

The Embodiment of Individualistic Values in American Nationality

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Abstract

America is the most developed country in the world. It is really amazing for such a young country with only two hundred years' history to get so great achievements. That has a close relationship with its cultural values. And, as the core of it, individualism really accounts. This essay is about American individualism. It has three parts. The first part is a brief introduction of American individualism, including its connotations and developments. Individualism emphasizes freedom, equality and independence mostly. The second part is about the embodiment of individualistic values in politics, economics and society. The third part is about its positive and negative influences on American society.

Key words: Individualism; American culture; American nationality

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INTRODUCTION

Individualism is the core of American culture and the main value in America. We can say that individualism has been influencing all the fields of politics, economics, society and even the characters of the nation. The ideas of self-reliance, individual freedom and equal competition

which are emphasized in American individualism are different from those in China. Individualism has supplied the nation with rational characteristics, behavior patterns and aspirations. It has endowed the past, the present and the future with the perspective of unity and progress. It has explained the peculiar social and political organization of the nation—unity, an ideal social organization, so individualism has been expressed as the most common characteristic of the national consciousness. In this paper, we will pay attention to how individualism is reflected on American national characteristics and the whole society with a critical eye.

1. INDIVIDUALISM IN AMERICA

To a large extent, cultural values are the understanding and awareness of life, the pursuit and interpretation of life, and a yearning for life. Formation of cultural value is inextricably linked to the historic experience of a nation, social development and ethnic composition. Individualism is the core of American culture and the most representative integral part of American values. It is a moral, political and social philosophy, emphasizing the importance of personal, self-contained virtue as well as personal independence.

1.1 American Culture Value

With an overview of the history of the United States, this country has only passed two hundred years since July 4, 1776 when it declared to be independent. However, it has become a country with advanced technology, developed economy and affluent life. It has nurtured and formed its own colorful cultural connotations which are based on material life. It is also typically formed by immigrants who bring different religion, language and cultural values. Under the influences of diverse cultural system, a new culture—American culture appears. Thus American culture is generally named “melting pot culture”, “platter

culture” and “mosaic culture”. It is in this integration process that all kinds of immigrant cultures bring vitality and power to the new country, which helps it develop into a powerful country in both culture and other fields rapidly (Chen, 2007).

The mainstream culture of America is formed by the following factors: (a) Religious culture. America is a country with the multi-confessional coexistence. Religious culture plays a vital important role in the development of American culture and it also has necessary relationship with its history. There are a large number of institutions of higher education run by religious denominations. (b) The idea of equality, democracy, and freedom. In the early days of America, the idea appears. Declaration of Independence says that Men are created equally. It also insists personal freedom, religious freedom and speech freedom, as well as the equal opportunity of education. (c) Individualism. Individualism is the most important philosophical category in the western ideological field which suggests that individualism should be the most important. Relying on one’s own and personal independence are the most important virtues. It emphasizes personality and insists that personality should be kept by the independence of thinking and action. Individualism is becoming the core culture of America. (d) Pragmatism. It features the proposed concepts and proposals which can be observed in actual results and practices. The practical methods with pragmatic view of point to analyze, estimate and solve problems make Americans more responsive to the new environment. (e) Innovation. Innovation is the core value of American culture. Innovation is an important way to the continuous development of society. Only innovation is the important means of survival, development and prosperity (Rideski, 1992).

1.2 The Connotation, Origin and Development of Individualism

The ideology of individualism can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy—the European Renaissance and Religious Reformation. From the 16th century to the 18th century, the famous European thinkers, such as Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Mill and Kant, laid a profound philosophical foundation for the seeds of individualism. In the year of 1840, French political thinker—Alexis de Tocqueville created the word “individualism” in his book. “Democracy in America” is used to represent a system of thought which is distinguished from self-interest. He defined personal values, dignity, happiness, interest, and freedom as individualism and gave it more complete theoretical connotation: First, individual is the purpose, and society is just the means of it. Second, it emphasizes democracy and freedom of the individual. Third, it emphasizes the social system of maintaining the private property from the point of individual. Since then, individualism is becoming a cornerstone of the Western countries’ thought and then

brought to America by the early colonists. After two hundred years of development, it ultimately becomes the fundamental cultural value of the United States.

