

Who is an American?
By Eric Foner

In 1995, the New York Council for the Humanities selected me as its second Scholar of the Year. For my talk at the award ceremony, I chose to address a subject then at the center of a fierce national debate - the definition of American nationality.

This was a moment when the Republican party of California had embarked on an anti-immigrant crusade (with what turned out to be politically disastrous results), bilingual education in the nation's schools was under fierce attack by those proclaiming English the nation's "official" language, and the writer Peter Brimelow had received much attention for his book *Alien Nation*, which warned that nonwhite immigration was destroying America's "ethno-cultural community," a community grounded, he insisted, in shared European ancestry. At the same time, commentators were blaming the "new social history," which emphasizes the diverse experiences of the numerous groups that make up American society, for the loss of a sense of social unity and the fragmentation of national consciousness.

My talk traced this debate back to the nation's founding era and suggested that there was nothing new in disagreements and worries about American identity. The tension between inclusive and restrictive definitions of the national community has a long history. There has never been a single answer to the question "Who is an American?"

Americans have always had a highly ambiguous attitude toward history. "The past," wrote Herman Melville, "is the text-book of tyrants; the future is the Bible of the free." Yet like many other peoples, we have always looked to history for a sense of national cohesiveness. To a large extent, today's debates over history are inspired by concern over a perceived fragmentation of American society, a fear that modern scholarship emphasizes what divides Americans rather than what they share in common.

Historians should certainly seek to identify the common themes of American history. Yet these themes are not as one-dimensional or as easy to delineate as many critics of the "new history" suppose. Difference and commonality are both intrinsic parts of the American experience. The diverse groups that make up American society have long spoken a common political language, although they have often interpreted its vocabulary in very different ways. Apparently universal principles and common values, moreover, have been historically constructed on the basis of difference and exclusion.

Nowhere is this symbiotic relationship between inclusion and exclusion - between a national creed that emphasizes democracy and freedom as universal rights and a reality of limiting these entitlements to particular groups of people - more evident than in debates over that fundamental question "Who is an American?" Today many politicians blame America's problems on an alien invasion and propose to redefine our nationality along racial and ethnic lines. But there is nothing new in bitter conflicts about who should and should not be an American citizen. We as a people have long been obsessed with definitions of "Americanness."

A nation, in Benedict Anderson's celebrated definition, is more than a political entity. It is also a state of mind, "an imagined political community," with borders that are as much intellectual as geographic. Rather than being permanently axed, national identities are inherently unstable, subject to continuing efforts to draw and redraw their imagined borders. Like democracy, freedom, equality, and other key words of our political language, "American" is what philosophers call an "essentially contested concept" - one that by its very nature is subject to multiple and conflicting interpretations.

In a society resting, rhetorically at least, on the ideal of equality, the boundaries of the imagined community take on extreme significance. Within the cognitive border, Americans have long assumed, civil and political equality ought to prevail, and the cry of "second-class citizenship" has provided a powerful language of social protest. The greater the substantive rights of American citizenship, the more important the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. American history is not simply the story of a fixed set of rights to which one group after another has gained access. On the contrary, the definition of those rights has changed as a consequence

of battles at the boundary, the demands of excluded groups for inclusion. For example, after the Civil War and again in the 1950s and 1960s, the struggle for full citizenship by former slaves and their descendants inspired similar claims by other groups and transformed what it is to be an American.

Americans' debates about the bases of our national identity reflect a larger contradiction in the Western tradition itself. For if the West, as we are frequently reminded, created the idea of "liberty" as a universal human right, it also invented the concept of "race" and ascribed to it predictive powers about human behavior. Nationalism, at least in America, is the child of both these beliefs. Traditionally, scholars have distinguished between civic nationalism, which envisions the nation as a community based on shared political institutions and values with membership open to all who reside within its territory, and ethnic nationalism, which considers a nation a community of descent based on a shared ethnic and linguistic heritage. France exemplifies the inclusive civic brand of nationhood, and Germany the exclusionary ethnic form. Most American scholars identify the United States with the French model. Since the time of independence, they argue, our *raison d'être* as a nation has rested on principles that are universal, not parochial; to be an American, all one had to do was commit oneself to an ideology of liberty, equality, and democracy.

