

## FINAL REPORT

FOR THE PETER UND RUTH WIRTS-FOUNDATION SPONSORING FIVE MONTHS OF CLINICAL ELECTIVES IN THE USA AT DUKE AND COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY.

BY BONG SEOK SONG, MEDICINE YEAR OF 2001

### THE AMERICAN IDENTITY: CULTURAL MELTING POT OR MOSAIC?

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#### Introduction

Amongst other factors, sponsorship by the Peter and Ruth Wirts-Foundation demands applicants to travel to other countries with both an academic intention and a cultural project in mind.

Not only will this intensify experiences in the visiting country, but it should also motivate to look beyond his/her “field of expertise“.

When thinking of an interesting project (which was before 9/11/01), I realized a considerable amount of Anti-Americanism in my surrounding community. Many people criticized the US' rude and ignorant or hypocritical behavior in world politics (for instance ignoring treaties like the Kyoto Protocol against air pollution or decisions by the International Court of Justice or the proposal of banning land mines, alliance with or fighting against countries merely for economic or self-serving reasons, e.g. oil, etc.). Others disliked the Americans' superficial behavior and their attitude of being superior and invincible. Also the discrepancy between high moral and prudery vs. apparent obscenity and violence in everyday life was pointed out by many.

To illustrate the ambiguity in American life one may cite the conservative American journalist David Brooks, who wrote about the so-called ‘bourgeoise Bohemiens (*Bobos*)’.

*“Bobos are the rich Americans who want both: Calm their conscience by voting for environmental protection and drive a “petrol-thirsty“ SUV (sports utility vehicle), save water and buy this special, cool shower for \$15.000 Dollar with water supply from front and back, praise nature and buy artificial lawn for the home backyard because natural lawn needs to be mowed and fostered once in a while.”*

As a result cynical voices even proposed to define American identity by weight, preference for fast food, number of available TV channels and ignorance of other cultures and languages.

Apparently what lies beneath is a fear of cultural imperialism.

Doesn't it say: "First there are the fast-food chains, then the supermarkets, and finally the shopping malls follow. The "Hamburger University", McDonald's training center in Oak Brook, Illinois, prepares its team for the ultimate goal, as stated formerly on the company's website: "*one taste worldwide*". And up to the historic fourth quarter 2002, when for the first time red figures appeared on the balance sheet, it had grown constantly. As in many other countries McDonald's is the largest restaurant chain in Germany. It is the largest private employer in Brazil and the most important acceptor of agricultural products in France.

The effect of the fast-food consume with its boom since the 70ies can be seen in everyday life when looking at the society: In the US every second adult and every fourth child respectively is overweight today. Great Britain, which according to statistics has European's highest per capita fast-food consume, also has the most obese people in Europe. And finally a German study conducted in 2000 found out that 23% of all children aged 5-7 years in the state of Schleswig-Holstein are also overweight relating it to higher fast-food intake.

Not surprisingly fast-food chains have started to become targets of this Anti-Americanism. Whereas embassies and oil companies had been the scapegoats in the past, McDonald's restaurants have been bombed, set on fire or demolished in another way in Russia, Greece, the Netherlands, Great Britain, India, Colombia and Brazil up to now. And finally, a poster demanded: "Defend yourself against America! Start with Cola!", at the University of Beijing in 1999.

But what is it that leads to these unfair thoughts and extreme actions? Is it envy? Do people fear to lose its own identity, i.e. being swallowed up by a global, uniform, consume-oriented identity? Does this at the same time mean that American identity is viewed as faceless and merely profit-oriented?

The same country that has brought us McDonald's has also given Ernest Hemingway, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Jackson Pollock, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, Oliver Stone and Bob Dylan to this world. It leads the world community not only through its political power, but stands on top of the scientific and economic world. It must be more than pure chance, that so many smart and enterprising people feel attracted to this country to a degree that they indeed dare to leave behind everything that is familiar to them. One might argue that these people also leave behind their identity in order to conform. But if American identity only meant a spirit of

confidence and motivation, then this would already be unique, extremely impressive and highly desirable.