Individualism is the emotion of one’s own interests and peace of mind. It makes every citizen alienate from relatives and friends. It represents a creative, pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit. Therefore, when every citizen establishes his own small community he will concentrate on his own development neglecting the larger society. From which we can easily find that “individualism” is completely different from “self-interest”. It is based on freedom and equality. It emphasizes on self-reliance and free development of personality. The central elements of American individualism are self-motivation, self-choice and self-reliance to achieve self-realization. The most closely associated idea is the concept of equality, freedom and competition. Equality of opportunity and individual freedom are the basic guarantees for achieving self-worth, and competition is the fundamental way to achieve their personal values. Individualism stresses on personality, self-centered and relying on oneself for free development.

The self-reliant spirit which was inspired in the wave of large-scale westward in the 1840s made individualism strengthened. People came to the western frontier overcoming all obstacles and built a new life through hard work, self-reliance, pragmatic progressive and they ultimately succeeded. This makes the unique American individual spirits of self-confidence, self-reliance and self-personal strengthened considerably. From the end of World War II to the 1960s, American economy has been prosperous continuously. As technology advances and capitalism develops, the alienation is deepened. The human diversity is stifled and the human is gradually subordinate to objects. Since the 1950s, in American society, a powerful ideological mind takes its trend to pursue freedom and peace. People’s attitude to life, success criteria and the concept of happiness are all in change. More and more people ignore the rules and prohibitions and they even don’t like various norms that restrain themselves. They oppose orthodox values. There has been a “runaway individualism” which exposes the negative decadence of individualism. The failure of Vietnam War, Watergate and some risk factors after 1970s such as American socio-economic stagflation influences the development of individualism. They no longer consider the rise and fall of society, the fate of a generation, but the future of the individual instead. Maslow’s humanistic psychology was very popular in the United States, which defines self-realization as the core. It also has a certain influence on individualism. Americans from all walks of life are actively looking for a more fulfilling self-achievement. Most American people spend a lot of time considering themselves, but they were indifferent to the economically disadvantaged people. Most of them believe that if you have access to superior

education, substantial wealth and the bosses' appreciation, you can make yourself stand out. After the 1980s, a new code of ethics—communitarianism is gradually formed in American society. Under the influences of this idea, people begin to start out from the ego. They come to be aware of the individual's social quality, the relationship between personal future and the fate of nations (Santayana, 2008).

2. THE EMBODIMENT OF INDIVIDUALISTIC VALUES IN AMERICAN NATIONALITY

Speaking of the American character, some words could not help but pull into one's brain such as positive, optimistic, greedy, adventurous and courageous. American character has a deep relationship with the spirit of America and the American Dream. The American spirit is yearning for freedom, democracy, justice and human rights. The desire for the American Dream is a kind of belief in the United States. That is, after a persistent struggle, one can be able to get a better life, so people should work hard on themselves with courage, creativity and determination rather than depend on the assistance of others. To a certain extent, it can be said that the U.S. national character is strengthened in the process of chasing the American Dream. This is intrinsically linked with the values of individualism.

Traditional Americans possess a strong sense of personal independence. They think of themselves as independent individuals. Of course, family and collective attention are important, but personal independence and individual rights are supreme. American people grew up in the atmosphere of this individualism which often makes them selfish. But Americans believe everyone should be equal and they respect each other. Privacy is one of the most important personal rights of Americans. It is also the direct product of individualism. They also believe in practicality and efficiency, therefore, Americans have a reputation for being realistic, practical and efficient. The practical consideration is likely to be given highest priority in making any important decisions (Bellah, 1996).

2.1 The Embodiment of Individualistic Values in the Field of Politics

Most commonly speaking, political individualism is a fundamental belief in the protection of individual rights. It is against the incursions of the state and political power. However, there are many dimensions of individualism and it is possible to be an individualist in several different fields. In general usage, an "individualist" denotes a person with a distinctive or unusual personal style, who stands out from the mass. In metaphysics or ontology individualism is a belief that the universe

consists of individual particulars and separable entities. The opponents of individualism in this sense are holists or monists. The typical holist belief is that the relations (usually systematic relations in some sense) between entities have a more fundamental existence than the entities themselves.

Political individualism is an ambiguous idea. The central question about individualism concerns the connections among these different dimensions. Then, what is the form of the association and to what extent are they associated? A saying is often quoted from Margaret Thatcher, "There is no such thing as society, but only individual." She actually adds two words "and families", which can be taken as the thin end of a more collectivist philosophical wedge. The connections among these dimensions are not logical entailment: there is no contradiction in being a philosophical monist, yet believing that individual initiative is the chief engine of economic progress or that persons possess rights which should be protected from the power of the state. But a desire for ideological consistency creates an association between the different dimensions of individualism. There is also an important paradox at the heart of individualism. John Stuart Mill offers one of the most morally appealing images of the individualist society. People are unconstrained by conformity and they are able to advance civilization by the freest possible development of their own ideas and any forms of expression.