In actual practice, however, American nationality has long combined both civic and ethnic definitions. For most of our history American citizenship has been defined by blood as well as political allegiance. Both ideas can be traced back to the earliest days of the republic, when a nation was created committed to liberty yet resting, to a considerable extent, on slavery. Slavery helped to shape the identity, the sense of self, of all Americans, giving nationhood from the outset a powerful exclusionary dimension. It made the value of American citizenship, as Judith Shklar has argued, rest to a considerable extent on its denial to others. Constituting the most impenetrable boundary of citizenship, slavery rendered blacks all but invisible to those imagining the American community. Slaves, as the nation's first attorney general, Edmund Randolph, wrote, were "not. . . constituent members of our society" and the language of liberty and citizenship did not apply to them. When the era's master mythmaker, Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, posed the famous question "What then is the American, the new man?" he answered: "a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes He is either a European, or the descendant of a European." This at a time when fully one-fifth of the population (the highest proportion in our history) consisted of Africans and their descendants.

What of those within the "circle of we"? Nowhere does the original Constitution define who in fact are citizens of the United States, or what privileges and immunities they enjoy. Rather, the individual states were to determine the boundaries of citizenship and citizens' legal rights. The Constitution does, however, empower Congress to create a uniform system of naturalization, and the Naturalization Law of 1790 offered the first legislative definition of American nationality. With no debate, Congress restricted the process of becoming a citizen to "free white persons." This limitation lasted a long time. For eighty years, only white immigrants could become naturalized citizens. Blacks were added in 1870, but not until the 1940s did persons of Asian origin become eligible. Only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were groups of whites barred from entering the country and becoming citizens. Beginning with prostitutes, convicted felons, lunatics, polygamists, and persons likely to become a "public charge," the list of excluded classes would be expanded in the twentieth century to include, among others, anarchists, communists, and the illiterate. But for the first century of the republic, virtually the only white persons in the entire world ineligible to claim American citizenship were those unwilling to renounce hereditary titles of nobility, as required in an act of 1795. For whites, here was as voluntarist a definition of nationality as could be imagined.

The two groups excluded from naturalization - European aristocrats and nonwhites - had more in common than might appear at first glance. Both were viewed as deficient in the qualities essential for republican citizenship, particularly the capacity for self-control, rational forethought, and devotion to the larger community. These were the characteristics that Jefferson, in his famous comparison of the races in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, claimed blacks lacked, partly due to natural incapacity and partly because the bitter experience of slavery had (quite understandably, he felt) rendered them disloyal to the nation. Like current writers, Jefferson was obsessed with the connection between heredity and environment, race and intelligence; unlike

them, he offered tentative, not "scientific" conclusions. Jefferson believed black Americans should eventually enjoy the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration, but in Africa or the Caribbean, not in the United States. America should have a homogeneous citizenry whose common experiences, values, and innate capacities made it possible to realize the idea of the public good.

Blacks formed no part of the imagined community of Jefferson's republic. And whether free or slave, their status became increasingly anomalous as political democracy (for white men) expanded in the nineteenth century. Indeed, in a country that lacked more traditional bases of nationality-long-established physical boundaries, a powerful and menacing neighbor, historic ethnic, religious, and cultural unity - America's democratic political institutions themselves came to define the nation. Increasingly, the right to vote became the emblem of citizenship - if not in law (since suffrage was still a privilege rather than a right, subject to regulation by the individual states), then in common usage and understanding Noah Webster's *American Dictionary* noted that the term *citizen* had, by the 1820s, become synonymous with the right to vote.

