

"I am a Mutt"

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, JUN 29 2009

In this blog I will raise more questions than answers.

For the last week at the Steinhardt School I have examined the historical narratives of local autonomy and pluralism in America. My particular interest in examining the evolution of the US nation-state has been the relationship between environmental conditions (structures of the state, society and culture) and the individual. Is there something specific about an American person that is the product of her country's history?

In the emerging nation-state after the Declaration of Independence in 1776 it was essential that a national patriotic identity was developed in order for the United States to survive. At the individual level this patriotism was played-out by trusting yourself. The American person needed to be self-confident in order to survive and hopefully thrive. Fast forward to today and this self-belief, this confidence in one's self and the belief that problems can be pragmatically resolved is acknowledged as an American trait.

"We are all mutts", said Jonathan.

He was referring to identity in America by referencing his ancestral past with no less than five different concepts. Let me paraphrase what he said: 'Who am I? A Pole, German [...] an American, a Jew?'

To me, this is what is special about American society. Most Americans have a multiple-choice selection of which groups they want to claim as their own and they don't have to choose just one. An American can be Buddhist, Indian (sub-continent) and American all at the same time; Buddhist for her religious identity, Indian for her cultural, social and perhaps political identity, and finally American for the same reasons as the last point.

At the individual and group level different strings are being pulled by the different identities but when it comes to political allegiance in the foreign arena can we say that the unifying concept of what it means to be American takes precedence? To understand how to answer one must first examine what it is to be American.

At the group level there are two common factors that may evidence the historical roots of Americanism; Christianity and Europeanism particularly Northern European culture i.e. whites. Estimates suggest that there are approximately 225 million people who identify themselves as Christian in the United States. I acknowledge that Christian does not mean white but with approximately 74% of 300+ million Americans that are white (ethnically German, Spanish, Italian, British etc) there is a large crossover. Therefore, a white and Christian (particularly Protestant with 50% of the Christian population) culture dominates the centre of American society and politics. Steven Seidman in *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory Today* (2004) confirms this sentiment when he suggests that 'white culture constitutes the general cultural mainstream'.

Furthermore, is it this concept of the American that binds the multiethnic America together? Does America the state and America the society flourish paradoxically because the so-called pluralism of America ties the individual to an overriding concept of what it is to be American? If I am black do I say I am an African-American? If I am Latino do I say that I am a Latin-American? Or do I just say that I am an American? Does your decision depend on whether it is at the international or domestic levels? For example, if I was an African-American in the US military and some Iraqi

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asked me who I was I would probably say I was an American. However, at the domestic level I could see myself saying I was African-American. The running narrative in these identities is American. Interestingly, if I were a white American I could not see myself, at the domestic level, saying that I was anything more than American but then is this because I am an English Protestant? What if I were a white American of Polish or Italian descent?

I think that the evidence outlined here supports the idea that the United States of America is dominated by what was formerly a Northern European culture interacting with the environmental conditions but has now become the integrating factor that binds Americans of all ethnicities together. My question for you is whether you agree this dominance is played out in the domestic and foreign political sectors?

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.