Individualists advocate that the social intervention to the private behavior should be limited to a minimum degree. However, too much emphasis on self would easily lead to social instability. "Gilded Age" is a typical period when industrial giant rise to the pinnacle of state power with the economic strength. Capitalists pursued the material interests unbridledly regardless of the requirements of social justice. To some extent, that undermined the mechanisms of democratic society which resulted in serious class confrontation. In this case, the countries adopted anti-monopoly law to limit their unrestrained behavior to safeguard the interests of the majority people.

Westward Movement promoted the development of individualism and it also cultivated a spirit of cooperation. It was also attributed to the harsh environment of the western. In the early time when immigrants came to North America, they were faced with a barren land and they must help each other to build and defend the homeland. In that difficult environment, it was very difficult to survive only depending on the power of a single individual. From this perspective, the tough guy images of cowboy came from life through some of deification. It could also be regarded as self-encouragement needs of immigrants. We could not deny that in the process of American history there was indeed individual or family living by themselves. But helping each other in the neighborhood

was also indispensable. To a certain extent, Westward Movement trained a double spirit of individualism and public liability.

Bell once said that Separation and individuation were necessary to get rid of the old power system and liberate themselves. But in order to avoid negative things—causing self-destruction, the tendencies of separation and individuation must be balanced by the sense of responsibility. In the modern era, it is more and more difficult to make scientific explanation of social reality by defining individualism and the related freedom as the political culture of the United States. Instead, in modern American society, the value orientation tends to be the combination of individualism and the notion of responsibility. And this value orientation constitutes the core of American political culture which also has a profound impact on American history process.

2.2 The Embodiment of Individualistic Values in the Field of Economy

The doctrine of economic individualism holds that each individual should be allowed autonomy in making his or her own economic decisions as opposed to those decisions made by the state or the community for him or her. It also deems that classical liberalism is a political ideology that developed in the 19th century in England, Western Europe and the America. It followed the earlier forms of liberalism in its commitment to personal freedom and popular government, but differed from earlier forms of liberalism in its commitment to free markets and classical economics. The phrase classical liberalism was also sometimes used to refer to all forms of liberalism before the 20th century. After 1970, the phrase began to be used by Libertarians to describe their belief in the primacy of economic freedom and minimal government. It is sometimes difficult to tell which meaning is intended in a given source.

Mutualism is an anarchist school of thought which can be traced back to the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who envisions a society where each person might possess a means of production and trade represents equivalent amounts of labor in the free market. The corresponding scheme is the establishment of a mutual-credit bank. The bank would lend to the producers at a minimal interest rate which is only high enough to cover the costs of administration. Mutualism is based on a labor theory of value which holds that when labors or their products are sold, it ought to receive goods or services embodying the amount of labor necessary to produce an article of exactly equal utility, so receiving anything less would be considered exploitation.

Left-libertarianism is a doctrine that has a strong commitment to personal liberty and an egalitarian view concerning natural resources. It believes that it is illegitimate for anyone to claim private ownership of resources to the detriment of others. Some left-libertarians

of this type support some forms of income redistribution on the grounds of a claim by each individual to be entitled to have an equal share of natural resources.

In 1921, Republicans Harding was admitted into the White House. From then on, a new era, Harding—Coolidge—Hoover era, came. Harding advocated restoring the normal so that the laissez-faire rose again. Coolidge believed that as long as the government does nothing, 80 percent of the problems will be resolved naturally. Hoover advocated laissez-faire strongly. In 1920s, the U.S. economy developed rapidly by technological innovation, the update of fixed capital and the rational management of organizations. Both gross national product and gross industrial production created a new record, especially the development of automobile manufacturing and motor electrical manufacturing. Besides, residential construction industry was particularly notable. Until 1929, the share of industrial production of the U.S. had reached 48.5 percent in the capitalist world and it was more than the sum of the proportion in England, France and Germany. However, the U.S. economy developed unevenly. The prosperity was mainly concentrated in partial industrial cities, and other industrial sectors and agricultural areas are in recession. What's more, stock speculation was rife. As a result, prosperity itself was false with certainty. The further concentration of production and capital deepened the inherent contradictions of capitalist society which bred a new crisis. However, the three Presidents advocated of non-interference in the economic activities of large enterprises to encourage the development of the American free enterprise and they turned a deaf ear to the problems in the U.S. economy. The three presidents' laissez-faire brought the Great Depression of the 1930s to the United States.