Various groups of Americans, of course, stood outside this boundary. Free women were certainly members of the imagined community called the nation; indeed, according to the prevailing ideology of separate spheres, they played an indispensable role in the training of future citizens. The common law subsumed women within the legal status of their husbands. But courts generally (although not always) held that married women had a civic status of their own. They could be naturalized if immigrating from abroad, and except for a fifteen-year period beginning in 1907, a native-born American woman did not lose her nationality by marrying a foreigner. In both law and social reality, however, women lacked the essential qualification of political participation - the opportunity for autonomy based on ownership of property or control of one's own labor. Women were also widely believed (by men) to be naturally submissive, by definition unfit for citizenship.

If women occupied a position of subordinate citizenship, nonwhites were increasingly excluded from the imagined community altogether. Slaves, of course, were by definition outside the "circle of we," and even in the North, democracy for whites, including immigrants from abroad, expanded hand in hand with deterioration in the status of blacks. In 1821, the same New York Constitutional Convention that removed property requirements for white voters raised the qualification for blacks to \$250 - a sum beyond the reach of nearly all the state's black residents. In effect, race had replaced class as the principal criterion of citizenship. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney gave legitimacy to this position in the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, which ruled that no black person could be a citizen of the United States.

The relationship between inclusion and exclusion was symbiotic, not contradictory. Even as Americans' rhetoric grew ever more egalitarian, a fully developed racist ideology gained broad acceptance as the explanation for the boundaries of nationality. As in the case of women, nature itself - inborn incapacity rather than human contrivance - explained the exclusion of nonwhites. Of course, as John Stuart Mill once asked, "Was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it?" Yet Mill himself argued in his great work, *On Liberty*, that the right to self-government applied "only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties." Entire "races" lacked the capacity for rational action essential to democratic citizenship.

Mill's view was widely shared in the United States. Perhaps this was inevitable in a nation whose economic growth depended in large measure on the labor of black slaves and whose territorial expansion involved the dispossession of one nonwhite people, the Indians, and the conquest of the lands inhabited by another deemed nonwhite, the Mexicans. Indeed, westward expansion created a sense, among white Americans, of land ownership as an entitlement of citizenship. Yet the West, imagined and experienced by white laborers as a land of economic independence, simultaneously harbored not only slavery but indentured Indian labor, Mexican-American peonage, and work under long-term contracts for Chinese immigrants. Free labor was an entitlement of whites alone.

The rhetoric of racial exclusion suffused the political language. "I believe this government was made on the white basis," said Stephen A. Douglas in his debates with Lincoln. "I believe it was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity for ever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men . . . instead of conferring it upon negroes, Indians, and other inferior races." Even as this focus on "race" (in the nineteenth century an amorphous category

amalgamating ideas about culture, history, religion, and color) helped to solidify a sense of national identity among the diverse groups of European origin that made up the free population, it drew ever more tightly the lines of exclusion of America's imagined community.

Yet if slavery spawned a racialized definition of American nationality, the struggle for abolition gave rise to its opposite, a purely civic version of citizenship. The antislavery crusade insisted on the "Americanness" of slaves and free blacks and repudiated not only slavery but the racial boundaries that confined free blacks to second-class status. Abolitionists pioneered the idea of a national citizenship whose members enjoyed equality before the law protected by a beneficent national state. Although far less egalitarian, Republicans in the 1850s also insisted that America's professed creed was broad enough to encompass all mankind. Speaking of European immigrants, Abraham Lincoln noted that their membership in the American community derived neither from "blood" nor ancestral connection with the revolution but rather from the "moral sentiment" of universal equality and liberty. Lincoln explicitly rejected Douglas's race-based definition of liberty, insisting that the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence applied to all peoples.

Thus, the crisis of the Union, among other things, was a crisis of the meaning of American nationhood, and the Civil War a crucial moment that redefined the boundaries of citizenship. Mobilization for warfare often produces an emphasis on national unity, and throughout our history wars have galvanized disempowered citizens to lay claim to their rights. Women and American Indians received the right to vote in the aftermath of World War I; eighteen-year-olds did so during the Vietnam War. The Civil War not only consolidated national loyalties but created the modern American nation-state. Inevitably, it propelled the question "Who is an American?" to the forefront of public discussion. "It is a singular fact," Wendell Phillips wrote in 1866, "that, unlike all other nations, this nation has yet a question as to what makes or constitutes a citizen." The war produced the first formal delineation of American citizenship, a vast expansion of citizen's rights, and a repudiation of the idea that these rights attached to persons in their capacity as members of certain ethnic or racial groups rather than as members of an undifferentiated American people.

