

Characteristic of the american nation history essay



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The United States are different from the rest of the world in many aspects, and Americans themselves like to emphasize their uniqueness. Many books, introductions to cultural studies, manuals, textbooks, dictionaries, guides, articles, and essays have been written with one common aim. They all have tried to distinguish and call the American distinctness by real names, as well as they have attempted to explain why Americans are such an exceptional nation. This thesis is also one of the efforts to objectify a rather complicated jigsaw of the American character. In total amount of four chapters a complex portrait of an American will be offered.

To start a research which quests a current form of any culture it is important to look firstly into its past. America may not have long history like English or Italian but still approximately 200 years of self-selective immigration were enough to set very clear distinctiveness typical for the United States. The first chapter of this thesis will attempt to point out various occurrences since the foundation of the first permanent settlement in the North America till 1776. Two greatest foreign traveler publications by Alexis de Tocqueville and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur that contributed to the development of the national pride will be mentioned. These two historical sources will be compared with current literature and it will be observed whether they differ or not. Finally, it will be dealt with the proportions of European immigrants and how they helped to change the portrait of the American nation.

The following chapter will continue on approximation of the American differentness by portraying the system of values. First of all, it will be clarified what is regarded as a value because traditionally more than one definition of this term occurs. It will be proven that values function like

dominant pillars on which the structure of the American character has been built. Quite much attention will be paid to values like work, achievement, or equality because these values have their historical background and are still reflected not even in American behavior but also in stereotypes common about American citizens.

The third part will be devoted to religion in the United States. This topic is purposely not attached to the chapter about values because as it will be explained, religion is traditionally not being mentioned as a value. What is more, religion will be portrayed as an independent factor touching different beliefs of common people but also like a factor contrasting to the secularity of the state.

The very last and rather shorter chapter will comment on stereotypes and prejudices which often do not provide a very objective picture of the United States. Attention will be also paid to the notably higher number of American stereotypes in comparison to other countries. Finally some examples of individual stereotypes will be provided and by these means the picture of the American nation will be concluded.

americans in terms of the historical development

Ever since America has been discovered, especially the North America, it has represented an object of fascination to observers from other countries who have been trying to solve the question of American nationality. The quest of the American[1]national identity, and who or what is considered to be American is perennial. It is regarded as a common knowledge that the US is primarily and undoubtedly a country of immigrants. According to American <https://assignbuster.com/characteristic-of-the-american-nation-history-essay/>

historian John Harmon McElroy, more than 55 million immigrants have arrived into America in the last four centuries. Such a high number represents the largest movement of people flowing into a certain place or a country in the history of mankind (60).

The Crucial Role of History in terms of American Culture

When an attempt to understand the American character and what has become the essence of being part of the American nation is made, a special attention must be paid to its formative period. Even McElroy claims that who wants to inquire the roots of any nation, he or she must begin with observation of its history. In the case of the USA, the crucial period understood as the American starting point was the colonial era in America between 1610 and 1760 (McElroy 4).

David M. Potter was in the 1960s chairman of the Department of History at Stanford and he tried among others to preserve the concept of the American national character. In Potter's opinion, people of the United States unlike most of the nations in the current world, have not been ethnically rooted in the land where they have been living for centuries (qtd. in Rapson 59). Americans lack direct antecedents like Europeans have always had. Potter continues, and says that there were no Anglo-Saxons like in England, no Romans like in Italy, nor Celts like in Ireland etc. (qtd. in Rapson 59). In this sense, the only American ancestors are remnant Red Indians but according to many historians[2], real history of the American nation begun with European immigration, later on complemented by immigration from Africa, Asia and from other parts all over the world. The presented opinions differ because the mentioned authors do not agree on one point since when it is

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possible to recognize American as an independent ethnic. Thus, it would be necessary to adjust to one year, to make it possible to decide upon only one group of American antecedents.

With the first immigration, the process of writing colourful history of the new American state has started. But to build a nation with its own traditions, a presence of culture is more than essential. American culture, as a key component enabling the existence of a society, started to be formed in the colonial era. It means that by the arrival of the first Europeans in the 17th century, also the process of forming American culture turned out to be the necessary part in the development of America as a state.

There is no single nation or country without its own culture. According to McElroy, by culture is understood a unique set of values, beliefs (learned and validated), behaviour patterns, but also attitudes towards music, literature, and other arts. In McElroy's opinion, it is culture what makes it possible for human beings to live together, and to be a part of one society (4-7). But what is unavoidable to be mentioned, culture also tends to persist unchanged because as McElroy says: " it satisfies deeply human need" (5). The abstract thing which we call culture is a social heredity. It is something which cannot be chosen. It is a given part of us.

According to Robin M. Williams, Jr., American sociologist from the Minnesota University, culture comes from the past and it is not created by an individual; it continues beyond any individual lifespan (22). By this means of comprehension, Williams conforms to the McElroy's affirmation. Williams uses a metaphorical comparison in order to approach the meaning of culture

even closer. The metaphor by Williams says that culture is a normative structure, so called ' designs for living'. In this view it means that every day we face a network of rules. The rules we have inherited and learnt from our ancestors and the same rules have been given to us by our cultural identity (Williams 22-23).

