

AMERICAN CULTURE 1

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Unit 1

IMMIGRATION AND DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

ETHNIC AND RACIAL ASSIMILATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Melting Pot or Salad Bowl

- The population of the US includes a large variety of ethnic groups coming from many races, nationalities, and religions.
- Some have described the United States as a "melting pot" where various racial and ethnic groups have been combined into one culture.
- Others are inclined to see the US as a "salad bowl" where the various groups have remained somewhat distinct and different from one another, creating a richly diverse country

The Establishment of the Dominant Culture

- White population had the greater numbers, the money, and the political power, therefore this majority defined what the dominant culture would be
- The dominant American culture that grew out of the nation's early history, then, was English-speaking, Western European, Protestant, and middle class in character

The Assimilation of Non-Protestant and Non-Western Europeans

- As is the case in many cultures, the degree to which a minority group was seen as different from the characteristics of the dominant majority determined the extent of that group's acceptance.
- Immigrants who were like the earlier settlers were accepted => those with significantly different characteristics tended to be viewed as a threat to traditional American values and way of life
- The US had a rapidly expanding economy at the turn of the century making it possible for these new immigrants, often with the help of the bosses, to better their standard of living. As a result of these new opportunities and new rewards, immigrants accepted most of the values of the larger American culture and were accepted by the great majority of Americans

The African-American Experience

- The process of assimilation in the US has been much more successful for white ethnic groups than for nonwhite ethnic groups. Americans of African descent have had the greatest difficulty in becoming assimilated into the larger culture as they were brought to the US against their will to be sold as slaves. Except for the Native American Indian tribes who inhabited the US before the first white settlers arrived, other ethnic groups came to America voluntarily.
- A minority of whites in the North insisted that slavery and freedom could not exist together in a free country and demanded that slavery be abolished, even if this meant war with the South. A much larger number of northern whites believed that freedom and equality of opportunity needed to be protected for white people only, but they were afraid that black slavery would eventually take away their economic freedom

- When Lincoln won the presidency in 1860, the southern states left the Union and tried to form a new nation of their own based on slavery. A Civil War between the North and South resulted, which turned out to be the bloodiest and most destructive of all the nation's wars. When the North was finally victorious, black slavery ended in the US.

- African-Americans were not readily assimilated into the larger American culture. Most remained in the South, where they were not allowed to vote and were legally segregated from whites. Black children were not allowed to attend white public schools & many received an inferior education that did not give them an equal opportunity to compete in the white-dominated society. Many former slaves & their families became caught in a cycle of poverty that continued for generations. Although conditions were much worse in the segregated South, blacks continued to be the victims of strong racial prejudice in the North.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s

- This state of affairs remained unchanged until the US Supreme Court declared in 1954 that racially segregated public schools did not provide equal educational opportunities for black Americans and were therefore illegal.

- Black leaders were greatly encouraged by this decision. They tried to end racial segregation in all areas of American life. The most important leader: Martin Luther King, Jr., a black Protestant minister with a great gift for inspiring his people. From the late 1950s until his assassination by a white gunman in 1968, King led thousands of African Americans in nonviolent marches and demonstrations against segregation and other forms of racial discrimination

=> 2 major civil rights laws were passed during the 1960s that removed racial segregation from public facilities in the South and also removed the barriers that had prevented black people from voting in that region

Race Relations after the Civil Rights Movement

- The civil rights laws of the 1960s helped to bring about a significant degree of assimilation of blacks into the larger American culture. They eventually helped to reduce the amount of white prejudice toward black people => The number of African-Americans attending the nation's colleges and universities, holding elective public office, and earning higher incomes increased dramatically

- There is still a gulf between the races. Although African-Americans represent about 13 percent of the population, they are grossly underrepresented in Congress. The median income of a married black man working full time is 23 percent behind a married white man

- Slavery was abolished in the 1860s, its legacy continues. Fortunately, people of good faith, both black and white, are working together to achieve harmony and equality between the races.

