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The American Dream: Independence Turned to Isolation

Across the globe, one of the defining factors of the “American” stereotype is undeniable, loud and proud patriotism. For decades, most Americans have been stereotypically regarded as blissfully ignorant of much that goes on outside of our own borders. In an interview with my mother who was born and raised in Brazil, but has spent over 20 years living in the United States, she argued that many Americans “don’t have an accurate view of foreign events... The scope and the breadth of (Brazilian) news coverage is much more global than just in Brazil itself, which helps to develop a broader perspective. I don’t see that nearly as much here” (Macedo). Growing up with a strong connection to my Brazilian family while living in America, I cannot help but notice the stark differences in mainstream media and news coverage. In comparison to societies of other developed nations, Americans, broadly speaking, are seemingly less concerned and uninformed about matters that do not directly affect their own communities or nation. Many believe that the root cause of this common theme of American ignorance is not the result of carelessness, but rather the product of centuries of individualism being bred into our culture and media. This made me wonder about how our leaders and society impact the knowledge, or lack thereof, of the masses. As the American public is exposed to the influence of powerful actors in politics, economics, and popular culture, I believe that hyper-individualist themes will continue

to increase in mainstream American media in comparison to trends seen in independent news sources and foreign countries. When specifically discussing individualism with my mother, she argued that “individualism is hard-wired into Americans. It is at the base of our consumption culture. Americans are taught abundance, and individualism has been nurtured as a long-time campaign to build wealth, often at the expense of others” (Macedo). Centuries of battles for power and money have bred the culture that we currently live with today. The historical and contemporary factors that shape hyper-individualist themes in American media stem from the influence of the interests of powerful actors, tainting Americans’ general perceptions of the world.

The evolution of American Individualism did not happen on a small scale and is often tied to general patterns in social behaviors and human nature. When humans are a part of a larger group or society, our responses to their environment are often influenced by others. After decades of research, social scientist and analyst Daniel Yankelovich describes social learning with his “lurch-and-learn” theory; Societies display abrupt and extreme change in behavior that is often a result of group frustrations, followed by a period of complex modifications based on trial and error (Yankelovich 4). This theory explains how the nationalist and patriotic themes in American culture can lead to a bandwagon effect that encourages certain beliefs, even when they are extreme or irrational. As humans, the natural urge to find belonging can lead to supporting a certain belief that may build a sense of community, while separating from others with differing ideas. Communities built strictly around certain beliefs can develop insular bubbles within our nation that spread ideas of disinterest in external affairs. However, a craving for community is by no means a guarantee of ignorance. Other times, a shared interest can plant the seed for larger purposes. A prime historical example of this occurred during WWII, when mothers bonded over

concerns about their children being drafted, forming a coalition of five to six million that opposed US intervention in the war (Frost 172). While the purpose of media is to educate the general population, patterns in human behavior can lead to the spread of certain ideas, even if they are not rooted in good intentions.

When examining the current role of individualism in America, many scientists and scholars emphasize its historical origins during and post the WWII era and further back to the Jacksonian era from 1820-1840, where there was a great time of political and social change. During both times, Americans bonded over the importance of the “common man” and strength in the masses. In his book about the roots of American individualism, Alex Zakaras defines the Jacksonian Era as the “crucible” of popular American political myths, like the “self-made man”, because this was when mass democracy and print culture swept the nation, allowing for mass political parties to spread their message of independence on a new scale (Zakaras 14). Ideas of individual rights resonated with the people and were a key selling point for the dominating political figures of the time. Whether it is human rights during the Jacksonian era or isolationism during WWII, the creation of a mass shared identity and purpose causes individuals to be open to certain viewpoints and automatically opposed to others. Those in power seeking to have control over the masses learned during these monumental eras about how people react to the shared desires for security and independence, which often lead to disinterest in affairs that inconvenienced them.

As technology developed, influential actors realized that the role of the media in shaping popular opinion was unlike anything ever seen before. From Hollywood films to social media posts, Americans are encouraged to consume as much information as they can play a critical part in shaping their thinking and behavior. In his essay on the impact of the Cold War on American

relations, journalist Richard Downes claims “the modern media’s pervasiveness and ability to magnify the intrusions of domestic politics into the foreign policy arena have made dealing with the media into a critical component of every foreign policy initiative” (Downes 199). Many Americans form their opinions of foreign events based on popular movements and trending headlines rather than logical arguments. When companies realized the power of advertising, there was a sudden surge of consumption culture in America as a means of dictating status. Americans became hyper focused on their own place in social hierarchies rather than the state of outside communities. Just as companies use advertising to sell their products, political ideas are often sold to citizens through the media. During WWII, Hollywood gossip writer Hedda Hopper adamantly spoke against US intervention through her column that “had an estimated daily readership of 32 million” (Frost), rallying opposition against “entangling alliances with a conflict-ridden Europe” to focus on our internal state. This use of media to spread nationalist ideas has since continued to play a vital role in the outcomes of American politics.

More recently, the growing connection between media, money, and politics has led to widespread polarization that has further developed the misunderstanding of global issues among the American people. Finding comfort in confirmation bias, people often avoid the discomfort of conflicting opinions by only learning from those that agree with their beliefs and interests. In an interview with a current German exchange student at UGA about differences he has noted in the media during his time here, he stated that “(in America,) you have Fox News that represents republicans, and ABC or CNN for Democrats. There are not many popular ‘neutral’ channels, and there’s a lot of screaming and extremists on the news” (Braun). This extremism risks creating a nation where individuals are more influenced by persuasive techniques than genuine facts. Unchecked facts that spark emotional reactions, like the denial of the results in the 2020

election, are easily spread across the media and are used by larger companies and power-hungry individuals to persuade the masses to behave in a certain way, influenced by their instincts rather than their logic.

While many people have recently become alarmed of the ignorance and miseducation of Americans in relation to foreign matters, this issue is deeply rooted in the foundations of our society and is strengthened by powerful players and institutions. I originally believed that the influence of these powerful actors is what has led to the hyper-individualist themes in our mainstream media. After researching more about the subject, I discovered many historical and contemporary examples of this which have led to a bubble of misinformation within our nation built upon patterns in human social behavior. In today's digital age, it is crucial that Americans are aware of the bias and disinformation that exists in media and take efforts to educate themselves to form opinions based on objective reality rather than persuasion tactics.

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