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"All Different" and "All the Same": Some Shared Aspects of American Culture

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American cultural critics like to imagine that their society is so diverse in population, so gigantic in scale, so mobile and changeable, that it has no cultural identity; instead Americans are said to be distracted, fragmented, confused, and irrational, unable to connect or focus on anything. In the United States, Saul Bellow gloomily says, "consciousness emptily asserts itself." (Bellow 1990)

Why exactly Americans (or, more accurately, American intellectuals) prefer to see their society as disjoined, vacillating, and vacant is a vexing question, but not one that I have time to address here. Instead, I want to draw attention to some of the central and taken-for-granted cultural values that do indeed give the United States a specific national character. Although an audience of American intellectuals might find my argument odd, it ought not be so unfamiliar to the French. After all, it was a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, who drew the first, and still the best, outline of American identity.

Let me begin by reciting some obvious historical facts. The United States never had an old regime. As Seymour Lipset
(1963) has written, it was the "first new nation"; it had its roots as a revolutionary society, and as a democratic one. The American governmental system, constructed against the backdrop of British colonial authority, was and remains profoundly anti-authoritarian, anti-state, and egalitarian. Of course, the propertied elite in colonial times did support their own interests. But the original US armed forces were made up of men who already held strong egalitarian and individualistic values. Just as importantly, these citizen soldiers owned their own weapons, and knew very well how to use them in defense of their hard-won freedom.

It is also worth stressing that the United States has developed into a remarkably stable and homogenous society – despite the reiterated fears of fragmentation and collapse. The only truly painful division in the United States is the continuing racial polarization of black and white. And even there, no plausible threat of black revolution or separation has occurred, or is likely to occur. In the country at large, the notion of states' rights and a deep distrust of the federal government continue to have a powerful appeal to most Americans, but there has been no talk of secession since the Civil war. Class warfare in the United States has also been subdued. The vast majority of Americans see themselves as "middle-class." Essentially conservative, they seek to maintain the status positions while also striving for upward mobility. Social revolution is not on their agenda. Nor is there any burning religious division among Americans, despite the fact that the
United States is the most pious of developed nations. This is because for Americans religion is a personal choice; so long as one believes in something spiritual, the actual content of belief is irrelevant. In fact, the main problem for religious groups in America is not persecution, but maintaining any kind of distinctiveness. Finally, although the United States is truly a nation of immigrants, the overwhelming result of immigration has been assimilation. Ethnic differences have become options, not essences. They are expressed in food preference and participation in parades, and serve to provide individuals a sense of distinction in a world that is remarkably homogenous. Such weak identities rarely lead to conflict. Note, for instance, the very low number of anti-Arab incidents in the wake of 9/11.

The point is that the United States has long demonstrated a strong homogenizing nationalism capable of drawing its citizens away from any particular ethnic, class or religious identity. Alternative visions have been marginalized in favor of a standard notion of what America ought to be, namely, "the land of opportunity" where old settlers and new migrants, rich and poor, Protestant and Catholic, all participate equally.

In contrast, consider France, which has long been recognized as the most centralized, liberal, democratic, and modern of European states. Yet, in comparison to the United States, France harbors within its borders many potentially very disruptive regional, class, ethnic, religious, and linguistic distinctions. For example, there is nothing in the United States
remotely resembling the separatist movements in Brittany or Corsica, which are based on deep and compelling linguistic, historical and cultural divisions.

If Americans have relatively little of content to divide them, they have much to stimulate unity. Not least is a common faith in the pleasures and potentials of capitalism, which remains at the heart of the "American dream" of attaining wealth and luxury. For Tocqueville, the American obsession with the money was best understood as a psychological consequence of an egalitarian classless society. As he wrote in 1840: "When the prestige attached to what is old has vanished, men are no longer distinguished, or hardly distinguished, by birth, standing, or profession; there is thus hardly anything left but money which makes very clear distinctions between men or can raise some of them above the common level" (Tocqueville 1969: 615). The intense competition of equals for status through wealth stimulates the conspicuous consumption of expensive goods that is the major route to prestige in American culture. (See Veblen 1979).

The capitalist spirit coincides and corresponds with a shared faith that all persons are independent individuals, each separately responsible for his or her own fate and endowed with a God-given potential for free choice and agency. Ideally, all such persons are equal before God and the law, with equivalent rights and privileges, and all are worthy of respect regardless of wealth, prestige or power. This pervasive belief, derived in part from the historical absence of an aristocracy in the United
States, in part from the culturally dominant Protestant faith in the capacity of individuals to choose their own fates, and in part from the great social mobility of American society, has always been expressed in ordinary interaction through an absence of deference and by strong moral demands for the expression of equal esteem for all members of the community.

