

Should We Be Teaching Americanism in U.S. Colleges and Community Colleges?

A Brief History of Americanism And a Curricular Proposal for *Emerging Americanism*

There is...nothing more radical than insistence upon democratic methods as the means by which radical social change is to be effected.

-John Dewey, "Democracy is Radical," 1937

If you ask students today why they want to get an education, most will say, "To get a job"...Education in the service of democracy has been lost as an important purpose, if it was ever established as such.

-James P. Comer, *Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World*, 2004

by

J. M. Beach

November 2-5, 2006

"Reclaiming Democracy: Visions and Practices from the Radical Left"

Radical Philosophy Association, 7th Biennial Conference

Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska

I. Contested Notions of Americanism

The nation known as “America” developed over several centuries as a country of immigrants coming (both freely and bound) from diverse parts of the globe and co-mingling (often violently) with the native inhabitants and each other. From the start the notions of an “American” nation and an “American” people were contested ideological battlegrounds by which diverse participants verbally, symbolically, and physically fought over the defining contours of a nation. The idea of America and Americanism remains to this day an unsettled and contested ideological terrain – the contours of which remain divisive and ever changing.¹

According to the founding document announcing the birth of the American nation, “The Declaration of Independence,” “all men” were “created equal” and had certain “inalienable rights” given to them by their “creator.” Among the most important of these rights were “life,” “liberty,” “the pursuit of happiness,” and the right to a responsive representative government that would protect the people’s rights, as well as their “safety and happiness.” But even before this hallowed political document would be approved by the Continental Congress and announced to the world, the wife of one Congressman, Abigail Adams, wrote to her husband on March 31, 1776 and scolded him and his fellow American congressmen for being hypocritical. How could these men proclaim “liberty,” inalienable political rights, and the “emancipation of nations”

¹ Specifically I am referring the debates over the “culture war” of the last three decades, which reflect a heated disagreement over the very notions of American national and cultural identity. A very short list of this debate might include the following: Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Touchstone, 1987); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society (Revised and Enlarged Edition)* (1991; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998); James Davison Hunter, *Cultural Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why American is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995); Michael Line, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill, NC: The North Carolina University Press, 2006).

while they were depriving women of their liberty and rights. She pointed out to her husband that American men did not truly know what liberty or equality meant because their idea of liberty and equality were only for a privileged, male few. Abigail warned that women would not take the “tyranny” of men for long and they would rebel, free themselves, “subdue” their masters, and then “without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet.”²

And yet the assertive Abigail Adams was only willing to extend her critique so far. Just a couple of years earlier she had written to her husband about the fearful “conspiracy of the Negroes,” by which she meant those slaves who had the audacity to petition for freedom in return for fighting along side the English against the insurrectionary colonists. Abigail apparently could not understand why black slaves wanted their freedom just as much as she did, nor could she understand that these blacks would do whatever they could to attain their liberty – including fighting against the hypocritical Americans (as Abigail herself threatened) whose “liberty” and “equality” were mainly for propertied, white men.³ The black American David Walker would later address the American republic in 1829, “Do you understand your own language? Hear your language proclaimed to the world on July 4th 1776 – ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident – that ALL men are created EQUAL!’” In 1850 Frederick Douglass asked, “What, to the Slave, Is the Fourth of July” – “This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*.”⁴

At the same time that diverse participants of the American nation were contesting the very meaning of America, there was also a solid tradition of self assured Americans trying to consolidate a single, unified vision of America. Not long after the revolution propagandists like J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur praised the “modern” American nation as everything backward

² Abigail Adams, *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams. With An Introductory Memoir By Her Grandson, Charles Francis Adams.* Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1840.