In 1934, Democratic Franklin Roosevelt took office. The "New Deal" was implemented. In this very state, President Franklin Roosevelt recognized that it was not feasible to save the capitalist system in the United States by full market mechanisms, economic self-regulation, monopoly capitalists' compassion and laissez-faire policy. In order to make the existing economic organizations serve to the public, the government should assume the task of economic regulation. Franklin Roosevelt believes when the financial, industrial giants violated the public welfare, the government must protect the public interests quickly, so out of the urgent need of overcoming the economic crisis and easing the class contradictions, he implemented the "New Deal" across the country quickly which was different from the laissez-faire.

2.3 The Embodiment of Individualistic Values in the Field of Social Life

An individualist enters into society to further his or her own interests or at least demands the right to serve his or her own interests without taking the interests of society into consideration. The individualist does not lend

credence to any philosophy that requires the sacrifice of the self-interest for any social causes. However, Jean-Jacques Rousseau would argue that his concept of “general will” in the “social contract” is not the simple collections of individual wills. Precisely, it furthers the interests of the individual. Societies and groups can differ in terms of which they are based upon predominantly “self-regarding” (individualistic and self-interested) rather than “other-regarding” (group-oriented, society-minded) behavior (Ketcham, 1987).

The United States is usually thought of being at the individualistic end of the spectrum and in America there is a particular social atmosphere. The loftiest desire of most American people is tightly coupled to individualism: they believe in personal dignity, esteem independent thinking and they do their utmost to meet individual requirements, which have started the engine of the whole country. In the U.S., the individual’s privacy is respected and protected. If a person violates the privacy of others for profits, curiosity or malignity, he will be punished. Americans cannot be asked age, marriage, work and income at will.

Moreover, Americans pay much attention to individual self-reliance. American children will leave their parents and live on themselves when they grow up. The elderly also do not want to live in their children’s spacious house. In the U.S., the phenomenon that students do part-time jobs is very common. And a considerable number of American students work to develop their own independent spirit instead of money. Third, Americans are brave to perform. They prefer to adventure, create and seek the limelight rather than follow the crowd. At class, when the teacher asks a question, the students scramble to raise their hands to answer. Their dresses are free and personalized. Instead of displaying the status of living, American clothing shows personality, so does home furnishings and rarely two are the same. What’s more, Americans are courageous to express themselves. So they are frank and do not pretend to be humble. Fourth, freedom is emphasized in America. Such freedom is not lawless freedom, but it is in the legal constraints which is the premise of freedom. If a person is free to damage another person’s freedom, the result is that everyone’s freedom cannot be guaranteed. In other words, a person can have his own freedom, but he is not allowed to damage the freedom of others. Nevertheless, many Americans are still trying to exploit an advantage. On one hand, they pay taxes by the provisions of the tax law. On the other hand, they try to find the grounds of exemption in order to reduce tax. Fifth, Americans are good at thinking. They do not believe in the words of others, especially the official view. There is no guidance to the institutions of journalism and propaganda. Media reports and statements are generally the authors’ and journalists’ view. Sixth, because of Americans advocating “sex freedom”, the phenomena of premarital pregnancy,

single mothers and the spread of AIDS are more serious which have brought serious problems. Seventh, personal choice is taken seriously. It mainly means political voting and elections. Each elector has the right of freedom choice. Choosing “donkey” or selecting “elephant” is all up to your choice. In religion, everyone has the right to religious belief. Eighth, Americans believe in individual competition. The individual competition has become a common American attitude towards life, and competition affects all aspects of Americans’ life. Unlike the Chinese, Americans are not interested in things of a person’s family background and social relations because the success of the parents cannot help the children to get success. The son of a president may also rub the car. Success all depends on personal ability.

3 COMMENTS ON AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

To assess the value of American Individualism, we should firstly know that the values of freedom and equality are the important constituents. They have played a significant role in American history especially from the Independence War to the Civil War. It is individual consciousness that helped the immigrants and settlers to form a new nation, to fight against their enemies and finally to establish a unified country. Until nowadays these American values are still inspiring people to struggle forward. Individualism—the core value among all the ideas of the Americans has been playing and will continue to play a crucial role throughout the American history.

3.1 Positive Influences of Individualism on American Society

These years, it is individualism that provides power for political system, economic system and peoples’ spirit. American people believe that if they insist on individualism, inspire the creativity of the people and ensure equality of opportunity, they will be able to continue to develop. Visibly, individualism has played an active role in American society.