As a result of this creed, Americans remain extremely careful to cloak all authority relations with the trappings of equality. Subordinates are "team members" whose "consent" and "cooperation" are "requested" by their "supervisor". At home it is perfectly acceptable to have servants or to go to an elite school, but not to put the servants in livery or to have a genteel accent; in short, it is politically correct to be rich and powerful just so long as one does not make claims to be different and better. The surest way to be ostracized by Americans is to have the reputation of being a snob; the surest way to be accepted is to be friendly and "nice" to everyone, regardless of status.

Such effacement might seem to conflict with the self-assertiveness of Americans, who are well known for their confidence and expressivity. Yet at the same time Americans place an extraordinarily high value on getting along well with others. This seeming contradiction can be reconciled once we note that among Americans status and respect are awarded to those who are well liked by their peers. In this context it makes sense that the majority of Americans who easily adapt to the needs of others also express themselves with certainty and
ease. After all, they are showing themselves to be capable of participating in banter with their co-equals. Deference would be both embarrassing and unacceptable.

Americans "niceness", easy social interaction, and distaste for elitism makes functional sense in a fluid social world where there are no clear status markers; this unstable and potentially threatening universe is made liveable by the expectation that one's own friendliness and helpfulness will usually be reciprocated. Such an attitude can only exist in conjunction with a basic sense of trust in the public sphere, which Americans think is populated by men and women who, like oneself, are basically fair, decent, and kindly.

This high degree of social trust is a legacy of the original Protestant covenanted community, now transformed into the larger secularized social world where the primary values are being "well liked" and "getting along well with others". Training toward these ends is clearest in the American school system, where popular students are elected as student body leaders whose job is to "represent" their fellows, where "school spirit" is heavily promoted, and where children are graded on the quality of their "citizenship". Students are also expected to participate in extracurricular activities that oblige them to cooperate together on a voluntary basis. Team sports especially are highly valued as an expression of "school spirit" and local pride, where individuals can show off their personal talents while helping their team mates to victory through disciplined self-sacrifice and cooperation. These institutions have nothing
to do with formal education, everything to do with learning how to participate peacefully in a competitive society of co-equal individuals.

Alongside diffuse trust goes another characteristic American stance, that of "moral minimalism", which prohibits overt interference with or judgement upon other people (Baumgartner 1988). This ethical position of benign detachment, like the requirement to be nice to everyone, is a product of the underlying American value system of individualistic egalitarianism, which means that all persons have the freedom to make their own fates, without restraint from their neighbors, and, concomitantly, should not meddle with anyone else either. This American pattern especially correlates with a roomy and fluid world, where there is rarely any need for individuals to confront one another. For example, in American suburbs it is quite possible for members of the same household to have separate rooms, separate schedules, separate meals, and to almost never to come in contact. Under these conditions, Americans tolerate diversity, so long as they are not obliged to interact with others who are too different from themselves, that is, who are "snobs" or "not nice", or with people who are intrusive and make demands on their time and autonomy.

Beneath the generalized "niceness", social trust and moral minimalism of America stands the fundamental cultural premise that "individualism is natural, community problematical. Society has to be built" (Varenne 1977: 70). Generated again from Protestant principles in the context of American social
openness, this is a vision of society not as a pre-existent entity but as a moral corporation knitted together by voluntary agreements between independent and co-equal agents each bearing personal responsibility for their acts. The individual in this cultural framework is not empty, but is an actor pursuing his or her own ends, whether spiritual or monetary (or both). The community is required to serve those ends, but it is not believed to pre-exist them, and it can be deconstructed when it no longer fulfills its purpose. The sense that community has no existence beyond the choices of the individuals who make it up is, I may hazard, the main source of American anxiety about the stability of their society.

In sum, America does have a unique culture that is based upon shared values of egalitarian individualism and capitalist free enterprise. It has demonstrated an astonishing capacity to integrate new immigrants, to defuse religious, class and ethnic hostilities, and to promote a homogenized national culture. It is animated by dreams of monetary success in the competitive marketplace, but this is softened by an ethic of generalized social trust and a pervasive interaction style that combines "niceness" with moral minimalism. Within this shared frame of reference, Americans imagine their social universe to be, in its ideal form, based on the voluntary co-operation of co-equals engaged in the joint task of building a community. From the point of view of its citizens, the United States is the best of all possible worlds, one that, by and large, delivers on its
promises. Instead of ethnic nationalism, Americans have the nationalism of an ideal.

We can say then that, despite rhetoric, the United States is not a society of great internal divergence. Although there is a plethora of noisy interest groups, there is little real recognition of genuinely alternative ways of life. This point can be underscored by noting a standard European joke about American foreign policy: the United States wishes people to be free to choose—just so long as they choose the American way. And this is scarcely surprising: Americans have not really experienced the clash of utterly different ways of life. Rather, the differences that exist in American civilization are objectively relatively small: whilst ideologically "all are different", Americans in fact are remarkably "all the same."