But what is American identity? The question remains unclear. I therefore asked myself: Why not ask the Americans themselves? I was particularly interested if people from different regions or ethnic backgrounds would come to different conclusions. The ultimate question therefore has to be: Is American identity a mosaic of many different cultures or is it a melting pot that has swallowed up and substituted all cultural backgrounds by a new one?

Hence I conducted a survey that is presented in the following chapters.

## Material & Methods

28 persons were handed out an anonymous, self-formulated questionnaire consisting of 12 questions (see appendix) in three different areas of the USA over a time period of 4 months. The questionnaires were handed out according to the situation without any sort of blinding, i.e. people I worked with in the hospital, acquaintances I made, relatives of mine and friends of these people. Therefore the persons mostly had a university background.

In addition discussions with these people as well as with friends in Germany were very helpful in getting a glimpse of the American way of thinking about these issues.

As preparation beforehand I had gathered information about the history of North Carolina and California, the fate of immigrants to the US and their assimilation process (in the first place about Germans), definitions of words as for instance identity and cultural imperialism through search in the world wide web and various encyclopedias. Finally I developed a particular interest in articles about this theme in the German and US press.

As already pointed out in my application this survey is by no means meant to be representative or to draw a definite conclusion. Its mere purpose was to occupy myself with this complex theme and to report my personal and therefore subjective thoughts about it.

## Results

### 1. Statistics

Of the 28 questionnaires 2 were lost to follow up (with myself being too lazy to track them down). 13 were gathered in Durham (NC: 7 female, 6 male), 5 in New York City (NY: 2 female, 3 male),

and 8 in San Diego (CA: 5 female, 3 male). Hence a total of 14 female and 12 male persons had been interrogated of whom all were American citizens, and of whom all but one person had also been born in the USA. 22 participants (84%) were of Caucasian origin, two were Asian (8%), one had an Indian-American and another person had an African-American background (4% each). Being asked in which region of the United States they had grown up (allowing multiple answers), 18 of the 50 states (36%) were named, amongst them the largest one and the one with the highest population. To mention the two largest groups, California was mentioned seven times and the New York/ New Jersey area six times.

Regarding their historic origin (again allowing multiple answers) most participants named Germany (11), followed by England (8) and Ireland (5). Other nations mentioned were Scotland (3), Wales (3), Poland (2), France (4), Russia (2), Romania (2), Switzerland (2), Italy (1), South Korea (2) and “Africa“ (1).

## 2. Opinions

Presenting opinions in a quantitative way does not make sense in this context. Hence I will simply present my personal impressions regarding the second part of the survey:

When asked about typical American character traits the spectrum of given answers was wide, but showed some interesting congruence: First of all 24 of 26 participants (not all, which is notable) believed that there actually are typical traits differentiating them from other nations. Mentioned by almost all of these participants was the character trait of self-confidence/-assurance. Enterprising mentality, “can do“-attitude, optimism, competitiveness and - in an even more positive sense - independence, passion and enthusiasm relate to the same idea. But some were also aware of the downsides as for instance arrogance (conceited, cocky), belief of being superior or even invincible. Other putatively negative traits mentioned in this context were being egocentric or self-absorbed/-centered (, whereas these character traits may very well result from being the opposite of self-confident as well). Other positive qualities mentioned frequently were friendliness and open-mindedness. Furthermore the following attributes had been written: religious/ faithful, clean, teamwork, ambitious, goal-oriented, diverse, fair-minded, egalitarian, tolerant, curious, fun-loving, “good athletes“.

With regard to negative qualities other than the ones mentioned above the following could be read: money-driven, greedy, over-indulgent, stressed, insular (3), naive (2), not interested in ecology (2), “know it all“, poor manners, brash, ignorant to other cultures.

