

# Lecture 15 American Culture.

- *The culture of the United States of America is primarily of Western origin, but is influenced by a multicultural ethos that includes African, Native American, Asian, Pacific Island, and Latin American people and their cultures. It also has its own distinct social and cultural characteristics, such as dialect, music, arts, social habits, cuisine, and folklore. The United States is ethnically and racially diverse as a result of large-scale migration throughout its history.<sup>[1]</sup>*

- The European roots of the United States originate with the English settlers of colonial America during British rule. The varieties of English people, as opposed to the other peoples on the British Isles, were the overwhelming majority ethnic group in the 17th century (population of the colonies in 1700 was 250,000) and were 47.9% of percent of the total population of 3.9 million. They constituted 60% of the whites at the first census in 1790 (%: 3.5 Welsh, 8.5 Ulster Scots, 4.3 Scots, 4.7 Southern Irish, 7.2 German, 2.7 Dutch, 1.7 French and 2 Swedish), The American Revolution, Colin Bonwick, 1991, p. 254.

- The English ethnic group contributed the major cultural and social mindset and attitudes that evolved into the American character. Of the total population in each colony they numbered from 30% in Pennsylvania to 85% in Massachusetts, *Becoming America*, Jon Butler, 2000, pp. 9–11. Large non-English immigrant populations from the 1720s to 1775, such as the Germans (100,000 or more), Scotch Irish (250,000), added enriched and modified the English cultural substrate, *The Encyclopedia of Colonial and Revolutionary America*, Ed. John Mack Faragher, 1990, pp. 200–202. The religious outlook was some versions of Protestantism (1.6% of the population were English, German and Irish Catholics).

- Jeffersonian democracy was a foundational American cultural innovation, which is still a core part of the country's identity.<sup>[2]</sup> Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia was perhaps the first influential domestic cultural critique by an American and was written in reaction to the views of some influential Europeans that America's native flora, fauna, including humans, were degenerate.

- Major cultural influences have been brought by historical immigration, especially from Germany in much of the country,<sup>[3]</sup> Ireland and Italy in the Northeast, Japan in Hawaii. Latin American culture is especially pronounced in former Spanish areas but has also been introduced by immigration, as has Asian American cultures (especially on the West Coast).

Native culture remains strong in areas with large undisturbed or relocated populations, including traditional government and communal organization of property now legally managed by Indian reservations (large reservations are mostly in the West, especially Arizona and South Dakota). The fate of native culture after contact with Europeans is quite varied. For example, Taíno culture in U.S. Caribbean territories is nearly extinct and like most Native American languages, the Taíno language is no longer spoken. In contrast the Hawaiian language and culture of the Native Hawaiians has survived in Hawaii and mixed with that of immigrants from the mainland U.S. (starting before the 1898 annexation) and to some degree Japanese immigrants.

- It occasionally influences mainstream American culture with notable exports like surfing and Hawaiian shirts. Most languages native to what is now U.S. territory have gone extinct,<sup>1</sup> and the economic and mainstream cultural dominance of English threatens the surviving ones in most places. The most common native languages include Samoan, Hawaiian, Navajo language, Cherokee, Sioux, and a spectrum of Inuit languages. (See Indigenous languages of the Americas for a fuller listing, plus Chamorro, and Carolinian in the Pacific territories.) Ethnic Samoans are a majority in American Samoa; Chamorro are still the largest ethnic group in Guam (though a minority), and along with Refaluwasch are smaller minorities in the Northern Mariana Islands.

American culture includes both conservative and liberal elements, scientific and religious competitiveness, political structures, risk taking and free expression, materialist and moral elements. Despite certain consistent ideological principles (e.g. individualism, egalitarianism, and faith in freedom and democracy), American culture has a variety of expressions due to its geographical scale and demographic diversity. The flexibility of U.S. culture and its highly symbolic nature lead some researchers to categorize American culture as a mythic identity.





