people down. It was then that the Declaration of Independence was written, claiming all "men ... [are] created equal...with unalienable

rights...[of] Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness ...” (Declaration of Independence, 1776)

The next major split in the American Identity was at the onset of the Civil War, which divided us further into the Northerners and the Southerners. It was at this time in history that Americans from the North of the Ohio River and Mason Dixon Line, and Americans from the South, believed in two very separate and very different things. Proud Southern plantation and slave owners believed that their way of life was best ; meanwhile Northerners were trying to free slaves, and give them a “safe” place to land. It was, most likely, around this time too, that people may have even started to identify with the particular state in which they reside, instead of specifically North and South, due to the fact the bordering states had varying thoughts on the matters at hand.

As America ages over the centuries, so do the thoughts and beliefs surrounding the Identity of the American mature. Over the past few decades Americans have begun to reclaim those Mother Countries that generations not so long ago had pushed away from. Now, to be proud of your heritage is just as important, if not more so, than to be proud to be American. Generations of families that have come to America to leave behind genocide and betrayal of their people, have started to reconnect with those old thoughts and beliefs. According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, “Some commentators anticipate a new melting pot, often labeled as the ‘browning of America,’ characterized by continued blurring of once-distinct racial and ethnic

divisions.” (Perez, 2009). This quote, and really the entire article, is discussing how to be American these days, after centuries of inter-race marriage, and mixed babies, is to be the true Melting Pot of identities that America was promised to be.

Along with this new Melting Pot though, comes the hate and ignorance of American Exceptionalism ; or the thought that Americans are more exceptional, and therefore of a higher mentality than other cultures and ethnicities. To feel as though to be “American” is Exceptional, is to feel as though that anyone who identifies as any other is less than. According to Tom Rosentiel of pewresearch.org, there are three types of exceptionalism ; Misunderstood, Conditional, and Problematic. He defines Misunderstood Exceptionalism as “American values and attitudes that many in the United States as well as abroad regard as part of the problem...” ; Conditional Exceptionalism as “aspects of the American character that are distinctive, but not so much that they are destined to consistently divide the American people from the rest of the world ...” ; and Problematic Exceptionalism as “how Americans view themselves, their country, and the world in ways that reflect potentially unbridgeable, persistent gaps in opinions on important issues...” (Rosentiel, 2006). This is not to say that Americans are the only people to believe themselves exceptional. In the time of these wars, most of these countries, especially the British, considered themselves “exceptional.”

However, as some Americans have always viewed themselves and their country as exceptional, others have seen things incredibly differently; and this was where the "Anti-American" Identity was born. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "Anti-American" as "opposed or hostile to the people or the government policies of the U.S." To be Anti-American is to oppose the views and foreign policies of the United States government, and the people it stands for. It is the most literal opposite of American Exceptionalism, as Anti-Americans hold strong beliefs against basically everything the typical identifying "American" will hold. People who would consider themselves to be Anti-American, need to also be able to recognize the fact that, in doing this they are expressing many of the rights that they have as an American citizen, laid out for us in the United States Constitution - specifically the Freedom of Speech, and the Freedom of Expression. "Freedom of speech is protected in many of the freest countries in the world but is often restricted in totalitarian countries, communist countries, fascist countries, and dictatorships..." (World Population Review).

However, how "free" is our speech in this country really? When compared to communist, fascists, and dictatorships, sure we look fantastic! However, worldpopulationreview.com has a really interesting chart showing exactly where we rank in our "Freedoms" ; and the chart is not pretty. We don't even rank in the top 10! United States is tied for spot #13 for Freedom of Speech, falling behind a total of 30 other countries! In addition to this, while the thoughts behind the Declaration of Independence could have been valid, if only they truly believed what they were saying ;

and included all "humankind" in that statement, not just the Cis-White-Men - who are still to this day in charge of running things. Sadly all of these divisions in American Identity, still exists today ; with people in the deep Southern states, (and even some less progressive people in the Northern States,) still proudly flying rebel flags, and regularly attending KKK meetings - ultimately, still truly believing that the North was wrong and should have not won the Civil War ; and that African American people, along with all other minorities, are still less than and undeserving of their human rights, and their part of society. We can see this unfortunate fact in the numerous "Black Lives Matters" riots over the last couple of years. People need to realize that to view oneself as Asian American, or African American, Indian-American - whatever is one's own culture - is to fully identify ; and the fact that it is 2022, and this same fight is still being fought, just shows that Americans have not learned from their past mistakes, and it will continue to repeat itself.

As you can see, the American Identity is an ever evolving idea that continues to change on a semi-regular basis. "So when Americans proclaim they are exceptional and indispensable, they are simply the latest nation to sing a familiar old song. Among great powers, thinking you're special is the norm, not the exception ... But if Americans want to be truly exceptional, they might start by viewing the whole idea of "American exceptionalism" with a much more skeptical eye." (Walt, 2011).

Reference Page

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Anti-American definition & meaning*. Merriam-Webster.

Retrieved April 10, 2022, from

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anti-American>

Perez, A. D., & Hirschman, C. (2009, March). *The changing racial and ethnic composition of the US population: Emerging American identities*. Population and development review. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2882688/>

Rosentiel, T. (2020, May 30). *The problem of American exceptionalism*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from

<https://www.pewresearch.org/2006/05/09/the-problem-of-american-exceptionalism/>

Walt, S. M. (2011, October 11). *The myth of American exceptionalism*. Foreign Policy. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism/>

World Population Review. (2022). *Countries with freedom of speech 2022*. World Population Review. Retrieved April 12, 2022, from

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-freedom-of-speech>