When asked which of these mentioned character traits they could relate to themselves most mentioned self-confidence and friendliness with only one person being cynical about herself:

“I am friendly and like most Americans I’m absolutely convinced that new acquaintances will like me!”

Next the participants had been asked whether regional differences in character traits existed in the USA. Again two people (which were not the same as above) denied regional differences, one had no opinion. The others were mostly consistent in their opinions about the prominent regions.

The following picture is drawn about the different American regions:

The “New-Englanders“ are the most progressive ones, but they tend to talk behind your back. New Yorkers on the contrary will tell everything “in your face“, often even appearing rude with their aggressive, fast paced, assertive behavior. Furthermore they are mostly self-centered, stubborn and cynical, but at the same time (or because of these qualities) very international and cultural. One even named it “European“.

Midwesterners seem to have more plain but nonetheless attractive qualities, namely being common, stable, family-oriented, hardworking and polite.

People from the south as for instance from NC have been described as slow, conservative, religious and friendly. They have also been named family-oriented and rooted. Critics on the other hand point out the left-over “Civil war complex“ and their insular behavior as well as their xenophobia.

Finally the Californian is the synonym for being relaxed and for having a liberal and tolerant view on life („easy going, hang loose“). Californians have further been called ecologically interested and being more aware of political correctness. As in the south the clocks on the West coast are ticking with a slower pace. The downsides of this liberal society are recognized though: It is less integrated and less rooted, hence more superficial.

Third the participants were asked about possible influences of their cultural and/or ethnic origin. Also I wanted to know which influence was stronger in them. Clearly the regional influence was pointed out by most. Especially people whose families were living in the States for a couple generations described proudly having incorporated the regional values mentioned above, especially people originating from the Midwestern region. But already people living in the States

as first generation underlined the importance of fitting in by adapting the regional traits. Of course “ethnic” influences as “Welsh stubbornness” and “German strength” were also appreciated (also named: heritage). In addition some saw themselves as fusion of it both “to create a new identity that draws from both”. Finally the importance of the religious influence on identity was emphasized. Only one person (from NYC) summed up his/her regional influence as a “melting pot of so many cultures”.

Fourth the questionnaire asked how the participants would define their national identity.

Interestingly most people related their definition to an idea(l) and not to some kind of origin as summed up perfectly by one person: “Most Americans would state freedom as the defining aspect of national identity”.

Other comments: democracy/ respect for freedom/ American love of fairness/ ‘as an American I can shape my own identity’/ ‘I am free to be myself’/ American as a melting pot of cultures/ the place where you feel most at home/ American/ American Indian/ patriot/ Korean-American/ ‘place where I was born/ talk funny/ ‘origins in Europe but shaped by my growing up here in US’.

Finally I wanted to know how the participants personally felt connected to their home country, i.e. what it means to them.

One fraction naturally related to it as the place where the family and friends live, where one’s personal history has been “burned” into the soil.

(‘My entire social history/ genealogy/ ‘without it my family would not exist as I know it now’/ shared sense of experience)

But again a notable fraction also appreciated the values and opportunities of their home country.

(‘Thankful for freedoms and opportunities available, tradition of political democracy and freedom, U.S. ideals’/ ‘proud and thankful to be American with the freedoms we have’/ ‘all have a chance to succeed’/ freedom of speech and religion/ ‘I believe no nation has historically been concerned with allowing its citizens to pursue their will more than the USA.’)

Last but not least some interesting comments: “Great place to live but government sucks/ We might be fat and ignorant but for some reason for the most part, the U.S. has nice friendly people.

Besides it is beautiful here!/ National anthem and significant historical events and historical figures./ Thanksgiving”.

## Discussion

### 1. Summary

The questionnaire was mainly handed out to Caucasians. Hence one might argue that this survey is not representative, draws bias conclusions and therefore should best be thrown into the next bin. But again, this report is meant to be a personal and therefore subjective view on the chosen topic, nothing else. Still this high percentage might unfortunately be representative somehow as it roughly reflects the distribution of different races in certain social classes and professional environments. The university background was chosen by purpose as more diverse and reflected answers were expected by these participants.