Europe was not. Crèvecoeur claimed the original English settlers were “enlightened” as they “discovered,” “settled,” “embellished,” and laid the foundation for what would become America. He also claimed that this new modern nation was being developed by and for white, Northwest Europeans who were busy creating “a new race of men” – “the American, this new man.” But to become American these Northwest Europeans (“English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans and Swedes”) had to not only leave behind their old culture, language, and customs, but also “embrace” the new American government and culture, which just so happened to be a highly Anglicized culture infused with Protestant and capitalist values.⁵ By 1811 John Quincy Adams could confidently write his father, “The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles.” Of course the “one nation” that Adams foresaw was a white man’s nation, a Protestant Christian nation, a capitalist nation, and these convictions would lead many white men to proclaim a new self-evident truth. The *Democratic Review* on July 1850 announced, “The fact that the dark races are utterly incapable of attaining to that intellectual superiority which marks the white race is too evident to be disputed.” It was a simple extension of deductive logic to thereby conclude, as did James De Bow in *De Bow’s Review* in 1854: “The Negro till the end of time will still be a Negro, and the Indian still an Indian. Cultivation and association with the superior race produce only injury to the inferior one. Their part in this mysterious world-drama has been played, and, like the Individual, the race must

³ Mia Bay, “See Your Declaration Americans!!! Abolitionism, Americanism, and the Revolutionary Tradition in Free Black Politics.” In *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, ed. Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 25-52.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ De Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St. John, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782; reprint, New York: Fox, Duffield & Company, 1904).

cease to exist.”⁶ But of course this drive for cultural unity, racial purity, and national solidarity as a white man’s nation was contested all the way. Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressed the New York State Legislature in 1860 and let them know that the “white Saxon man[’s]” ridiculous “prejudice” against “color” and “sex” were not congruent with “The Declaration of Independence.” She declared sarcastically that “negroes” and women were not “monsters” and thus they too deserved liberty and political rights. She wanted the nation to remove all the prejudicial legislation against women and blacks and then to “strike the words ‘white male’ from all your constitutions.”⁷

The historian Gary Gerstle has examined the close interrelationship of race and nationalism (2001).⁸ His book focused on the presence of two “powerful and contradictory” nationalist “ideals” in America, especially during the 20th century. One ideal has been called the “American Creed” of “civic nationalism,” which describes the political principles of freedom and equality found in the foundational document “The Declaration of Independence.” This civic nationalism was developed in a long tradition of democratic political initiatives to expand suffrage, political rights, freedom, and general welfare to larger swaths of the American population (women, ethnic minorities, labor, and radicals). The other nationalist ideal is a “racial nationalism,” which was consecrated in two foundational documents, the constitution and the naturalization law of 1790, which both limited American citizenship to “free white persons.” The ideal of a “white republic” would not be legally overturned until 1952 (Brown) and more

⁶ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁷ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Address to the Legislature of New-York, Adopted by the State Woman’s Rights Convention, Held at Albany, Tuesday and Wednesday, February 14 and 15, 1854* (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons: 1854).

⁸ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). While he does make mention of particular gender issues, Gerstle does not make explicit reference to gender discrimination within his two conceptualizations of nationalism. However, his analysis does leave the door open conceptually for a “gendered nationalism” as another distinct conceptualization of American national identity.

fully in 1964 (Civil Rights Act). Gerstle pays particular attention to liberals and the liberal state, which utilized civic nationalism and often expanded “equal rights for ethnic and racial minorities” while also reinforcing the “rhetoric and policies” of racial nationalism. The often progressive and/or liberal rhetoric of “new nationalism” and the “melting pot” were always “invariably racialized” and “always, and deliberately, excluded one or more races.” As Gerstle points out, the civic nationalist tradition had its own heritage of “exclusiveness” by which it was extended fully to only certain groups often under certain conditions.

Nationalist conceptions of Americanism have always been contested as dominant, minority, traditional, and transgressive parties symbolically battled over the legitimacy of competing visions of America – the American people, the American state, American aims, and American values. American democracy, if a democratic vision and praxis is still at the heart of the American political and social project, must address the foundational truth of what Alexander Hamilton and James Madison once called “factional” politics.⁹ Articulations of the “public good” have often mystified the particular interests of the economically, culturally, and politically powerful, but never has the “public good” gone uncontested. An honest and accurate understanding of American history and the American future must come to terms with the divisive messiness of factional politics in relation to approximations of the “public good” and public notions of Americanism.

⁹ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist*. Benjamin Fletcher Wright, ed. (1787-1788; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961; reprint, New York: Metrobooks, 2002).