A Universal Nation

- The dominant culture and its value system, established by the early settlers, had its roots in white, Protestant, western Europe
 - In 1965, the United States made important changes in its immigration laws, allowing many more immigrants to come and entirely eliminating the older laws' bias in favor of white European immigrants
 - Perhaps the US will be described not as a "melting pot" or a "salad bowl" but as a "mosaic" _ a picture made up of many tiny pieces of different colors. If one looks closely at the nation, the individuals of different colors and ethnic groups are still distinct and recognizable, but together they create a picture that is uniquely American

Unit 2

TRADITIONS AND ADAPTING CULTURES

- All of us inherit something: sometimes it may be money or property, but always it is something much less concrete and tangible, something we may not even be aware of fully. It may be a way of doing a daily task, or the way we solve a major problem or decide a moral issue for ourselves. It may be something important and central to our thinking, or something minor, casual; something we proudly think of as “our heritage,” or something we would prefer to ignore or forget. Our heritage may be a source of pride, a happy discovery; it may also at times be a source of embarrassment, a burden.

We are most aware of a heritage when it expresses itself in traditions, observances, and rituals. But we encounter our heritage, or that of others, most often in ordinary ways: in a restaurant, or a grocery store. America, with its different ethnic groups, is richer, perhaps more than any other country, in the variety of its foods; here is a starting place where many first encounter cultural diversity. In the selection Petrakis, H.M describes a boy who is embarrassed, by his heritage. The boy wants to demonstrate that he is a true American not only by eating American food but by insulting a Greek grocer who: represents his embarrassing heritage to him. In the end the old man teaches the boy about their common heritage, making olives and figs.

Unit 2

TRADITIONS OF VALUES AND BELIEFS

The Context of Traditional American Values: Racial, Ethnic, Religious, and Cultural Diversity

As the 21st century begins, the US probably has a greater diversity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups than any other nation on earth. From the beginning of the history of the US, there has been diversity_ Native Americans throughout the North American continent, Spanish settlers in the Southwest and in Florida, French missionaries and fur traders along the Mississippi River, black slaves brought from African countries, Dutch settlers in New York, Germans in Pennsylvania, and, of course, the British colonists, whose culture eventually provided the language and the foundation for the political and economic systems.

- Historically, the US has been viewed as "the land of opportunity," attracting immigrants from all over the world. The opportunities they believed they would find in America and the experiences they actually had when they arrived nurtured this set of values. In this chapter, we will examine six basic values that have become "traditional" American values. Three represent traditional reasons why immigrants have been drawn to America: the chance for individual freedom, equality of opportunity, and material wealth. In order to achieve these benefits, however, there were prices to be paid: self-reliance, competition, and hard work. In time, these prices themselves became a part of the traditional value system.

Individual Freedom and Self-Reliance

- The earliest settlers came to the North American continent to establish colonies that were free from the controls that existed in European societies. They wanted to escape the controls placed on their lives by kings and governments, priests and churches, noblemen and aristocrats. To a great extent, they succeeded

- The historic decisions made by those first settlers have had a profound effect on the shaping of the American character. By limiting the power of the government and the churches and eliminating a formal aristocracy, they created a climate of freedom where the emphasis was on the individual

- The price to be paid for this individual freedom: self-reliance. Individuals must learn to rely on themselves or risk losing freedom \Leftrightarrow achieving both financial and emotional independence from their parents as early as possible

- If people are dependent, they risk losing freedom as well as the respect of their peers. Even if they are not truly self-reliant, most Americans believe they must at least appear to be so

- The sight of beggars on city streets and the plight of the homeless may inspire sympathy but also concern. Although Americans provide a lot of financial support to people in need through charities or government programs, they expect that help to be short-lived \Rightarrow ppl should take care of themselves.

Equality of Opportunity and Competition

- The second important reason why immigrants have traditionally been drawn to the United States is the belief that everyone has a chance to succeed here. They have felt that because individuals are free from excessive political, religious, and social controls, they have a better chance for personal success
 - Because titles of nobility were forbidden in the Constitution, no formal class system developed in the US
 - The hopes and dreams of many of these early immigrants were fulfilled in their new country. The lower social class into which many were born did not prevent them from trying to rise to a higher social position.

- What most Americans mean when they say they believe in equality of opportunity. They do not mean that everyone is_ or should be_ equal. However, they do mean that each individual should have an equal chance for success.

