

## Emergence of the Distinctively American Mind

Modern American <sup>popular</sup> culture seems to be the yardstick <sup>em/against</sup> to which the whole of the world measures itself. <sup>^</sup> Rock and roll bands tour Europe and Japan to huge sold-out crowds. American movies permeated Iranian society, provoking a crackdown on non-Islamic cultural events in the early 1980s. Levi blue jeans were a hot item in the former Soviet Union. There are McDonald's fast-food restaurants in Berlin, Paris, Rome and Moscow.

When did the American cultural experience become so widely accepted as the norm? Perhaps as World War II ended and the United States took on a more worldly and helpful role, American culture and ideas began to introduce themselves gradually into foreign societies. These very foreign – primarily European – cultures were at one time the major influences on the American mind. The original thirteen colonies existed to send back bounty to their homeland; in that capacity the American mind began to develop as a separate identity from its theoretical, political, societal and cultural background.

Thomas Paine, who wrote *Common Sense* in 1776, was an English immigrant to the American colonies and arrived on the eve of the creation of the United States. As the

From your lead paragraph, I would think you would locate the watershed of the American mind in the post World War II period.

I'm not sure how this follows first sentences of paragraph

thirteen upstart colonies contemplated separation from their sovereign, it was Paine who became the first person to codify the American mind. His widely popular pamphlet served to inflame the average recalcitrant colonist to <sup>take up</sup> arms / or at least to finally publicly accept that his colony would soon be in need of its freedom.

Paine decries the absurdity of the English monarch as a man who, by his own existence proves himself to be useless. <sup>Paine (or otherwise reference to English monarch)</sup> He rails against the hypocrisies of the English constitution, as it represents a long history of monarchical and aristocratical tyranny.

Even though Paine had only been in the colonies only a short time before writing his historic pamphlet, his is the first recognizable example of the singularly American mind.

Even though the colonies had existed as viable entities for nearly 150 years at the time *Common Sense* was published and the writers of the Declaration of Independence and the new Constitution and Bill of Rights would soon define the American mind more in-depth, Paine signed on with the first American effort. With one quick Bible reference, Paine deconstructs the English monarchy and sets the stage for American democracy with one line: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you, *The Lord shall rule over you.*"<sup>1</sup> (his emphasis)

The de-emphasis of King George was crucial to the establishment of the American mind. Subjugation to any monarch, especially the king of England to <sup>whom</sup> ~~which~~ most

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982, 68-73.

Americans had so recently been under, had to become a foreign concept for the new United States to survive. Hereditary succession and the English system of primogeniture had to be replaced by a representative government and legal means of inheritance. According to Paine, hereditary succession not only "opened the door to the *foolish*, the *wicked*, and the *improper*," it was by its very nature oppressive.<sup>2</sup> Oppression was one thing that the new Americans must always be wary of and the sole enemy they must never succumb to. Exhibiting oppressive tactics would make the new American colonies no better than the monarch they were about to fight.

So rejection against primogeniture defines the American mind?

Generations before Paine, however, the Puritans fled England to seek a new home in the colonies. Settling in New England, the Puritans strove to establish a holy and righteous community. Since the "Puritan work ethic" is a term that has come to represent honest, hard work, one might consider the Puritan as the first true American mind to emerge in the New World. While the Puritans were seeking the location where they might practice their particular strain of the Reformation, they were not the first example of the American mind. The Puritans, though physically separated from Europe, were still very much connected theoretically and intellectually to the Old World. The best example of this is in the Salem, Massachusetts witch trials that took place in 1692. The Protestant Reformation spearheaded by Martin Luther rocked sixteenth-century

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

Europe; an unfortunate side-effect of the Reformation, both its Protestant movement and the Catholic counter-reformation, were wide-spread witch trials. The European witches in question were primarily female; a disturbing majority of them were tried, tortured, convicted and executed.<sup>3</sup> That the Puritans, separated though they were from the main witch-craze in Europe, found themselves subject to the same mind-set that sparked the European witch hunts shows that they were not long enough intellectually separated from the Old World to be the first true American minds. The Puritans also believed that God was incomprehensible to man;<sup>4</sup> Paine's concept of God was as a helper to any true and just cause, especially a cause seeking to separate itself from tyranny.

