

From the Outside In

A Foreigner's Education in American History

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WHEN I CAME TO THE UNITED STATES for graduate school, I assumed that my education abroad (in Israel) offered me a unique perspective on American history, compared to classmates and colleagues whose ideas were shaped by their education in American schools and colleges. If asked, I would doubtless have also thought that being a foreigner gave me greater objectivity and emotional detachment from the topic. In hindsight, however, my sense is that instruction on American history is fairly similar in the United States and abroad, since instructors and textbook authors abroad reflect the research of American historians on U.S. history. By the same token, pedagogy on France and Sweden in American schools reflects the research of French and Swedish historians on their national histories.

Virtually everyone who approaches the study of American history—in the United States and abroad—already knows that Americans are different. They have their own sports, a quirky political culture and unique political institutions, a distinctive approach to criminal justice, an attachment to religion that stands out among Western nations, a materialist and consumerist ethos, and a pop culture that is easily identifiable as American (from rock 'n roll, jazz, soul, hip hop, and country music to Hollywood blockbusters, westerns, comic books, talk radio, and daytime soaps). It is no surprise, therefore, that perhaps the most prominent theme that students all over the world learn in classes on early American history is the formation of American identity—how (and therefore when) did American society become distinctively American, featuring uniquely American manners, philosophical and political sensibilities, religiosity, and sociology.

Most historians hold that life in colonial America gradually reshaped English settlers' habits, mores, values, and beliefs. According to this view, Americans gradually formed their own cultural traits, as the colonies drifted away from English influence. The result of this process of Americanization was an American impulse to secede from the British Empire. Other scholars—mostly specialists on colonial America, myself included—see the settlers as conventional Englishmen. These historians argue that settlers retained their English identity, patriotism, customs, and sensibilities; their rebellion was not the product of gradual Americanization, and their uniquely American identity took form mostly after independence, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rather than in the colonial era.

The framework of Americanization as the driver of the American Revolution is as prominent abroad as it is in the United States. First, students (both foreign and domestic) are introduced to colonial and Revolutionary America already pre-loaded with the knowledge that the United States is today a distinctive and idiosyncratic country, and one with a unique role in the world—a technological, cultural, economic, and military superpower. They are therefore encouraged to identify colonial antecedents to the distinctive path the United States would take as an independent nation.

Moreover, it makes intuitive anthropological sense that the American environment would reshape the culture of European settlers. After all, we expect peoples living in different environments—hot versus cold, mountainous versus flat, arid versus fertile—to differ from one another culturally. In 1782, a French settler in New York (Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, naturalized as John Hector St. John) explained to European readers in his *Letters from an American Farmer* that Americans are Europeans who had been transformed by America itself: “Europeans submit insensibly to these great powers [of environment], and become, in the course of a few generations, not only Americans in general, but either Pennsylvanians, Virginians, or provincials under some other name. [...] The inhabitants of Canada, Massachusetts, the middle provinces, [and] the southern ones will be as different as their climates.”¹

Historians and other observers have provided variants of this explanation for the development of American identity ever since, examining not only the influence of America's geography, topography, climate, flora, and fauna, but also the transformative effects of America's social environment (for example, its racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, its cheap land and high wages, slavery, and the

¹ Adolf Hitler famously expressed a similar assessment of the cultural impact of America's physical environment. In explaining why the East is the proper site for German settlement, he stressed that only in Eastern Europe's cold climate can the German character persist unchanged: “Transplant a German to Kiev, and he remains a perfect German. But transplant him to Miami, and you make a degenerate of him—in other words, an American.”

absence of a legal aristocracy). Many scholars thus hold that American racial, religious, ethical, and political sensibilities were molded in America, reflecting the colonies' unique demographics and economics. By the same token, some hold that regional American accents formed in America over time, by the mixing of Anglos with other ethnicities—African, Dutch, German, Scottish, and Scotch-Irish—in different parts of America.²

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I myself was armed with this historical framework of Americanization when I began my doctoral research on the colonies' military history. As I've grown more familiar with the colonists' habits and beliefs, however, I've become increasingly skeptical of the Americanization thesis. While there is no denying that environment does shape culture, one should keep in mind also that culture shapes the environment. The question is which force is more pervasive. In the American case, the evidence indicates that the English Empire facilitated the effective transplantation of English practices, technologies, ideas, culture, and institutions to America, alongside English people, animals, and plants. Colonial America was thus marked more by forces of Anglicization than Americanization. English settlers survived and thrived in America not because they were gradually transformed by America—Americanized—to fit into and to take advantage of their new and foreign environment. Rather, they prospered and multiplied because they gradually Anglicized America to become less foreign; to become a place that would sustain pre-existing English patterns of settlement, agriculture, manufacturing, trade, and social and civic organization.