- The price to be paid for this equality of opportunity: competition. If much of life is seen as a race, then a person must run the race in order to succeed; a person must compete with others

- The pressures of competition in the life of an American begin in childhood and continue until retirement from work. Learning to compete successfully is part of growing up in the US, and competition is encouraged by strong programs of competitive sports

- The pressure to compete causes Americans to be energetic, but it also places a constant emotional strain on them. When they retire, problem arises. They may feel useless and unwanted in a society that gives so much prestige to those who compete well

Material Wealth and Hard Work

- 3rd reason why immigrants come to the US is to have a better life_ that is, to raise their standard of living. For the vast majority of the immigrants who came here =>the most compelling reason for leaving their homeland
- Placing a high value on material possessions is called materialism, but this is a word that most Americans find offensive. To say that a person is materialistic is an insult
- The main reason is that material wealth has traditionally been a widely accepted measure of social status in the US. Because Americans rejected the European system of hereditary aristocracy and titles of nobility, they had to find a substitute for judging social status. The quality and quantity of an individual's material possessions became an accepted measure of success and social status.

Unit 4

GOVERNMENT

- The way - the national government is organized in the US Constitution: an excellent illustration of the American suspicion of governmental power. The provisions of the Constitution are more concerned with keeping the government from doing evil than with enabling it to do good. The national government is divided into 3 separate branches. This division of governmental power is based on the belief that if any one part or branch of government has all, or even most of the power, it will become a threat to the freedom of individual citizens.

- The legislative or lawmaking branch of the government is called the Congress. Congress has two houses_ the Senate, with 2 Senators from each state, and the House of Representatives, consisting of a total of 435 Representatives divided among the 50 states by population.

- If any one of the 3 branches starts to abuse its power, the other 2 may join together to stop it, through a system of checks and balances. The Constitution is most careful in balancing the powers of the legislative and executive branches of the government because these 2 (Congress and the president) are the most powerful of the 3 branches

- The president and both houses of Congress have almost complete political independence from each other because they are all chosen in separate elections.

- In addition to dividing government powers into three branches, the Constitution included a Bill of Rights, which is designed to protect specific individual rights and freedoms from government interference. Some of the guarantees in the Bill of Rights concern the freedom of expression. The government may not interfere with an individual's freedom of speech or freedom of religious worship. The Bill of Rights also guarantees the right of a fair criminal procedure for those accused of breaking laws. Thus, the Bill of Rights is another statement of the American belief in the importance of individual freedom

Unit 5

EDUCATION

The Establishment of Public Schools in America: de Tocqueville's Observations

- Educational institutions in the United States reflect the nation's basic values, especially the ideal of equality of opportunity. From elementary school through college, Americans believe that everyone deserves an equal opportunity to get a good education
- During the next century and a half, public schools in the United States were expanded to include secondary or high schools (Grades 9-12) and colleges and universities, with both undergraduate and graduate studies.

The Educational Ladder

- Americans view their public school system as an educational ladder, rising from elementary school to high school and finally college undergraduate and graduate programs. Most children start school at age five, by attending kindergarten, or even at age three or four by attending pre-school programs. Then there are six years of elementary school and usually two years of middle school (or junior high school), and four years of high school. Not all school systems have kindergartens, but all do have twelve years of elementary, middle school, and senior high school

- The educational ladder concept is an almost perfect reflection of the American idea of individual success based on equality of opportunity and on “working your way to the top.” In the US there are no separate educational systems with a higher level of education for the wealthy and a lower level of education for the masses

The Money Value of Education

- The American definition of success is largely one of acquiring wealth and a high material standard of living. Americans value education for its monetary value. The belief is widespread in the US that the more schooling people have, the more money they will earn when they leave school. The belief is strongest regarding the desirability of an undergraduate university degree, or a professional degree such as medicine or law, following the undergraduate degree.

Educating

- The Individual American schools tend to put more emphasis on developing critical thinking skills than they do on acquiring quantities of facts. American students are encouraged to express their own opinions in class and think for themselves, a reflection of the American values of individual freedom and self-reliance. The goal of the American education system is to teach children how to learn and to help them reach their maximum potential.

- The development of social and interpersonal skills may be considered as important as the development of intellectual skills. To help students develop these other important skills, schools have added a large number of extracurricular activities to daily life at school. These activities are almost as important as the students class work

- Some Americans consider athletics, frequently called competitive sports, the most important of all extracurricular activities.

- Student government is another extracurricular activity designed to develop competitive, political, and social skills in students. The students choose a number of government officers, who compete for the votes of their fellow students in school elections.

