

# WHAT AMERICAN CULTURE?

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American nationalists would have us believe that the United States have a culture, and that this culture is superior to other cultures.

Contrariwise, those who are prejudiced against Americans would say that Americans have an inferior culture to other societies.

I am inclined to believe that both of these views are incorrect. I am inclined to believe that America does not even have a culture *per se*, and that therefore it cannot be inferior *nor* superior to other cultures.

American “culture,” if we can even refer to it as such, is a conglomeration of other cultures and customs. After all, we come from all different parts of the world. The cultures here splash together in what we might call a “melting pot” or a “salad bowl.”

Take a look at cuisine, for example. Although some foods were invented here, much of what we accept as “American” is an outgrowth of other cultures. Chicken lo mein is obviously a Chinese dish, with the term *lo mein* being a Cantonese

term originally. But even other foods we might associate as “purely American” originate from other cultures.

The pizza comes from Italy, and prior to that the ancient Greeks had a type of flatbread called *plakous*.

Although the *term hot dog* is an American invention, the hot dog *itself* is a German invention. It was invented in Frankfurt, Germany where it was originally made of pork and called a *frankfurter*.

Even the apple pie isn't American, but was instead eaten since long before the discovery of the Americas. In fact, it dates back to at least 1381!

The list goes on. Fried chicken was known as *gà xào* in Vietnam and *pollo fritto* in Italy. Africans (while forced to work in the Americas during the era of the evil institution of slavery) improved the dish by adding seasonings and spices. From the lasagne of Italy to the sushi of Japan, most American food is really the food of the world.

But if we only look at food, then we are deceiving ourselves. Not just food, but even the *English language* developed thanks to influences from all sorts of languages. English began as a Germanic language, but was quickly influenced by the Old Norse language of the Vikings. From there, it became heavily influenced by French. To this day, we continue to adopt words from other languages and to invent new terms based on Latin- or ancient Greek-roots.

*Amigo*, for example, is just as much a Spanish word as it is an English word. *Feng shui* is just as much a Chinese term as it is an American term. And *café* is just as much a French word as it is English. *Blitz* and *blitzkrieg* both began as German terms before being adopted into English. *Anime* and *karaoke* were both Japanese words, and are now fully English as well. Again, the list goes on.

How can America be said to have its own culture, considering how dependent we are upon the mixture of other cultures? Not that the lack of a culture is a bad thing—not at all!

Bill Murray, in the 1981 comedy *Stripes*, has a memorable quote about Americans: “We’re all very different people. We’re not Watusi, we’re not Spartans; we’re Americans, with

a capital ‘A.’ You know what that means? Do you? That means that our forefathers were kicked out of every decent country in the world. We are the wretched refuse. We’re the underdog. We’re mutts!”

Murray’s character refers to the American as a mutt—not with hatred but rather with adoration. America lacks a culture, but this is not something to remorse. Quite the contrary, the American is lucky enough to have front-row seats at a remarkable development in human history: the introduction of a new, global culture.

Take a look at clothing styles and then take a look at the United Nations. What do you see? Although there may be some slight differences, virtually everyone present at a U.N. meeting will be wearing a suit and tie. This is clearly not an example of “American culture” being exported to other countries but rather the development of a global culture. That the suit and tie was developed in Western society first is completely irrelevant. When a characteristic of the new global culture develops, it has to start somewhere, and by sheer coincidence it began in Western civilisation. Had the suit and tie been invented in Eastern Asia first, and only thereafter adopted by the global community, this adoption would not be evidence that Eastern Asia is “exporting its culture,” nor would the voluntary wearing of suits and ties by members of Western society be something to view with horror. Thus, I see no reason to assume that this global trend is in any way indicative of the existence of an American culture.

I even have problems with the view that McDonald’s Corporation or Levi Strauss & Co. are “American companies.” Sure, they both happened to first set up shop in the States, but what difference does that make? They are, it seems to me, part of the new global culture. American nationalists will of course disagree wholeheartedly, seeing this stance as an attack on their ability to lay claim to these companies as some sort of “proof” as to the supposed glory of “American culture,” but I can only maintain to the contrary that America lacks any culture for these nationalists to take pride in, and that therefore the claim that these firms are somehow *examples of American culture* or somehow *uniquely-American firms* is disingenuous.

Further, the desire of anyone to take pride in the accomplishments of others is purely ridiculous. For person *A* to believe he has any reason to take pride in the accomplishments of person *B* simply because *A* is a neighbour to *B*, *A* would naturally have to be a collectivist who views superiority as some sort of mystical force that emanates and swells among those who share arbitrary characteristics with the *actual* successful person. Nationalism, not surprisingly, is wholly collectivist and irrational.

Cultures evolve over time. Of this point, virtually everyone agrees. The speed at which cultures evolve, of course, varies. Those cultures that have been stifled by the presence of a static, authoritarian hierarchy have often evolved rather slowly. Those under the yoke of tyranny, after all, often lack the freedom of trade and of communication that we typically associate with open, progressive societies. With the spices and other commodities that Europe began importing in the Middle Ages in exchange for woolen textiles and whatnot naturally came greater communication, which of course can never be a bad thing for cultural evolution. Unfortunately, the rise of statism and feudalism had the contrary effect: to stagnate the evolution of culture, to suppress individualism, to promote mercantilism over the liberation of trade, and to keep people trapped in a relatively static political structure.

Thanks to our more liberated atmosphere in trade and communication today, we are able to witness cultural evolution take place at a more natural, less stagnated pace. The Internet in particular has proved quite liberating. Even in countries like China where communication is still officially suppressed, more and more people are finding ways to circumvent the official channels and gain access to sites banned by the Chinese Communist Party. If present trends continue, communication will become even more liberated and liberating. Of course, this scares some reactionaries who wish to stifle, with varying degrees of success, this communication or trade with the outside world, but we must remember that the evolution of cultures is a perfectly natural thing, while aggressive restrictions on the individual's spirit are notably unnatural.

Given that cultures naturally develop over time, and that

we today have what is more and more becoming a global system of communication, it should come as no surprise that we are beginning to see the evolution of a global culture. It will develop in some places quicker and in others slower, the speed of which will be based on a variety of factors, especially freedom of communication. This is certainly nothing to fear, nothing to suppress—it is merely the inevitable result of the progressive and unstoppable movement of liberalism. Nationalism is dying—ever so slowly dying—and we should celebrate its coming death.

But even, in the end, if America *did* have an actual culture *per se*, I would still have to look critically upon the claim that it is objectively better than or objectively inferior to other cultures. If America *were* said to have a culture, it would necessarily have to be rather thick, containing some things we might subjectively consider good and some others we might subjectively consider bad. Therefore, even if one rejects my thesis that America has no culture *per se*, it still stands to reason that he or she should continue to reject the view of American nationalists *and* prejudiced anti-Americans *alike*.