Settlers transformed America through military conquest, farming, animal husbandry, logging, settlement, and civil engineering. Thus, as frontier demographics and economics gave way to more conventional patterns of English social organization, colonial settlements and culture became more recognizably English. This allowed Anglo-American settlers to retain their English identity, customs, values,

2 The opposing view is that Americans' regional accents came ready-made from Britain. According to this view, Americans' regional accents simply indicate from which parts of the British Isles American settlers had originated. This means that American accents are, in fact, regional British accents that were transported to America. This debate holds for French as well—some argue that American conditions changed the speech patterns of French settlers in America to produce the Quebec accent; others view Quebecois French as a linguistic time capsule that preserved the sound of French as it was spoken in seventeenth-century France.

and beliefs. When one considers family life, home furnishings, fashions, religious practices, civic and political life, agriculture, manufacturing, and commerce, the colonies were not drifting away from Britain's sphere of cultural influence. To the contrary, the Empire encompassed a truly transatlantic civilization. Indeed, the settlers eventually rebelled because they were British, not because they had taken on a new identity or political creed. Their complaints about arbitrary power and self-government reprised those of English rebels during the English Civil War (1642-51) and the Glorious Revolution (1688).

Over the past twenty years, the debate on Americanization has been the running theme in my career, in both my scholarship and my classrooms. I approached my first book—my doctoral dissertation—with the educated assumption that warfare in America forced English settlers to “unlearn” the European way of war and adopt an “American way of war” that was better suited to the uneven wooded environment and to Indians' open-ordered tactics.³ My original intent was to trace the colonists' military Americanization. The evidence, however, led elsewhere. It indicated that American colonists never did renounce the European way of war. Their military manuals, training, and actions in the field indicate that despite serious deficiencies, they remained committed to European military conventions. If Americans developed a uniquely American way of war, it happened in the nineteenth century, after independence, rather than in the colonial era.

Research on my second book also revealed transatlantic cultural cohesion between Britain and British America.⁴ It grew out of the traditional depiction of Atlantic piracy as a flourishing trade that Britain quickly and forcefully suppressed between the late-1690s and 1720s. My study was an attempt to understand how the Royal Navy met the tactical challenge posed by a vast ocean and small, swift pirate ships. I found that British command of American waters has been greatly overstated by piracy specialists, and that piracy continued to flourish in the North Atlantic. It dissipated—peacefully, due to shifts in global trade—only in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, as in the “golden age” of piracy, the greatest obstacle to Britain's piracy-suppression efforts was not the ocean itself, but British subjects. Coastal communities in America and Britain saw the imperial government's attempts to police maritime trade practices as a novel breach of both custom and law. Britons and Anglo-Americans remained wedded to pre-modern beliefs that upheld the legality and propriety of commerce-raiding, and they thwarted imperial efforts to target and stamp out this and other forms of illegal trade.

³ Guy Chet, *Conquering the American Wilderness: The Triumph of European Warfare in the Colonial Northeast* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

⁴ Guy Chet, *The Ocean is a Wilderness: Atlantic Piracy and the Limits of State Authority, 1688-1856* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

Over the past two decades, my graduate and undergraduate classes reflected my growing familiarity with colonial culture and increasing skepticism of the Americanization thesis. My classroom experience led me to my third book project,⁵ a dissenting companion to traditional U.S. History textbooks that I and my colleagues regularly assign in our classes. Because U.S. History classes are designed as national histories, virtually all U.S. History textbooks (both K-12 and college) employ the narrative of Americanization to help students understand how American colonists formed their own ideas, beliefs, and practices, and why they separated themselves from their mother country. This approach makes use of hindsight to explain the country's founding, identifying for students colonial antecedents of the Revolution—Puritan separatism, the Mayflower Compact, the economic and cultural dynamics of the frontier, imperial restrictions on American trade and manufacturing, the rise of colonial assemblies, the development of American racial attitudes and practices, the Great Awakening, Albany Plan, Braddock's defeat, and the like. These textbooks thus tell a story of America's physical and social environment gradually transforming English settlers into Americans. It is this process of Americanization that differentiated and distanced the settlers from their mother country.