Resulting from what has been just said, Americans could not decide about the first look of their culture, and as McElroy argues, not even the American Revolution had enough power to change their culture which had already been rooted since the 13 colonies time (8). This may be an unpleasant and controversial statement for Americans who have been convinced that their society is different from the other ones from the very early beginning. But as Williams objects, they have been always wrong when thinking about their unique and only pure American culture. Williams is of that belief that American society was formed thoroughly from the European society model because Europeans were the first ones who created a permanent settlement in the New World. And from that reason American culture carries entirely its European heredity (23-24).

Emanating from knowledge about culture, it is necessary to follow the history of immigration into America and how immigration, led mostly by British, has puzzled the model of American men, like we know them nowadays.

People coming into the United States have always differed from each other in many aspects and immigration has always had an individualistic character[3]. Those people could be for example of numerous origins, different faith, language, social class etc. But since they have all been

crossing the ocean and then entering the New Continent, they suddenly had one thing in common - it was a search and a belief to make their hopes and dreams about freedom truth, or whatever they were looking for. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville simplified these shared features which were connecting all immigrants as “ an analogous situation, where all immigrants were placed” (40).

From the perspective of a present person, the first wave of new comers in the 17th and 18th century fully attempted to assimilate, or even to quell their origins. This period turned out to play a crucial role in the development of American culture, as British were predominantly those who voluntarily came to America. British were also those who ruled over the 13 American colonies the country was created out of, and from this reason it is not just a matter of fact that Americans speak English. With the later development of the United States, some immigrants intentionally might have tried to preserve the best of their worlds - of the old one and the new one; or they developed their own retainers in the sense of their cultural origins and their unique backgrounds in the context of American society. America is considered a melting pot[4]connecting various nationalities organized into one. But nonetheless, even nowadays, similarly like it used to be in 1782 when Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote the Letters from an American Farmer[5], Americans are still aware of their double citizenship and of the bifurcated heritage. Michael McGiffert, American professor from the University of Denver wrote in his book: “ Each of us is conscious of a heritage as an American, and each of us is conscious of another heritage -or more commonly- of a complex mixture of heritages” (McGiffert 5). In other words,

to be an American does not mean that a person cannot be at the same time American a member of e. g. Polish community, fully accepting Polish traditions. That is why for example Chinese immigrants do not differ in a sense of the mix-up tradition from the descendants of Negro Slaves, Dutch or even English. They are all Americans but they are still aware of the country they, their parents, or their ancestors came from (McGiffert 5). At this point McGiffert's pluralistic opinion[6]contrasts for example to Israel Zangwill, whose play about the Melting Pot[7]has become frequently referred to in the majority of books about American studies. McGiffert's supports his readers the idea that the descendants of immigrants preserve both parts of their cultures. Unlikely, according to Zangwill, the only way how to become a real American is to abandon own history and roots, whereas the focus is on the full and fast adaptation with the new culture of majority.

Discord in Terminology

When studying different sources related to the roots and very beginnings of the American nation, it is sometimes a difficult question whether those Europeans who came very first in the 17th century to the North America with the intention of an economic gain, or those who came to find religious freedom etc. should and even have the right to be regarded the first and real Americans. And it is also debatable since when we can even talk about the American nation, as Native Americans should not be forgotten. As it will be demonstrated on a few examples, the disagreement between various sources is notable and the terminology is apparently disunited.

Once an answer to such an apparently easy question ' since when we can talk about American nation' will be requested, it will be soon and perhaps

surprisingly recognized that the historical sources and publications are not of the same opinion. It seems that it is up to the reader to decide which opinion sounds more reasonable for him or her. Historians do only offer their attitudes, but it is up to individuals to make their own opinion about this topic. Just when we take two seemingly very similar publications, both dealing with the same subject, both written by American academics and both sharing the same encyclopaedic format, they will still surprisingly disagree on the apparently clear term ' the first Americans'.

John A. Garraty's publication named *The American Nation - A History of the United States* suggests that only with the first arrival of European colonists we can talk about Americans (30). This opinion is probably the most common one maintained by the majority of authors of various publications about American studies. Garraty does not share the idea with the minority of others who may claim that the American history, in a sense of forming the nation, had started and had been grounded before the first colonists came.

Paul S. Boyer is professor at the University of Wisconsin, and he is also the author of the book *The Enduring Vision - A History of the American People*. Contrasting to John A. Garraty, Paul S. Boyer, identifies the first Americans already with Native Americans (Boyer 2). It is undoubtedly truth that Indians left a mark on the later European conquerors. But is the mark such a significant one, that it would give Natives the privilege of being the ' founding fathers' of the American nation? According to Boyer, it is. Boyer argues for his statement by stressing the way of dealing with crops and other manners which colonists have taken from Native Americans. Boyer's other major argument for Natives stretches out beyond many names of

various places, as well as personal names or heritage of woodcraft which have been imprinted into roots of the American nation right by Natives. For Boyer, any question, whether Natives they should or should not be considered the nucleus of the American nation, does not really exist. He expresses himself clearly for Natives (Boyer 3-4). Boyer of course does not forget about immigrations from Europe. But he perceives the first colonists mostly from English speaking Britain as 'the first settlers' who should not be confused with the first Americans. Colonists do not represent for him, unlikely to other historians, the only and the first step in the development of the new American society. He sees them more as one element out of more which has helped to create the American whole. But Natives have, in his opinion without any doubts, the right to represent the germ of the American nation (3).