A new concept of Americanism emerged from the Civil War. The first statutory definition of American citizenship, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, declared all persons born in the United States (except Indians) national citizens and spelled out rights they were to enjoy equally without regard to race - the ability, essentially, to compete in the marketplace, own property, and receive equal treatment before the law. The Fourteenth Amendment placed in the Constitution the definition of citizenship as birth on American soil or naturalization and prohibited states from abridging any citizens' "privileges and immunities" or denying them "equal protection of the law." This broad language opened the door for future Congresses and the federal courts to breathe substantive meaning into the guarantee of legal equality, a process that has occupied the courts for much of the last century. Then, the Fifteenth Amendment barred the states from making race a qualification for voting.

Because what Republican leader Carl Schurz called "the great Constitutional revolution" of Reconstruction represented so striking a departure from the previous traditions of American law, it aroused bitter opposition. "We are not of the same race," declared Indiana senator Thomas Hendricks, "we are so different that we ought not to compose one political community."

Reconstruction Republicans rejected this reasoning, but their universalism too had its limits. In his remarkable "Composite Nation" speech of 1869, Frederick Douglass condemned prejudice against immigrants from China, insisting that America's destiny was to serve as an asylum for people "gathered here from all corners of the globe by a common aspiration for national liberty." Any form of exclusion, he insisted, contradicted the essence of democracy. A year later Charles Sumner, the Senate's leading Radical Republican, moved to strike the word *white* from naturalization requirements. Senators from the western states objected vociferously. They were willing to admit blacks to citizenship but not Asians. At their insistence, the racial boundaries of nationality were widened but not eliminated.

Nor did Reconstruction policymakers make any effort to expand the definition of citizenship rights to incorporate women. Reconstruction, declared Universalist minister and suffrage leader Olympia Brown, offered the opportunity to "bury the black man and the woman in the citizen." Yet Republicans - including many former slaves - saw emancipation as restoring to

blacks the natural right to family life, in which men would take their place as heads of the household and women theirs in the domestic sphere from which slavery had unnaturally removed them. Indeed, when women tried to employ the Fourteenth Amendment's expanded definition of citizenship to press their own rights, they found the courts unreceptive. Citizenship, declared Chief Justice Morrison Waite, was compatible with disenfranchisement; it meant "membership of a nation and nothing more." The Court's argument regarding women was a harbinger of a more general narrowing of the definition of citizenship. With the end of Reconstruction, the egalitarian impulse faded from national life, and the imagined community was reimagined once again.

The "failure" of Reconstruction strongly reinforced the racist thinking that reemerged to dominate American culture in the late nineteenth century, fueling the conviction that non-whites were unfit for self-government. "A black skin," Columbia University political scientist John W. Burgess would write at the turn of the century, "means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, and has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind." The retreat from the postwar ideal of color-blind citizenship was also reflected in the resurgence of an Anglo-Saxonism that united patriotism, xenophobia, and an ethnocultural definition of nationhood in a renewed rhetoric of racial exclusiveness. America's triumphant entry onto the world stage as an imperial power in the Spanish-American War of 1898 tied nationalism more and more closely to notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority, displacing in part the earlier identification of the United States with democratic political institutions (or defining those institutions in a more and more explicitly racial manner).

