

Formation and evolution of the collective american identity

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Americanism, what is it? Although many people have written on the subject, Michel-Guillaume Jean De Crèvecoeur is remembered as the first to write about the American Dream and its principles. Although he was originally French, he moved to America and married an American woman before returning to France in 1790. The experience allowed him to write the essay “What Is an American?”, which details his thoughts and ideas about what it means to be an American. With this, along with my own opinions and other resources, I will detail to you three Americanisms that I believe define our common identity: our self-centeredness, our desire for conformity, and our propensity for change.

The first Americanism under discussion is the self-centeredness of our society as a collective. Americans are usually focused on ourselves, whether it be with our money, our possessions, or even our time, Americans usually care more about ourselves than other people, especially people who we view as not American enough. This self-centeredness also applies to our motives, as what drives us isn’t usually to better society or the lives of others, but rather to serve our own interests, such as to gain money or influence.

This has actually been the case for a long time, as evidence of this is seen in Crèvecoeur’s essay. Crèvecoeur writes, “Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor; his labor is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest.” Here, Crèvecoeur is saying that Americans are industrious, or hard working, because of their own nature of self-interest, not because of their desire to work hard to help others or improve the quality of life for society. This self-interest also happens to help drive the second part

of our common identity, our desire for conformity. Another part of the common American identity is our desire for conformity. Just for clarification, conformity, for the purposes of this essay, is the idea that everyone should adhere to the same set of ideas and beliefs as everyone else. The idea of conforming to this idea of being a “ real American” was one of the subjects of “ One Hundred Percent Americanism: Material Culture and Nationalism, Then and Now”, a scholarly article written by Margaret C. Wood.

The article takes a look at how Americanism and nationalism have evolved over the course of American history, and their attachment to physical objects. In the article, Wood says, “ The American Legion emerged as an organization whose members, mostly middle and upper class whites, preached an impassioned Americanism that demanded cultural conformity and undivided allegiance to the nation. Immigrants and those who accepted cultural diversity rather than assimilation to the “ given” social order were dubbed as un-American.” (7). In this quote, Wood is talking about the 1920’s, where large groups such as the American Legion, were fighting to deny rights and citizenship to those who didn’t conform to their idea of an American, that is to say, a white, English-speaking, Christian member of the middle-to-upper class. They had decided that their view of an American was correct, and desired to push their ideas onto the whole of American society. This also meant that they spurned anyone who didn’t fit their ideas, and sought to deny them rights and freedoms that should have belonged to them. This is because they were viewed as so “ un-American” that they didn’t deserve the kindness or the freedoms provided by America and her

people. How they did this actually leads straight into my next Americanism, our propensity for change. The final Americanism up for discussion is society's propensity for change.

Throughout the decades, Americans have never been afraid to fight for a change in the status quo. For example, the Civil Rights movement was led by the disenfranchised African-American populations, who after the Civil War were spurned by their owners. Facing discrimination, predatory laws, and a lack of wealth and social status, they felt that they deserved better from their country. So, they decided to fight for it, organizing protests, holding rallies, giving speeches, and gaining the support of the people in power who could actually work to help them. And so, society changed, African-American people gained more rights and status. Through this shared desire for change, society could accomplish great deeds and improve the lives of millions of people.. It should be noted that society's drive for change often flies in the face of my first Americanism, as the motives for change usually transcend the individual, and instead belong to the collective. In final consideration, Americanism is a complex, highly debated topic that is always changing and evolving. Every person has a differing answer to the original question posed by Crèvecoeur's essay, "What is an American?" In my opinion, these three Americanisms hold true regardless of who you ask. Americans are selfish, we love to put ourselves first, and we believe that only people deserving of our help should receive it. Americans would also love everyone to be the same. No matter how we preach about diversity, everyone would love it if people shared their ideas and beliefs, because of the security that lies in similarity

and group mentality. Americans also especially love to shake things up every now and again. We aren't afraid to challenge what we know is safe and normal, with the hope that change will make our lives better. In short, Americanism is just like every American, different to each in their own way.

Works Cited
Wood, Margaret. "One Hundred Percent Americanism: Material Culture and Nationalism, Then and Now."