TEACHER’S TRAINING COLLEGE

OF NABEREZHNYE CHELNY

REPORT:

LOOKING FOR CULTURAL ROOTS OF AMERICANS.

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LOOKING FOR CULTURAL ROOTS.

**1. introduction**

All societies must provide for the basic human needs of their members. These include food, clothing, shelter, family organization, social organization, government, security, belief system or religion, and education. *How* a society provides for these needs depends on the geography (climate), resources, and history of the society. Different cultural values develop in different societies because of the variations in these factors and how the people view them.

In order to understand why people behave as they do, it is necessary to look at their geographical location and the historical events that have shaped them as a group. Because the history of the USA is rather short (relatively to most of the world), some of these influences are fairly easy to understand.

**2. First impressions while in the USA**

Some visitors to the USA remain permanently baffled [about America and Americans]. With despair and accuracy they point out endless paradoxes in the typical American. Friendly on the surface, but hard to know intimately. Hospitable and generous socially, but hard-driving and competitive professionally. Self-satisfied, at times, to the point of smugness but self-critical, at other times, to the point of masochism. And so on.

They find the regional diversity of Americans confusing, too. What on earth, they ask, can a Maine lobsterman have in common with a Dallas banker, a West Virginia coal miner, a Hollywood producer, a Montana sheep-herder, or a black school-teacher on a South Carolina sea-island? And they give themselves a bleak and hopeless answer; not much.

But that answer is almost certainly wrong; these people share the mysterious and powerful intangible called nationality. They are all Americans and, however faint, a common denominator is there, an almost invisible strand woven out of common history, a common heritage and, underneath the surface differences, a common way of looking at things.

**3. Modern American is an ancestor of the frontiersman.**

People never really escape from their origins. So, to understand an American you should focus for a moment not on the modern American, but on his ancestor, the 17th century settler who, having survived the grim Atlantic crossing, found himself with his back to the sea facing a vast and hostile wilderness that had to be tamed and conquered if he was to survive. conquer it he and his descendants did, in a struggle so epic that its memory lingers on in countless Western movies. Many of the basic attitudes and characteristics formed in that struggle persist in Americans today. You may find some admirable, and others less so. The point is, they are.

Everywhere he looked, that early American was surrounded by problems. To this day, by tradition, by training – almost by instinct– Americans are problem solvers and solution seekers. In some parts of the world, uncomfortable or unpleasant circumstances are endured because they have always been there and people see no alternative. To an American, a problem is not something to be accepted; it is something to be attacked. Adaptability, ingenuity, raw physical energy – these made up the frontiersman’s survival kit. To these qualities his descendants have added enormous confidence in their technology and a kind of invincible optimism. No matter what the obstacles, whether they set out to conquer polio or land a man on the moon, Americans are convinced that initiative, intelligent planning, and hard work will bring about the desired condition sooner or later.

A problem-solver is an achiever, and you will notice that once how greatly Americans respect and value achievement (they have even invented a whole industry called public relations to make sure that achievement doesn’t go unrecognized.) They are happiest when accomplishment can be measured specifically. A businessman wants his charts and graphs kept rigorously up-to-date. A book tends to be judged by the numbers of copies it sells. In sports, American’s obsession with statistics often amazes non-Americans. No fuzzy theory here; no guesswork. The American wants to know exactly who is achieving what – and if he can’t measure it he’s inclined to wonder if it’s any good.

To be an achiever, one must be a do-er, and it will soon be apparent to you…that Americans are much better at doing that at merely being. In fact, you’ll notice that if they’re deprived of doing for very long, they become miserable. Some Americans grumble about their jobs, but the truth is most of them think they should work hard and most of them like to work. It is this national characteristic more than natural resources or any other factor that has made the USA so productive. In modern American life, the non-worker is regarded with a certain scorn based, perhaps, on the conviction that in pioneer days he would not have survived.

These attitudes have produced a highly kinetic society, full of movement and constant change. If you’re accustomed to a more leisurely pace, you may find the American tempo exhausting. Or you may find it exhilarating. Most Americans enjoy it; it’s a high compliment when they say of a person, “He has a lot of drive,” or “He knows how to get things done.” Almost invariably, the 1st question an American asks about a newcomer or stranger is, “What does he do?” He’s interested primarily in the person’s main achievement, his work or his impact on his environment, not his personal philosophy or inner world.

Restless and rootless, the frontiersman had no time to be philosopher or a theoretician, and his descendants still take a pragmatic and straightforward view of the world. …you may feel that Americans are much more concerned with material than with spiritual things. You’re probable right. Religion is woven into the fabric of American life but most people have little taste for metaphysics. Man is seen not so much as a passive part of the schemes of things, but as a re-arranger of that scheme. When the pioneer needed a waterwheel for a grist-mill, he built one, and his great-grandchildren still have a unique genius for inventing machines that can dominate or subdue their environment. Americans think nothing of moving mountains, if the mountains are in their way. They simply combine their own optimism and energy with unlimited mechanical horsepower and push.

Until recently, it’s true, Americans have been prodigal with natural resources, because they seemed to be limitless, and careless about ecology, because the traditional American way was simple to move on when an area had been exploited. Now they are beginning to realize that it’s better to cooperate with nature than try to overwhelm it. A European or Asian could have told the Americans this long ago, but he would not have listened. He learns more quickly from his own mistakes than from the accumulated wisdom of the past.

Regardless of where you come from, it will seem to you that the American is usually in a hurry. Because of this, he is extremely time-conscious. He has a strict sense of punctuality and hates to waste time by being late or having others late for appointments. If you ask an Englishman or a Frenchman how far it is from London to Paris, you’ll get an answer in miles or kilometers. Ask an American and he’ll probably tell you in hours with his calculation based on the fastest available mode of transport.