- The United States has traditionally been thought of as a melting pot, with immigrants contributing to but eventually assimilating with mainstream American culture. However, beginning in the 1960s and continuing on in the present day, the country trends towards cultural diversity, pluralism, and the image of a salad bowl instead. Throughout the country's history, certain subcultures (whether based on ethnicity or other commonality, such as the gay village) have dominated certain neighborhoods, only partially melded with the broader culture. Due to the extent of American culture, there are many integrated but unique social subcultures within the United States, some not tied to any particular geography.

- The cultural affiliations an individual in the United States may have commonly depend on social class, political orientation and a multitude of demographic characteristics such as religious background, occupation, and ethnic group membership.
- Colonists from the United States formed the now-independent country of Liberia.

# *Regional variations*

- Semi-distinct cultural regions of the United States include New England, the Mid-Atlantic, the South, the Midwest, the Southwest, and the West—an area that can be further subdivided into the Pacific States and the Mountain States.
- The west coast of the continental United States, consisting of California, Oregon, and Washington state, is also sometimes referred to as the Left Coast, indicating its left-leaning political orientation and tendency towards social liberalism.

- The South is sometimes informally called the "Bible Belt" due to socially conservative evangelical Protestantism, which is a significant part of the region's culture. Christian church attendance across all denominations is generally higher there than the national average. This region is usually contrasted with the mainline Protestantism and Catholicism of the Northeast, the religiously diverse Midwest and Great Lakes, the Mormon Corridor in Utah and southern Idaho, and the relatively secular West. The percentage of non-religious people is the highest in the northeastern state of Vermont at 34%, compared to 6% in the Bible Belt state of Alabama

- Strong cultural differences have a long history in the U.S., with the southern slave society in the antebellum period serving as a prime example. Social and economic tensions between the Northern and Southern states were so severe that they eventually caused the South to declare itself an independent nation, the Confederate States of America; thus initiating the American Civil War.

# Language

- Although the United States has no official language at the federal level, 28 states have passed legislation making English the official language, and it is considered to be the de facto national language. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 97% of Americans can speak English well, and for 81% it is the only language spoken at home. More than 300 languages besides English have native speakers in the United States—some are spoken by indigenous peoples (about 150 living languages) and others imported by immigrants.

- Spanish has official status in the commonwealth of Puerto Rico, where it is the primary language spoken, and the state of New Mexico; various smaller Spanish enclaves exist around the country as well.<sup>[11]</sup> According to the 2000 census, there are nearly 30 million native speakers of Spanish in the United States. Bilingual speakers may use both English and Spanish reasonably well but code-switch according to their dialog partner or context, a phenomenon known as Spanglish.

- Indigenous languages of the United States include the Native American languages, which are spoken on the country's numerous Indian reservations and at cultural events such as pow wows; Hawaiian, which has official status in the state of Hawaii; Chamorro, which has official status in the commonwealths of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands; Carolinian, which has official status in the commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands; and Samoan, which has official status in the commonwealth of American Samoa. American Sign Language, used mainly by the deaf, is also native to the country.



- The national dialect is known as American English, which itself consists of numerous regional dialects, but has some shared unifying features that distinguish it from other national varieties of English. There are four large dialect regions in the United States—the North, the Midland, the South, and the West—and several smaller dialects such as those of New York City, Philadelphia, and Boston. A standard dialect called "General American" (analogous in some respects to the received pronunciation elsewhere in the English-speaking world), lacking the distinctive noticeable features of any particular region, is believed by some to exist as well; it is sometimes regionally associated with the Midwest.

# Native language statistics for the United States

- The following information is an estimation as actual statistics constantly vary.
- According to the [CIA](#),<sup>[12]</sup> the following is the percentage of total population's native languages in the United States:
  - English (82.1%)
  - Spanish (10.7%)
  - Other [Indo-European](#) languages (3.8%)
  - Other [Asian](#) or [Pacific Islander](#) languages (2.7%)
  - Other languages (0.7%)

- In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, American artists primarily painted landscapes and portraits in a realistic style or that which looked to Europe for answers on technique: for example, John Singleton Copley was born in Boston, but most of his portraiture for which he is famous follow the trends of British painters like Thomas Gainsborough and the transitional period between Rococo and Neoclassicism. The later eighteenth century was a time when the United States was just an infant as a nation and was far away from the phenomenon where artists would receive training as craftsmen by apprenticeship and later seeking a fortune as a professional, ideally getting a patron: Many artists benefited from the patronage of Grand Tourists eager to procure mementos of their travels.