After the Revolution succeeded and the colonies became the United States of America, it took a significant amount of time for the American mind to emerge as a distinct entity. The first few generations of colonists – now Americans – were not that different from their European ancestors. The desire for total control consumed them; it hearkened to the absolutism of the monarchs they struggled so valiantly to free themselves from. They found themselves in a land that, beyond the safety of their own towns and villages, was populated with a strange and (to them) savage culture of natives. The recently freed colonists-turned-New-World-citizens felt obligated, because of their

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Klaitz, *Servants of Satan: The Age of Witch Hunts*. Bloomington, Indiana: Bloomington University Press, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939, 10

several

European past and influences, to "save" the Indians; converting the native Americans to Christianity became of the utmost importance. Their well-meaning but misguided intentions led them to believe the Indians were potentially convertible, thought the conversion process might be a long and involved process. The colonists could not see that they were, in fact, themselves subject to the very things they accused the Indians of being: unrestrained by reason and focused on their passions. The new Americans felt it their obligation to make the old Americans civilized and Christian; whether by educating them or forcing them, they sought to Anglicize the Indians.<sup>5</sup>

? some were converted

Though Paine was the father of purely American thought, it was not until the American literary renaissance that the American mind-set had become fully ingrained into the everyman. The American authors that wrote their way into literary fame were the first group to epitomize the true American mind. They were adventurous to a fault; they sought out the edges of the American intellectual envelope and then pushed it to its very limits. They combined their past, that is, a European literary background, with contemporary American culture, which included their colonial environment and mind-set and the native culture which they saw on the American Frontier to create the first American contribution to world culture.<sup>6</sup> The writers of the Declaration of

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<sup>5</sup> James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 131-4.

<sup>6</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1988, 5.

Independence and the Constitution of the United States were political theorists; the ideas they wrote down were radical but not entirely new on their own. Men like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were absorbing and synthesizing the political theory that charged the air around them; authors like Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe were launching out in search of completely new ideas on their own.

In the form of Poe America finds its first penultimate American mind. Granted, Poe's writings were horrific; they were at the same time hauntingly beautiful. This was a direct reflection of the singularly American experience of frontier life. The American frontier was a terrifying thing capable of granting a man untold rewards or prematurely ending not only his life, but the lives of his family as well. Poe took this promise and fear and turned it into a uniquely American style of writing. Poe made the logical next step after the appearance of Oriental and visionary fiction; he extended the secularization of literature to symbolic and nearly outright criticism of the established order.<sup>7</sup> Poe was the first of the critics of his own culture; it is this very self-criticism that puts him at the forefront of the American mind. The idea of publicly criticizing one's own government and semi-nationally accepted religion is one the American mind has pushed past its logical end. To criticize, question and debate one's own establishment have become American pasttimes.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-6.

The self-criticism which Americans can pride themselves of began over two

Is that definitive of the American mind?

hundred years ago with a short pamphlet written by a recent immigrant. Thomas Paine's

*Common Sense* is what started it all. The colonies accepted as near gospel his widely-

read revolutionary pamphlet. It took several generations, though, for the American mind

to tear itself completely from its European background. In the unique and horrifying

writings of Edgar Allan Poe the distinct American mind finally becomes separate from its

ancestral lineage.

BT/ ~~BT/~~ I love your engaged writing style. But your argument is all over the place. American <sup>popular</sup> culture becomes an international influence in the post World War II period, but it begins in the Revolutionary era with Paine's political treatise. The leap here is not just in centuries, but in kinds of culture -- political versus recreational. You make an excellent argument for maintaining our <sup>second</sup> strongest argument of our mentality, but don't mention the Enlightenment, certainly the source of much of Paine's but your argument would come with the American renaissance what I suppose is footnote 7. It is American renaissance and concentrated use of Beneath the American Renaissance which that makes Poe and that is what is supported in the post WWII period.