In the Progressive era, citizenship's boundaries narrowed even as its substance expanded. As the "labor question" came to dominate public life, so too did the idea that citizenship must have an economic content. Progressive leaders like Louis Brandeis and Theodore Roosevelt insisted that in an age of corporate capitalism, the "essentials of American citizenship" had come to include "freedom in things industrial," such as the right to education, "some degree of financial independence," and "social insurance" as a guarantee against unemployment and poverty. Here was a social definition of citizenship whose influence would extend to the New Deal and beyond. But the progressives also envisioned a strong state as an agency of Americanization, which would forge a unified community in the face of the demographic changes overtaking the society, dissolving ethnic identities and making the new immigrants full members of the nation. Like today's proponents of a common culture and common values, the progressives, in fact, were amazingly ambiguous when it came to the actual content of Americanism. One searches their speeches in vain for any precise definition of American values, apart from belief in democracy and loyalty to this nation rather than to an immigrant's land of origins.

The most vocal advocates of Americanism continued to adhere to a racialized definition. In the idea of an "American standard of living," the American Federation of Labor popularized an identification of high wages with national identity, while simultaneously insisting that Asians, blacks, and new immigrants from Europe were by nature willing to work for "slave wages" and thus were not truly American. Other self-proclaimed defenders of America's racial and cultural heritage warned of the danger posed by "lower races" - a term that included immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. This racist language inherited from the nineteenth century acquired a pseudoscientific underpinning in the newly invented concept of IQ and in birth-rate statistics "demonstrating" that the less able were in danger of overrunning the superior races and undermining the nation's genetic purity. (Similar calculations by today's opponents of nonwhite immigration say nothing that cannot be found in Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* eight decades ago. The only difference is that today's nativists romanticize the immigrants of the Progressive era as self-reliant individuals who, unlike modern counterparts, did not rely on public assistance or commit violent crimes. This portrait of turn-of-the-century immigrants as self-reliant and law-abiding would have amazed Americanizers of those days, who leveled against Italians, Jews, and Poles the very same charges of inferior intelligence, dependence on public assistance, and propensity to criminality wielded today against Haitians, Mexicans, and others.)

The idea that the new immigrants were representatives of distinct races unfit for democratic citizenship fueled renewed efforts to narrow the boundaries of nationhood. Congress had already prohibited the further entry of immigrants from China. In 1921 and 1924, in a fundamental break with the tradition of open entry for whites except for specifically designated

classes of undesirables, it imposed the first sharp numerical limits on European immigration, establishing a nationality quota system that sought to ensure that new immigrants would never outnumber descendants of the old. The same intellectual linkage of race, intelligence, and Americanism inspired laws to reduce the number of "feeble-minded" through sterilization, a practice upheld in 1927 by the Supreme Court as a way of improving the quality of the American population. At this time too, a concerted effort was made to revise school curricula to make the teaching of American history more patriotic.

By the 1920s, with black disenfranchisement in the South, the exclusion of Asians from entering the country, the repudiation of the idea of "industrial democracy" in favor of industry's American Plan, and the broad segmentation of immigration and labor markets along racial, ethnic, and gender lines, the boundaries and substantive content of American citizenship had again been severely curtailed. But as always, these remained points of intense social conflict. Progressivism may have given impetus to a homogenized Americanism, but progressives such as Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne reinvigorated the civic definition of nationality and insisted that democracy thrived on group difference, not artificial homogeneity. America, wrote Bourne, was a "federation of cultures," not an Anglo-Saxon preserve.

In some respects, cultural pluralism (a term coined by Kallen in 1924) was as vague an idea as the demand for adherence to "American values" - it often seemed to amount to little more than belief in democracy and tolerance of group difference. These pluralists, moreover, had remarkably little to say about the place of nonwhites in American society. But they effectively challenged the idea that the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were unfit to become citizens, or could do so only by abandoning their traditions in favor of Anglo-Saxon ways. Meanwhile, anthropologists Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, and Ruth Benedict offered intellectual legitimacy to the idea that differences among social groups arose from history and experience, not from biology, and challenged the prevailing notion that societies or races inhabited a fixed spectrum running from "primitive" to "civilized."