II. Should U.S. Colleges Teach Americanism?

In *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (1996), Lawrence W. Levine devoted a section to “The Search for American Identity”¹⁰ in which he asserted that the United States has always “harbored the kernels of division” and has always “contained a multifarious population” divided by many factors and issues. He went on to say that because each generation of Americans has failed to fully understand “the phenomena of immigration and assimilation,” each generation has failed to appreciate the complexity of history’s lessons, and thus each generation has repeated the same nativist fears and baseless reactions to new immigrant populations. Levine pointed out that although immigrants may look and behave like assimilated people, they most likely still harbor some vestiges of their original culture, which they generally preserve outside the public sphere: they learn to live with what W.E.B. Du Bois called “twoness.” Levine argued that immigrants go on to change their host culture as much as the host culture changes immigrants, and thus a hybrid, new culture arises out of the interaction. As Glazer and Moynihan stated in 1963, the melting pot “did not happen” because American nationality “is still forming and the final form, if there is ever to be a final form, is as yet unknown.” Levine reiterated: “White Anglo Protestant Americans, for all their importance through the years, are no longer conceived as *the* central group whose culture defines the norm. They are seen as one – albeit a very influential one – of the ethnic groups that have contributed to and helped to forge an American culture and identity which, to reiterate the point, is still in

¹⁰ Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

process, still being formed, still becoming...The United States is always and ever an *emerging* nation.¹¹”

I believe the idea of America as an “emerging nation” could be the conceptual foundation for a major part of community college and college “General Education” curriculum. Many four year colleges and universities require the following core courses:

- 1) Basic English Composition
- 2) Advanced English Composition/Critical Thinking
- 3) Advanced English Composition and/or Speech
- 4) U.S. History
- 5) Constitution and Government
- 6) Assorted Introductory Arts and Humanities Courses

It could be possible to design a core curriculum on the theme of *emerging Americanism* that could be methodologically utilized by Composition, Speech, History, Government, and other “General Education” courses during the freshman and sophomore years. From a pedagogical perspective, unifying these foundational classes could provide concrete “concept maps,” “knowledge maps,” and “schemas” that would make history, government, and communication more relevant, understandable, and digestible to college age youth. Providing college students with a clear and focused schema would also aid in their learning and retention of core democratic values and important historical, social, and political themes of the “emerging” American nation as well as giving them a basic “American” socio-political vocabulary and communication theory

¹¹ Ibid., Ch 6-8. Levine’s conceptualization of assimilation is taken from Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

based on their own construction of relevant knowledge.¹² Also, by aligning these core courses around an understandable process of clear and effective academic communication skills, colleges can more easily acclimatize students to academic culture by equipping them with relevant knowledge that can be worked, re-worked, and reinforced in multiple academic classrooms. As Gerald Graff has argued, “If the best way to learn a foreign language is live in the culture of native speakers, to socialize students more successfully into the foreign language of academic intellectual discourse educational institutions will need to create a more continuous and self-reinforcing intellectual environment. The academic curriculum has the potential to become that kind of intellectual environment, but not in its presently disconnected, disjunctive, and unfocused state.”¹³ A unified *emerging Americanism* curriculum could provide a clear and organized schema for focusing the construction of knowledge through emersion in academic communication, while also developing a core understanding of American history, politics, and literature through disciplinary methods.

A curriculum focused on *emerging Americanism* could also help students better understand the country they live in, the different groups of people that inhabit that country, the ideas and social-political concerns of those people, and the historical context through which the issues of place, people and ideas commingle into a complex web of interrelationships. There would be a place to examine a range of interests and ideas so as to assemble and construct a rich

¹² Schemas help students construct and organize knowledge. McVee, Dunsmore, and Gavelek have explained their importance for learning theory: “The great difficulty lies not in presenting students with more information but in providing for them a means to recognize and construct the relationships between various bits of information – that is, weaving the strands of information into a coherent schema that facilitates students’ understanding of content.” Mary B. McVee, Kailonnie Dunsmore, and James R. Gavelek, “Schema Theory Revisited.” *Review of Educational Research* 75:4 (Winter 2005): 531-566. See also, John C. Nesbit and Olusola O. Adesope, “Learning With Concept and Knowledge Maps: A Meta-Analysis.” *Review of Educational Research* 76:3 (Fall 2006): 413-448; Joseph Novak, *Learning, Creating and Using Knowledge Concept Maps as Facilitative Tools in Schools and Corporations* (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1998).