When following the track of the American origin, which has played a key role in the development of the American national character, one more conventional opinion of two American historians should be provided. David Mauk and John Oakland are authors of American Civilization which is a large publication of an encyclopaedic character. This book has been meant as an introduction to the studies of American history. Contrasting to Boyer who fights for the supremacy of Natives, David Mauk and John Oakland do not even mention Natives as a possible root of the American nation. Also in relation to Garraty's theory, these two authors are a bit sceptical about a term how to call the first colonists who were settling in the eastern coast of the American continent. That is why they rather talk about the first European pioneers under the term of so called 'founders'. They motivate their claim

about the first colonists by the means that the founders 'founded', or in other words, created the first institutions and laws which any later arrivals had to adjust. In this slightly different point of view from Garraty, they are of the opinion that those founders of the first colonies represented a kind of a 'semi step' before becoming an American and becoming part of the American nation (Mauk and Oakland 58-59). The authors dissimilarly stress, opposing to the other mentioned theories, that only any later arrivals have the right to be mentioned within the context of the first immigrants - new and pure Americans.

It seems that the most complex and precise definition has been offered by David Mauk and John Oakland in American Civilization. Their reception of the first Americans presents a good compromise between the other two theories provided. They do not omit nor exclude the first colonists from the role of building the American nation. But reasonably, according to the authors, the very first new comers still did not have the right of being ascribed the 'title' of the first Americans. Mauk and Oakland rather came up with the term of so called 'founders'. Because of this reason it can be concluded that Mauk and Oakland's terminological theory is the most accurate from the others which have been mentioned. Contrasting to the opinions of the other mentioned, it is highly valuable that Mauk and Oakland do concern also with the 'founders' as a semi-step to become an American. Their theory does supply a practical double-layer system in the American cultural terminology.

European Pervasive Part of American Nationality

Despite the disagreement in terminology, we could without audacious affirmation agree on that, that those first, either settlers or founders of

American colonies began to write vivid, European based, history of the American nation. McElroy depicts the situation of the European arrival to the eastern coast of America by words: " To understand American Culture, one must always bear in mind that it developed from the situation of civilized men and women in a Stone Age wilderness" (16). McElroy's strong metaphor comparing America to the Stone Age stands for the purity of a taintless New Continent in the 17th century. And as McElroy adds, everything from the perspective of European civilization, everything of value in the central North America, awaited its creation (McElroy 23).

It is obvious that McElroy does not consider Natives as a part of the American civilization; he intentionally does not mention millions of Natives who had lived and occupied the territory of the North America long before the first European colonist came. But it is more than necessary to mention that the American land was of course not completely empty, unoccupied, nor uncivilized.

In the book called *Natives and Strangers* by Leonard Dinnerstein, Roger Nichols and David M Reimers, its authors focus on the multicultural history of Americans. In the very first chapter, readers get to know that at that time when colonists came, much of the coastal region was heavily populated. They estimate the figure of population in the North America prior the colonization from three to five million native inhabitants (5). These Native people were already skilled in farming, hunting, fishing and their culture did not await any creation as McElroy mentioned. Authors of the *Natives and Strangers* prove that Natives mastered their environment and their technology permitted them to live in a modest comfort. Dinnerstein, Nicols

and Reimers thus consider the newcomers as a “ just one more element in already complex relationships with the nearby Indian groups” (5). Europeans thereupon came to an utterly new environment for them, but already with quite developed and specific Native culture.

With the foundation of the first colonies, tens millions of Europeans crossed three thousand miles of ocean to fill up the vast spaces of the empty North America (Brogan 3). Denis W. Brogan, who worked as professor of political science in Cambridge in his publication *The American Character*, says that without European techniques, ideas and physical habits America would not be there, where it is now. It signifies that according to this claim, without Europeans no Americans in the sense of nowadays would even exist. And with this statement by Brogan we can only agree. The new American nation was born out of the first stages of the breakup of Europe, and the genesis of the new American nation helped to accelerate the transformation of the Old Continent in the 17th century and later on.

It is not easy to generalize the character of an American man. First of all, it is due to the question with Natives as it has been discussed before[8].

Secondly, not even the European heritage is so clear, as it was not only one group of British who arrived to the coasts of America. The historical process of forming American nation was long and difficult. Many nations, or as McElroy calls them ‘ races’ contributed their quotas to the early settlement (McElroy 11). Thus, there are many American ‘ sub-national’ characteristics which originate in a relation with many races of the Old Continent. The heritage of the American character depends on the large number of national and ethnic groups that came to America from different parts of Europe. At <https://assignbuster.com/characteristic-of-the-american-nation-history-essay/>

the beginning, it was the group of Spanish explorers[9]who started to settle down in America already in the 16th century, later on in the 17th century English and other Europeans.