With 18 of 50 U.S. states being represented (allowing multiple answers), this seems to be a good percentage.

The participants of this study named self-confidence, optimism, enthusiasm, independence, friendliness, etc. as typical positive American traits. These as well as the negative traits named (self-centered, naïve, insular, ignorant) would for the most part be in accordance with descriptions by foreigners. What seems to be missing though is the high mobility of working Americans within their country. Also prudery would surely be an important trait mentioned by foreigners. Finally in his movie “*Bowling for Columbine*” the author Michael Moore draws the picture of a culture of fear fuelled by military bravado and media hysteria.

There are significant regional differences in character traits as described above. It is interesting to hear a person from for instance the southern area talk about Californians. People identify themselves with their regional origin as much as they do with their country. Therefore people in the USA must be connected through more than just an idea(1). There should have been tremendous historical influence and important input by the immigrants too.

It is not surprising that most people feel connected to their home country because it is the place where the family and friends live and where one’s own history becomes vivid through familiar places. In addition it is obvious that people, who have come to the US as first generation and are willing to integrate, will go through some (more or less) identity conflict, which ultimately will lead to a synthesis of ethnic background and cultural environment “ which draws from both”.

Every country will have these citizens, but the USA might just have them in much higher numbers with lots of new ones following constantly.

What seems to be different if not unique though is some participants' definition of their national identity: "Freedom" relates to an ideal in contrast to geographic regions, family ties, significant historical events or persons/tribes/empires in the past which mostly define other countries.

In summary the American identity seems to have both character qualities resembling traits found in "older countries" (especially the regional identities) and traits that relate to a joint value rather than to the same ethnic or cultural background (the national identity). Yet the question remains if the American identity is a melting pot or a mosaic of many different cultures.

## 2. Identity

When looking up the word identity in the German dictionary you will find two almost contradictory definitions:

*1. The assembly of traits, that a person calls its own or that distinguishes this person as single personality from another one.*

*2. Likeness, uniformity: the condition, that objects are alike/equal or even completely uniform.*

This contradiction is a good starting point for the discussion "melting pot" (where all individuality vanishes) vs. mosaic (where each part contributes equally to the picture). It shall be explained in the following chapters.

## 3. "E pluribus unum"

In 1787 the founders of America – mostly English and to a smaller part French and Netherlanders - did not have a multi-cultural community in mind at all. Still deeply rooted in their own culture they rather imagined a democratic state with an uniform language and an uniform culture, namely British-oriented.

Yet it is said today that it had been the particular destiny and luck of the United States of America to become the country of immigrants. In a survey conducted 1990 57.9 Mio. (23.3%) Americans reported having German ancestors, 38.7 Mio. (15.6%) Irish, 32.7 Mio. (13.1%)

English, 23.8 Mio. (9.6%) Afro-American, 14.7 Mio. (5.9%) Italian, and ancestors of many other nationalities in smaller numbers.

They came into this country searching for freedom (personal, religious, political, etc.), flying from their past or longing for material wealth and they still do so up to the present day. Spiritualized by these hopes they accept to leave behind their personal roots and to suffer prejudice, fear, pain, loss, and exertion and they do so by their free will (with the exception of the enslaved African-Americans).

*„ Little is more extraordinary than the decision to migrate, little more extraordinary than the accumulation of emotions and thoughts which finally leads a family to say farewell to a community where it has lived for centuries, to abandon old ties and familiar landmarks, and to sail across dark seas to a strange land.“*

Whatever may have been the specific reason to immigrate into the United States, they all strive for what has been written down in the American constitution as (life, liberty and) the pursuit of happiness. Hence, just this endeavor already makes each of these immigrants a true American.

But what else makes them Americans? What unites so many people from so many different countries with even more cultures to become one nation? How important is this “foreign” influence? Or is the promulgation “e pluribus unum” only an illusion, a phrase?