Although these officers have little power over the central decisions of the school, the process of running for office and then taking responsibility for a number of students activities if elected is seen as good 35 experience in developing their leadership and competitive skills, and helping them to be responsible citizens

Racial Equality and Education

- The most significant departure from the ideal of equality of opportunity in education has occurred in the education of African-Americans. After the Civil War in 1860s, the southern states developed a social and legal system that segregated the former black slaves from the white population in all public facilities, including schools. Black people in the southern states were prohibited by law from attending schools with whites. Blacks had separate schools, that were inferior to the white schools by almost any measure

The Increasing Responsibilities of Public Schools

- Americans place the weight of many of their ideals, hopes, and problems on the nation's public school system. Some observers believe they have placed more responsibilities on the public schools than the schools can possibly handle. For example, public schools are often expected to solve student problems that result from the weakening of family ties in the US. Rising divorce rates have resulted in an increasing number of children in the public schools who are raised by only one parent. Studies have shown that these students are more likely to have problems at school than are children raised in families with two parents

The Standards Movement

- Recently, international comparisons of education have revealed that, American students do not perform as well in math, science, and other subjects as students from many other developed countries. Some believe American standards for education may not be high enough. Traditionally, local community school districts have had responsibility for determining school curricular and selecting textbooks, with only limited state or national supervision. However; in the 1990s, both the states and the federal government have become more involved in determining school standards. The federal government has set national goals for education that include standard for early childhood, elementary, secondary, and adult education. Most major educational associations, such as national associations of teachers of science, or math, or language arts are also evaluating the current curricular and criteria for certification and developing new standards

Multicultural Education

- The changing populations of students in American schools has brought some changes in what is taught in the school as well. Ethnic and racial minorities have criticized schools and textbooks for focusing too much on the literature and historical events of Anglo-Europeans or white males. They believe that schools have almost ignored the contributions of African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. More seriously, some have charged that American history has been told from the perspective of Anglo-Europeans rather than exploring historical events from the various perspectives of those involved. For example, the frontier movement west has been presented more from the perspective of descendants of white settlers than from the perspectives of the descendants of the Native Americans who were moved in the process.

Unit 6

FAMILY

Family Structures

- The structure of the American family has undergone enormous changes since 1950s. Traditionally, the American family has been a nuclear family, consisting of a husband, wife, and their children, living in a house or apartment. Grandparents rarely live in the same home with their married sons and daughters, and uncles and aunts almost never do.

- In the 1990s, only 8 % of American households consist of a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and two children under 18. An additional 18% of households consist of two parents who are both working and one or more children under the age of 18 living at home. That means that a total of only 26% of households in the United States consist of two parents and their children. The remaining households consist of the following: 30% are married couples without children; 8% are single parents and their children; 11% are unmarried couples and others living together, in 25% of the households, there is someone living alone

The Emphasis on Individual Freedom

- Americans view the family as a group whose primary purpose is to advance the happiness of individual members. The result is that the needs of each individual take priority in the life of the family. In contrast to that of many other cultures, the primary responsibility of the American family member is not to advance the family as a group, either socially or economically, nor is it to bring honor to the family name. This is partly because the US is not an aristocratic society.

- Family name and honor are less important than in aristocratic societies, since equality of opportunity regardless of birth is considered a basic American value.

- The American desire for freedom from outside control clearly extends to the family. Americans do not like to have controls placed on them by other family members.

Marriage and Divorce

- Marriages are not “arranged” in the United States. Young people are expected to find a husband or wife on their own; their parents do not usually help them. In fact, parents are frequently not told of marriage plans until the couple has decided to marry
- Over the years, the value placed on marriage itself is determined largely by how happy the husband and wife make each other: Happiness is based primarily on companionship. The majority of American women value companionship as the most important part of marriage. Other values, such as having economic support and the opportunity to have children, although important, are seen by many as less important.
- The divorce rate rose rapidly in the United States after the 1950s, but it had leveled off by the 1990s. Approximately one out of every two marriages now ends in divorce

Equality in the Family

- Along with the American emphasis on individual freedom, the belief in equality has had a strong effect on the family.
- There is much more social equality between parents and children than in most aristocratic societies or societies ruled by centuries of tradition. This can be witnessed in arguments between parents and their children, and in the considerable independence granted to teenagers
- Americans give their young people a lot of freedom because they want to teach their children to be independent and self-reliant.