Partly because of this time-obsessions, Americans are impatient with ceremony, which is time-consuming, and with protocol, which they view with suspicion as a dubious relic of monarchist days when they were rigid social distinctions between people. Americans are taught from the cradle that “all men created equal,” a phrase enshrined in their Declaration of Independence. They don’t really believe that this is true in terms of ability, but they accept it politically. One man, one vote, with the will of the majority prevailing and the rights of minorities safeguarded. This is the American’s political ideal, and it puzzles him greatly when it is not accepted or admired abroad.

In everyday live, in a kind of a tacit acknowledgement of this official egalitarianism, Americans tend to be informal, in most parts of the country breezily so. Visitors from abroad are often astonished to hear secretaries in American offices call their employers by their first names. The American is also gregarious; he likes to join clubs or other organizations where the backgrounds and thought-patterns of other members do not differ too much from his own. He is likely to have friendships compartmentalized; those he sees only at social gatherings. He enjoys the companionship of such friends, but doesn’t offer – or expect to receive – deep intimacy or total commitment. The rapid pace and enormous mobility of American society make lifelong friendship difficult, although in small towns and settled communities they do exist.

Some visitors to the USA say that the thing they miss most of all is the emotional support that comes from close, sharing friendships. When a Spaniard or Greek or Brazilian has some acute personal problem, he turns to his best friend. An American is more likely to turn to psychologist, or a marriage counselor. Americans have great faith in “the expert,” a reflection of their conviction that specialized training and knowledge make problem-solving quicker and produce better solutions. Most old societies are firmly rooted in tradition. You will find that, while they often have a sentimental attachment to the past, Americans are not true traditionalists. To the forward-looking American, established ways are not necessarily best. Unless your visit takes you to older parts of the country – New England or the Deep South – you’ll probable find that people regard adaptability as more important than conformity with ancestral ways and customs.

In many countries, persons tend to think of themselves primarily as a member of a group, or community, or sect, or a clan. The American sees himself as an individual, and this individualism makes him wary of authority in any form. He will accept military discipline in wartime, but only reluctantly. He believes in maintaining law and order, but he also believes that he is the best judge of what is good for him. In recent years he has been forced to the conclusion that only centralized government can deal with certain massive social problems. But his basic concept of government remains unshaken; that the State exists to serve him, not the other way round…

**4. American paradoxes**

Yes, American life is full of paradoxes. Its people and culture, values and beliefs are often seen as contradictory and at times even absurd. But like all impressions of a nation or people, popular perceptions do not always match to the day-to-day reality. Here are some of the paradoxes that you can meet in the US.

Americans are fiercely individualistic. It may seem that everyone has an opinion, whether they are informed about the subject or not. “The every man for himself” attitude is much a part of the American mentality. Americans place great value on the individual. They believe that individuals are solely responsible for their success and failures in life and that they should “earn their own way”. Due to this belief, you may see that individual achievements are often measured by one’s ability to accumulate material things, rather than the quality or strength of one’s character. You will also hear arguments in support of individual rights over the community good. And, even though Americans tend to be very generous in some situations, many of them are not supportive of national programs where they think that healthy, able-bodied people might not have to work for their benefits. Americans are extremely patriotic. The have taken great pride in their nation’s accomplishments and in being as “the best” or “the 1st”. whether it to be in national wealth, discoveries or inventions, technological feats, or sport. National symbol such as the raising of the flag, the pledge of allegiance and singing the country’s national anthem are rituals routinely made part of public life.

However, despite their fervent nationalism and love of country, only about half of the Americans vote in political elections. In the 1992 presidential elections that elected Bill Clinton, only 55% of eligible Americans voted, which was the largest voter turnout since 1968, when 61% of citizens voted for president. Many Americans don’t see voting as a duty but do consider it a right. While immensely patriotic, the are suspicious of government, distrust politicians and don’t see voting doing much to significantly impact their everyday lives.

Self-absorbed in their own particular work and activities, most Americans have limited knowledge even about their own country.

Americans have an extremely organized approach to recreation and leisure activities. Their weekends and vocations are prepared and managed like any other work while shopping and watching television consume much of their leisure time.

In a nation where shopping is considered a leisure activity, Americans are quite proud of the their purchasing power. The popular slogan “shop until you drop” reflects the pattern of Americans going to shopping malls filled with every imaginable consumer good and looking for the best deal. The variety of goods and services available to the average American consumer is staggering.

If one didn’t know better, one would think that all Americans are rich and can purchase anything that please them. But this is hardly the case. The number of Americans living in poverty is more than 14%, while close to one third of Blacks are poor. Americans are faced with walking by the growing number of homeless people who they see on the streets.

Crime has become a result of poverty, drug trafficking and an assortment of social problems that only seem to grow in number each year. While crime was once the scourge of urban America, it has now become a major concern for suburban and rural America as well. Millions of citizens own guns, and it is reported that deaths by guns may soon be higher than the rate of Americans who die each year in accidents. While the US has the largest prison population in the world, little has been done to stop the proliferation of lawfully owned guns among Americans who staunchly defend the “right to bear arms” that is guaranteed by the US constitution.

**5. Why do I like them anyway.**

Despite the many serious problems they face, most Americans are optimistic people. They have great faith in the future and believe that the future will always be brighter.

Although they are often self-critical people, their criticism is seen as a method by which the continue to create a better future for themselves. They have traditionally thought that things can be “fixed” and will always get better for the future generations. They place great faith in technology and its ability to improve the lives of people.

SOURCES

1. “How to Understand Those Mystifying Americans” by Arthur Gordon.
2. Introduction to the USA – student workbook. © 1993, 1994 by YFU Washington, DC, USA.