What is obscured in this conventional account is the colonists' *own* understanding of the origins, causes, and ends of their Revolution. My contention is that English settlers in America did not display or perceive a growing sense of alienation or distance from England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They referred to themselves as English (or British), they took patriotic pride in Britain's accomplishments on the world stage, and they saw themselves as integral components of British civilization. Moreover, even as they resisted Parliament's imperial policies in the 1760s and 1770s, settlers understood and explained their resistance as conventionally English—they understood themselves not as agents of change, but as upholding traditional English practices and liberties. Their struggle was the same as that of those venerated English leaders who had launched the English Civil War (1642) and Glorious Revolution (1688). Indeed, the settlers' beliefs regarding self-government, arbitrary power, law, law enforcement, and criminal justice were mainstream beliefs not only in the colonies, but also in Britain.

As the settlers understood it, their political resistance and subsequent rebellion were products of their English inheritance, not of uniquely American sensibilities that they had acquired by living in America. They were trying to preserve the old established order, rather

⁵ Guy Chet, *The Colonists' American Revolution: Preserving English Liberty, 1607-1783* (Wiley, forthcoming 2019).

than create a new order or a new system of government. Only during and after the war did Americans develop their own national identity, including a new system of government.

The purpose of my forthcoming book is not merely to introduce students to an idea that challenges the orthodoxy they know. It aims to make history interesting and relevant to them by making the classroom a venue for debate between two competing narratives, rather than for memorizing a single unchallenged narrative. It illustrates to students that the authors of their traditional history textbook are not simply relaying a series of facts about the past; they are advancing a particular interpretation of the past—the Americanization thesis. In presenting a dissenting interpretation of America’s founding, my book invites students to evaluate both narratives on the strength of evidence.

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The Americanization debate is significant for anyone interested in American history. It determines whether the ideas we associate with the American Revolution were created in America or transported to America; whether America Americanized English settlers or was Anglicized by them; whether centrifugal forces drew the colonies away from Britain, or were the colonies increasingly integrated into a transatlantic British civilization; whether Revolutionists were trying to create a new political system or preserve an old one; and whether the Revolutionary era is a story about change or a story about resistance to change. More generally, the Americanization debate raises the question of whether people from the past are reliable witnesses to their own motivations and beliefs. If they are, then historians should investigate past societies through the eyes of contemporaries, channeling how they themselves understood their actions. If they are unreliable witnesses, however, then historians must use hindsight, comparative models, and integrated data to identify forces (such as Americanization) that were hidden from contemporaries but nevertheless shaped their ideas and actions. Awareness of what is gained and lost in each historiographical method reveals to students that history is a more contentious and active endeavor than a simple chronicling of historical facts.

Heated public debates on Civil War monuments, guns, healthcare policy, church and state, education, criminal justice, and a Constitution written over 200 years ago point to the role historical interpretation plays in our private and public lives. When I immigrated to the United States, it was these debates that clarified to me that I did not understand American culture, American values, and Americans as well as I had previously believed. Many native-born Americans are in the same boat—they are equally perplexed by their fellow-Americans and by the political culture that surrounds them. There is no doubt that this is partly due to the fact that Americans have insulated themselves from their fellow-citizens by living, working, and socializing only with those who share their sociological profile (educational attainment, family structure, wealth, and political sensibilities). But there is good reason to lay some blame at the feet of those responsible for Americans' understanding of their history. After all, American history is the vehicle through which people absorb their civics lessons about American society, institutions, and political culture.

Foreigners and Americans alike would doubtless understand America better by getting to know more Americans; especially Americans from other parts of the country and other walks of life. But they can also make better sense of American society today by seeking out histories that challenge basic assumptions and beliefs they hold about America's past. At the very least, this can reveal that others understand the present differently not because they are ignorant or deranged, but because they understand the past differently. It could even lead one to consider the possibility that one's own understanding of the past might be incomplete, flawed, or erroneous.

Reading histories habituates the mind to the notion that "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."⁶ It helps us recognize that practices and beliefs that we deem funny, bizarre, foolish, or cruel seemed utterly normal and sensible to reasonable, intelligent, and honorable people at the time. Like foreign travel, history can teach us to understand and tolerate—perhaps even respect—other societies' divergent mores, sensibilities, and beliefs. It can even help us extend the same intellectual courtesy to members of our own society—our perplexing acquaintances, co-workers, neighbors, and relatives. **A**

6 Historians like to use this phrase, lifted from L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), to remind audiences to approach past societies as anthropologists—studying them on their own terms, rather than assessing how they fail to conform to the reader's own culture.