¹³ Gerald Graff, “The academic Language Gap.” *The Clearing House* 72:3 (Jan-Feb 1999): 140-43. See also, Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

understanding of historical and contemporary American issues and debates through the prism of knowledge, power, place, and time. As advocates for a “critical multiculturalism,” Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg have argued that “multiple histories will not only uncover new dimensions of many experiences but also reveal new ways of seeing dominant culture and dominant education.” They also argued for a “social vision” that could move “beyond the particular concerns of specific social groups” so as to “embrace a democratic politics that emphasizes difference within unity.”¹⁴ A schema of *emerging Americanism* could be an ideal social vision for just such a purpose.

What would such a schema look like and how might multiple disciplinary fields of study be organized around the schema of *emerging Americanism*? For our purposes I will only provide a brief sketch that will describe both basic curricular activities and the larger interrelationship of disciplinary approaches. **English composition** classes would not only teach students how to communicate clearly, effectively, and in an organized manner, but they would also stress how to participate in the construction of knowledge via “conversation.”¹⁵ English composition classes would be built around reading and responding to historical and contemporary texts focused on *emerging Americanism*. The major academic purposes of English composition would be 1) developing clear communication skills, 2) developing organized thought processes and critical

¹⁴ Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, *Changing Multiculturalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), 233, 33.

¹⁵ Kenneth Burke described the pursuit of human knowledge as an “unending conversation,” which we as individuals enter at some point in our lives so that we can play a small or large part in the larger human drama: “Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you...the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.” Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941. See also: J. M. Beach. “Ideology, Reality, and Rhetoric: Kenneth Burke’s Dramatism.” In *Studies in Ideology: Essays on Culture and Subjectivity*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2005.

thinking skills, 3) gaining knowledge of point driven argumentative debates, and 4) the ability to research, construct, and respond to a layered argumentative academic conversations. **Speech** classes would mirror these same objectives while focusing on the process of oral communication. **Government** classes would not only 1) develop an understanding of the processes of government, but also 2) discuss the contested and changing nature of civil and legal structures such as government organizations, government process, laws, voting processes, extra legal justice/injustice, and popular protest. These classes should strive to facilitate the construction of knowledge through the investigation of primary and secondary sources organized around past and present “debates” of political and legal issues. Students would learn by reconstructing past and present debates and practice their own ability to construct knowledge by participating via engaged and critical responses to the primary and secondary material. **History** classes would focus on a general overview of U.S. history via specific schemas that reinforce *emerging Americanism* themes chosen by the instructor. These classes should incorporate both primary and secondary sources and they would specifically encourage engagement with historical debates of the past and an understanding of how America “emerged” in particular historical contexts. Such schematic themes could include: the American Dream;¹⁶ Multicultural America;¹⁷ American Freedom;¹⁸ American Democracy;¹⁹ or Race and American Nationalism.²⁰ It might also be advisable from a curricular perspective to offer other specific disciplinary studies in the

¹⁶ Cal Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity & Exclusion over Four Centuries* (Lawrence, KA: The University Press of Kansas, 2004).

¹⁷ Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American* (New York: The Free Press, 1983). Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

¹⁸ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

¹⁹ Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005).

²⁰ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

humanities or ethnic studies programs focused on more specific themes that relate *emerging Americanism*. I might also be advisable to have a junior level capstone course that revisits the schema of *emerging Americanism* and focuses more on contemporary debates and current issues that will affect students in their lifetimes and which could help orient students for democratic responsibilities in their American society.

Emerging Americanism would present students with conflicting visions and definitions of America and Americanism, and would thereby force them to come to terms and internalize their own vision and definition of America in the context of past and present articulations. It might also encourage a more concerted and complex engagement with American society and politics in the students life and it could be incorporated with – if given institutional or extra-curricular opportunities – specific community service projects that would situate students as engaged citizens. And of course, this program would have the opportunity to unify the interdisciplinary tertiary curriculum so as to facilitate academic communication and disciplinary study around a concrete and practical schematic focus.

At this time I would like to open up a dialog with the audience to discuss the merits of the proposal, both potential positive and negative consequences of the curriculum focus, and other relevant issues (both practical and theoretical) that might help us evaluate whether this program of study has merit.