The Role of the Family in Society

- The American ideal of equality has effected not only marriage but all forms of relationships between men and women. Americans gain a number of benefits by placing so much importance on achieving individual freedom and equality within the context of the family. The needs and desires of each member are given a great deal of attention and importance. However, a price is paid for these benefits. American families are less stable and lasting than those of most cultures. The high rate of divorce in American families is perhaps the most important indicator of this instability

- The American attitude toward the family contains many contradictions. For example, Americans will tolerate a good deal of instability in their families, including divorce, in order to protect such values as freedom and equality. On the other hand, they are strongly attached to the idea of the family as the best of all. lifestyles

Family Value

- Respecting one's parents
- Being responsible for one's actions
- Having faith in God
 - Respecting authority
- Married to the same person for life
- Leaving the world in better shape

Unit 7

LEISURE TIME

Sports and American Values

- Most social scientists believe that the sports that are organized by a society generally reflect the basic values of that society and attempt to strengthen them in the minds and emotions of its people. Therefore, organized sports have a more serious social purpose than spontaneous, unorganized play by individuals. This is certainly true in the United States, where the three most popular organized sports are football, basketball, and baseball. Nowhere are the ways and words of democracy better illustrated than in sports

Competition Carried to an Extreme?

- Although sports in the United States are glorified by many, there are others who are especially critical of the power of sports to corrupt when certain things are carried to excess. An excessive desire to win in sports, for example, can weaken rather than strengthen traditional American values.
- Most Americans would probably say that competition in organized sports does more to strengthen the national character than to corrupt it. They believe that eliminating competition in sports and in society as a whole would lead to laziness and vice rather than hard work and accomplishment.
- Another criticism of professional sports is that the players and the team owners get too much money, while fans have to pay more and more for tickets to the games.

Recreation: A Time for Self-Improvement

- Recreation is not expected to encourage competition => it is much more spontaneous and serves the individual's needs beyond the competitive world of work. Nevertheless, much can be learned about the values of Americans from an examination of the kinds of recreation in which they engage. Many Americans prefer recreation that requires a high level of physical activity.

- The high level of physical activity at play has led to the observation that Americans have difficulty relaxing, even in their leisure time. Yet the people who enjoy these physical activities often say that they find them very relaxing mentally because the activity is so different from the kind of activity they must do in the world of work, often indoor office work involving mind rather than body. The interest that Americans have in self-improvement, traceable in large measure to the nation's Protestant heritage, is also carried over into their recreation habits.

- Interest and participation in cultural activities, which improve people's minds or skills, are also popular. Millions of Americans go to symphony concerts, attend live theater performances, visit museums, hear lectures, and participate in 53 artistic activities such as painting, performing music, and dancing

- The recreational interests of Americans also show a continuing respect for the self-reliance, and sometimes the adventure and danger, of frontier life

Health and Fitness

- Not all Americans are physically fit, or even try to be. The overall population is becoming heavier, due to poor eating habits and a sedentary lifestyle. Some studies estimate that less than half of Americans exercise in their leisure time. Experts say that it is not because Americans “don’t know what’s good for them” _ they just don't do it. Compared to the beginning of the 1980s, threequarters of Americans in the 1990s say that physical fitness is more important to them now than it was then. But the National Center for Health Statistics reports that the number of people who are at least 20 percent over their desirable weight has risen from one in four to one in three Americans.

The Impact of Television

- Ironically, as Americans have gotten heavier as a population, the image of a beautiful woman has gotten much slimmer. Marilyn Monroe would be overweight by today's media standards. Television shows and commercials feature actresses who are very slender. Beer and soft drink commercials, for example, often feature very thin girls in bikinis. As a result, many teenage girls have become insecure about their bodies and obsessed with losing weight. Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia are now common among young women

Unit 8

JUSTICE, FREEDOM AND DISCRIMINATION

- Today in the South, blacks and whites work at the same jobs, live in the same neighborhoods, and attend the same schools. Interracial marriages, illegal in most southern states until 1967, are gradually increasing in number, although they are still rare. “White Only” signs have been removed from restaurants and other public places, and blacks are no longer barred from swimming pools because of fears that their black skin might contaminate the water. It has taken a long time to achieve these steps toward racial equality

- Racial tension decreased in the 1970s thanks to the gradual enforcement and acceptance of civil rights legislation. Today in the 1980s, despite the fact that blacks live in freedom and equality unparalleled in their American history, economic and social problems persist and incidents of racial discrimination and violence are not uncommon. A discrepancy still exists between legal rights and social realities. The true hope of the United States remains that someday Martin Luther King's dream will come true, "... that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.""