Anthropologies, however, do not generally shape public politics. Despite broad acceptance among intellectuals, the celebration of diversity remained a minority point of view until World II, when it suddenly emerged as the official definition of American nationhood. The way, to be sure, had already been paved during the New Deal by the resurgent union movement the broad left-wing culture of the Popular Front era. The mobilized ethnically divided industrial workers into a self-conscious class with a broad social definition of citizenship and emphasis on pluralism and inclusiveness as the American. Meanwhile left-wing artists and intellectuals advanced a conception of America as a multiethnic, pluralist nation (including even blacks). By 1940, the idea that the country's strength lay in diversity and tolerance had been so widely disseminated that Earl Robinson's "Ballad for Americans," a quintessential expression of the pluralist Popular Front culture, was at the Republican party's national convention.

Only the mobilization for World War II and the confrontation with Nazism, however, purged Americanism of the language of race. No longer identified as members of distinct "races," Italians, Poles, Jews, and the other new immigrants became hyphenated ethnics, or to put it another way, they merged into a general category of white Americans. Meanwhile, for the first time since Reconstruction, the status of blacks reemerged as a concern of national policy, partly because of the demands of blacks themselves and partly because of the contradiction between the nation's racial system and its claim to be fighting a global battle for democracy and equality against demonic theories of a master race. The war even led to the inclusion of Chinese in the ranks of those eligible for naturalized citizenship (although the annual quota of 105 did not suggest a desire for large-scale immigration from Asia). As the ethnic understanding of Americanism was discredited, President Roosevelt explicitly committed the nation to the civic definition. To be an American, he insisted, had always been a "matter of mind and heart" and "never was a matter of race or ancestry" - a statement more attuned to mobilizing support for the war than to accurately describing the American past. The onset of the cold war reinforced this official definition of the United States as a diverse nation committed to a creed of equality, liberty, and democracy and open to all who desired freedom.

The rise of the civil rights movement further invigorated the civic, inclusionary definition of American nationality. The movement reclaimed the color-blind ideals of the Reconstruction era, erased the second-class legal status of black citizens, and, not coincidentally, inspired the

elimination of the nationality quota system for immigration. Only time will tell whether the widespread acceptance of civic nationalism was a permanent change in American life or the product of specific circumstances, some of which - the cold war, an expanding economy capable of absorbing immigrants, and a broad national commitment to eradicating racial inequality - are already fading into history.

Historians, Eric Hobsbawm writes in his recent chronicle of the twentieth century, are the "professional remembrances of what their fellow citizens wish to forget." Americans often "forget" that our history is not a Whiggish progress toward greater and greater freedom and equality but a far more complex story in which gains are made and lost, rights are expanded and sometimes revoked, and ideas long since discredited rise like ghosts to haunt later generations. If our history teaches anything, it is that the question "Who is an American?" has never had a fixed or simple answer. It seems safe to predict that in the twenty-first century, the boundaries of our imagined community will continue to be a source of political conflict and social struggle.

An American is Christian, or he could be Jewish, or Buddhist, or Muslim. In fact, there are more Muslims in America than in Afghanistan. One difference between them is that in America they are free to worship as each of them chooses. An American is also free to believe in no religion. An American is from the most prosperous land in the history of the world. The root of that prosperity can be found in the Declaration of Independence, which recognizes the God given right of each person the pursuit of happiness. An American is generous.Â Everyone who holds to that spirit, everywhere, is an American. It is important to note that Mexicans and Canadians are, like us in the United States, North Americans. And, there are the Americans of the 25 countries of Central and South America. American pie American beauty American me American Graffiti American werewolf American Gigolo I like 1-5 but as number 6 I would use American Psycho.Â American literature is part of the system by which the federal government creates an American identity. American literature is the inspiration through which people build an American identity. What are some movie titles starting with American? Who is an American and who is not, that is the Question. What does it mean to be an American and how does it sound to be an American. This question begs itself after an Iranian-American fashion blogger, Hoda Katebi, who was in an interview by Chicagoâ€™s WGN News morning show was told that â€œshe didnâ€™t sound Americanâ€. After these remarks, the interview went viral and many felt the questions posted to her was unfair and inappropriate. What exactly is the stereotypical image of an American? By definition, an American is a native or citizen of the USA. Does it really matter what your ethnic backgro