- There were no temples of Rome or grand nobility to be found in the Thirteen Colonies. Later developments of the 19th century brought America one of its earliest native home grown movements, like the Hudson River School and portrait artists with a unique American flavor like Winslow Homer.

- A parallel development taking shape in rural America was the American craft movement, which began as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution. As the nation grew wealthier, it had patrons able to buy the works of European painters and attract foreign talent willing to teach methods and techniques from Europe to willing students as well as artists themselves; photography became a very popular medium for both journalism and in time as a medium in its own right with America having a great deal of open spaces of natural beauty and growing cities in the East teeming with new arrivals and new buildings. Museums in Chicago, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. began to have a booming business in acquisitions, competing for works as diverse as the then more recent work of the Impressionists to pieces from Ancient Egypt, all of which captured the public imaginations and further influenced fashion and architecture.

- Developments in modern art in Europe came to America from exhibitions in New York City such as the Armory Show in 1913. After World War II, New York emerged as a center of the art world. Painting in the United States today covers a vast range of styles. American painting includes works by Jackson Pollock, John Singer Sargent, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Norman Rockwell, among many others.

# Architecture

- Architecture in the United States is regionally diverse and has been shaped by many external forces. U.S. architecture can therefore be said to be eclectic, something unsurprising in such a multicultural society. In the absence of a single large-scale architectural influence from indigenous peoples such as those in Mexico or Peru, generations of designers have incorporated influences from around the world. Currently, the overriding theme of American Architecture is modernity, as manifest in the skyscrapers of the 20th century, with domestic and residential architecture greatly varying according to local tastes and climate.

# Theater

- Theater of the United States is based in the Western tradition and did not take on a unique dramatic identity until the emergence of Eugene O'Neill in the early twentieth century, now considered by many to be the father of American drama. O'Neill is a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for drama and the only American playwright to win the Nobel Prize for **literature**. After O'Neill, American drama came of age and flourished with the likes of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, William Inge, and Clifford Odets during the first half of the twentieth century. After this fertile period, American theater broke new ground, artistically, with the absurdist forms of Edward Albee in the 1960s.



- Social commentary has also been a preoccupation of American theater, often addressing issues not discussed in the mainstream. Writers such as Lorraine Hansbury, August Wilson, David Mamet and Tony Kushner have all won Pulitzer Prizes for their polemical plays on American society. The United States is also the home and largest exporter of modern musical theater, producing such musical talents as Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Leonard Bernstein, George and Ira Gershwin, Kander and Ebb, and Stephen Sondheim. Broadway is one of the largest theater communities in the world and is the epicenter of American commercial theater.

# Music

- American music styles and influences (such as rock and roll, jazz, rock, techno, soul, country, hip-hop, blues) and music based on them can be heard all over the world. Music in the U.S. is diverse. It includes African-American influence in the 20th century. The first half of this century is famous for jazz, introduced by African-Americans. According to music journalist Robert Christgau, "pop music is more African than any other facet of American culture."
- The top three best-selling musicians in the United States are Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley, and Madonna.
- The best-selling band is The Eagles.

# Broadcasting

- *Main articles: Television in the United States and Radio in the United States*
- Television is a major mass media of the United States. Household ownership of television sets in the country is 96.7%,<sup>[16]</sup> and the majority of households have more than one set. The peak ownership percentage of households with at least one television set occurred during the 1996–97 season, with 98.4% ownership.<sup>[17]</sup> As a whole, the television networks of the United States are the largest and most syndicated in the world.<sup>[18]</sup>
- Due to a recent surge in the number and

- As of August 2013, approximately 114,200,000 American households own at least one television set.