First, individual competition is a positive and progressive attitude towards life. It can improve the efficiency of both individual and the entire community to make the economic and social progress. Americans believe that competition will maximize the role of individuals. It challenges everyone to create wealth. For society, under the mechanism of competition, the community can have a continuous and rapid development through the principle of “elimination of inferior”. The competition is an invisible rule leading to efficiency. In 1990s, the United States got an unprecedented moment on economic development, because the government introduced mechanism of competition in public services, thereby enhanced the efficiency of the public administration.

Second, individualism promotes people to pursue diversification and innovation, which changes people's attitude towards life. Innovation and change are the American philosophy of life. Therefore, the United States always seems to be dynamic and vibrant. New products and new concepts are full. Innovative ideas promote Americans to be creative which promotes social progress. The yearly number of Nobel laureates can fully prove that. According to statistics, from 1901 to 1999 there are 191 American people winning the Nobel Prize of the natural sciences which account for 1/3 of the world winners. Each year, the number of technology patents of the U.S. researchers is equal to the sum of the rest of the world.

Individualism is a personal attitude to life. In American families, the children have also been respected and treated as a personal being. Children are taught to be independent. When they grow up, they determine by themselves what college to enter, what major they learn and what kind of job they are engaged in. Whether their point of view is unrealistic, as long as they are positive, the parents will respect these ideas and think them over. Children are taught to learn self-judgment, self-denial and self-responsibility from an early age and to avoid drifting with others. All these let the children know the importance of self-independent, so that they can be self-reliant in the future (Heard, 1990).

3.2 Negative Influences of Individualism on American Society

In American history, the magic of individualism has ever played an active role. However, if individualism is put too much emphasis it also results in negative impact. Actually, negative impact of individualism has penetrated into all spheres of life in American society.

First, the pursuit of individual freedom leads to the "American disease". The United States is indeed a free country. However, due to "excessive freedom", some "social diseases" such as drug abuse, crime, violence and homosexuality are common phenomena in American society. The trend of drug abuse has become a big disease of the country. Many factors cause drug abuse, but free indulgence advocated by the individualism is one of the main reasons. The United States is the world's largest drug market. In the United States there are about 200 million people smoking marijuana, 100 million people using cocaine and 500,000 people sucking food heroin. Each year nearly 50 million people die in drug use and there are more than 230 crimes of drug-related offences per 100,000. About 80 percent of inmates in the jail have the problem of drug addiction.

Second, violence, murder and crime in America make the society full of fear. In this "free" territory, the law allows citizens to have personal firearms and firearms can even be traded freely. The full freedom of purchasing and holding the gun makes the community pay a high price.

In the United States, almost everyday shootings happen and the number of deaths due to shot lists at the top in the world. Homicide criminal cases have occurred continually. In the United States, the number of innocent people being shot dead is far higher than any other countries.

Third, interpersonal relationship is indifferent. People who have the pursuit of self-reliance can control their own lives. They are unwilling to be constrained and interfered by their parents, friends and society. However, too much emphasis on self-reliance results in the invisible interpersonal indifference and emptiness of people's life. Independence would weaken the social control, while individuals may feel lonely. Unlike the communal life of people, loneliness is the price paid for the freedom of the individual. "I" am elevated to a supreme position and thus walking towards "solipsism". With times going, the feeling of loneliness is more prominent.

CONCLUSION

America is the only super country in the world, which is leading in economy, technology and other fields. It is really amazing for such a young country with a history of only two hundred years to get so great achievements. American cultural value, particularly, the core of it, individualism, plays a vital role in the process of success. This essay mainly talks about American individualism and how it is reflected on American national personality. The central elements of individualism are freedom, equality and independence. It is an individual-centered point of view. Americans are positive, optimistic, greed, adventurous and courageous. They like changes and innovation. We can find "individualism" in all the fields in America, including political field, economic field as well as social life.

A coin has two sides, so does individualism. Of course, individualism promotes the development of American society, is the driving force of economic development, ensures citizens' democratic rights, and promotes people to pursue the diversification. Accordingly, new products and new concepts are full. Therefore, the United States always seems to be dynamic and vibrant. However, negative impacts of individualism also exist. Drugs and violence are around. Americans pay attention to independence overly. They behave at will and they oppose being interfered by others even their parents and friends. As a result, interpersonal relationship is more and more indifferent. Moreover, people's life is increasingly empty.

From this essay, we can know more about America from all aspects. That is beneficial to the communication between countries, as well as the friendship between peoples. What's more, all those offer us references. We can draw lessons, absorbing advantages and avoiding disadvantages to improve ourselves.

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