

# The many faces of american identity

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Since the Civil War, America's identity and the identity of its citizens has gone through multiple transitions, each building upon or rejecting the ideas and principles of those issues which had come before.

From the racial segregation and discrimination of African Americans from the time of Reconstruction through the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the plight of the poor and the politically disenfranchised, the struggle for equal rights for women and homosexuals, and the post-Cold War issues of globalization and economic viability in a changing world, the concept of what it means to be American has adapted to both the successes and failures of each.

At the basis of each of these struggles is the idea that at periods throughout American history each of these groups have felt the need to be heard and represented, having been marginalized by social and political injustices and ideologies that at each turn represented a hypocrisy over the basic tenets of freedom and liberty. Unrepresented and kept outside of the political process and the mainstream social identity, these groups have sought to alternately belong to a concept of the American identity and to redefine it.

In examining each of these developments, from Jacob Riis 1890 expose of the New York City slums to the new freedoms and challenges of the post-Cold War America of presidents Clinton and G. W. Bush, I will illustrate how each social and political revelation combine to create an American identity that is uncertain of its future while carrying an awareness of its past. Jacob Riis 1890 book *How The Other Half Live* gave the average, middle-class American room for pause. In his description of the slums and challenges

faced by the economically and socially handicapped masses of New York City, show an underbelly to the American dream.

The poverty and inequality that pervade the plight of the tenement dweller, both black and white, is at odds with the ideals of freedom. In particular, Riis makes a case for African-Americans who having recently been emancipated had fled the institutionalized racism of the South to come work and live in New York. However, they have escaped one kind of bondage, clearly and legally defined, to be forced into a socially ambiguous but no less prevalent form of degradation and discrimination.

But even as Riis decries the struggle of the newly arrived blacks, who based upon their skin color alone are placed at the bottom of the social ladder, his own views speak of a different kind of discrimination. While at once condemning the landlords who profit by courting black tenants due to the ability to charge more money, Riis explanation of the character of blacks is simplistic and demeaning, likening them more to children than adults equal in every respect to their white counterparts, “ If his emotions are not very deeply rooted, they are at least sincere while they last, and until the tempter gets the upper hand again” (Riis, p.

155). He also expresses a desire to maintain a level of segregation, calling the mixing of races on Thompson Street where the “ this co-mingling of the utterly depraved of both sexes, white and black, on such ground, there can be no greater abomination” (p. 156). Despite the shortcomings of his viewpoint, influenced by the historical relationship of whites and blacks in the U. S. , Riis nevertheless realizes that blacks are being pushed away from the very equality promised to them as citizens, as Americans.

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Additionally, the poor native New Yorkers and immigrants who people the tenements, share a similar burden. Reduced by economic and social circumstance to merely subsist on the scraps of a society which has turned a blind eye to them, the “ pauper” is in a position devoid of hope, He is as hopeless as his own poverty” (Riis, 1890, p. 246). Immigrants such as the Irish fared no better in Riis opinion, being particular vulnerable to the moral deterioration of slum life being the “ soonest and most thoroughly” (Riis, 1890, p. 249) corrupted.

The kind of separation between economic and racial portions of society, as well as the defense of one while the other remains degraded, is a common thread that runs throughout the changes of the last century in America’s identity. The 1896 Supreme Court ruling in the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson legalized this type of segregation with the “ separate but equal” precedent, providing a constitutional basis for Jim Crow laws to flourish and plant deeper roots in the American South. Though struck down over a half a century later by the Court’s decision in Brown vs.

Board of Education, the realization of equality as American citizens regardless of race, religion, sexuality, gender, or economic status proved to not be so easy. While in 1881 Chester Arthur hoped to assimilate the Native American population into the broader scope of white society through re-education and removal of tribal affiliation and heritage, no such policy was established in regard to African Americans. As with the struggle for women’s and gay rights, the struggle for African American equality culminated within the community itself.

The refusal of Southern lawmakers to rise out of the era of racism and embrace a new concept of American, as non-white and white side-by-side, created a necessity to action. As Martin Luther King Jr. 's 1962 " Letter From a Birmingham Jail" attempted to explain this need to the black power structure which both supported and chastised him for his actions in Birmingham and across the South, "“ unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community no alternative.

" More importantly, King understood the concept of the " mutuality" of the American community, whether it be black or white, male or female, which was picked up again by the youthculturethat grew to embody a sense of change and challenge, as embodied in the Port Huron Statement. King noted in 1962 that, " Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. " There is truth still in that statement, as well as in the ideals placement within other struggles for equality. It is a concept that not only did the student protesters understood but was an equal basis for Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique and the rise of the feminist movement and later the push for gay rights and better federal programs to combat the AIDS crisis.

Like the inequalities of the previous century, the poverty described by Riis and the racism inherent to the continued racial discrimination, the gender and sexuality issue that has come to a head over the past fifty years have effectively acted to undermine the idealized definition of American while also

harming the fabric of society. Disenfranchised people are left to stagnate rather than grow and instead of reasoned change it boils over in emotion and uncertainty.

The women in Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* cannot name the hypocrisy of the country's national values and the gender roles programmed into their psyche and are bowed under an enemy they cannot see. The hypocrisy of American identity has not evaporated but instead become more difficult to understand and identify; to be American has built upon the ideals established by King and Friedan, whose spirit of questioning and rebellion have become part of what it is to be American even as new and more complex cracks have appeared in the facade of such a delicate but no less no dream of freedom and liberty. Both President Bill Clinton and George W.

Bush illustrate this new era of a globalized identity with in their respective inaugurations. Each faced challenges during their presidencies, differing on a wide-array of social and political issues. However, on the cusp of their first term they express the optimism and unfailing double-blindness of a nation which tries to steer its hope to the future while alternately cowering against and celebrating its past. Constantly aware of our differences, America has attempted to celebrate this difference even as we continue to marginalize along the lines of race, religion, politics, social status, and gender.

It is a cycle of self-hate and self-love that has become as much a part of the American identity as the mythological concept of the American dream.

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