#### 4. Integration/Assimilation of immigrants: the Germans

Although the United States may be the embodiment of an “immigration-country” today, xenophobia has had a tremendous influence on national politics through all the country’s history.

This is well reflected in the never-ending story of bills and laws concerning immigration and asylum: Exclusion act of 1882 against Chinese workers, Quota laws; Smith Act; Displaced Persons Act; McCarran-Walter Act; Refugee Relief Act; Californian bill (proposition?) 187; etc.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants mostly originated from lower classes. Hence the Americans often despised them. Especially the Irish and the Germans are said having been the object of frequent mockery and discrimination.

But within the group of immigrants strong tendencies towards “ethnic separatism” existed too. Naturally immigrants preferentially mix with other fellow immigrants and try to uphold their

culture and language in a foreign environment, as it gives them a feeling of safety and unity. But immigrants like Franz Loehner even envisioned a separate German state in the New World somewhere between the Missouri and the Great Lakes (*Geschichte und Zustände*, 1847, 502).

More conciliatory and realistic though was the comment of a German immigrant in the magazine *Atlantis* in 1857:

*“There has been much debate about the fact that in this ‘melting pot’ of the American nation the German nationality would be drowned, that ‘the German’, as the technical term runs, would have to ‘Americanize’. However, we believe that the Germans does not have to discard his social qualities and customs any more than he needs to deny his intellectual accomplishments, and that he is already sufficiently Americanized once he has acquired ideas about the self-government of a republic. This set of political ideas is the only belt strap that binds together the various population strands of the New World. Anyone, who subscribes to this concept is worthy of American citizenship. Hence our Americanization requires nothing else but for us to adopt the ideas of democracy about human rights and the sovereignty of the people in social and political life. ...What Americanizes us completely is simply the decision, firm conviction, and the capacity to be a free men.” (Anonymous, Atlantis, Jan. 1857, 4-6)*

The Civil War came and all of a sudden Americans, Irish, Germans and others fought shoulder to shoulder for one or the other political persuasion. The immigrants earned their respect and social esteem.

*“ In this great moment in the history of the United States there were no Irish, no Germans, no Scandinavians, no aliens, but only Americans ... All fought like brothers, shoulder to shoulder, for one holy purpose – the preservation of the Union – and, with it, for the salvation of the last great bastion of freedom and for all the suppressed and the underprivileged of all nations.”*  
*(Hense-Jensen/Bruncken, 1902, II, 117)*

And being accustomed to the new home as well as having adopted the new language, the immigrants also became more open-minded to the New World. Economic success and consequently material wealth was becoming important as the political and social career depended on it more and more. Hence looking back at the assimilation process of the German immigrants the American social critic H.L. Mencken writes:

*“The melting pot has swallowed up the German-Americans as no other group...”*

What has been left over from the German culture in Today's America? The succeeding generations mostly do not speak the language, many do not know where their ancestors originated from and most of the former cultural habits have been replaced by the American ones. Still, the idea of the kindergarten has originated from German immigrants as well as the concept of public universities. In addition physical exercise as essential part of school education has been imported from the Germans. Furthermore the names of the well-known ‚Hamburger‘ and ‚Frankfurter sausages‘ reflect their German origin, just to give a few examples. Finally these immigrants have been instrumental in the formation of the Republican Party after the Civil War. Although the German immigrants have been assimilated for the greatest part, they have also been able to integrate some of their cultural aspects into American life.

## 5. Nationalism

The German author Theodor Schieder writes about the term nationalism:

*“There must be homogeneity of some kind in a political group that evokes the awareness of being different or even privileged vs. other groups or units.*

*Such Homogeneity can be ethnic or lingual, it can be cultural or religious, but it may also simply be a conjoint historical fate. On the other hand it could be a matter of a conjoint value, that primarily claims to be an universal ideal, but consequently focuses on certain national bearers. The “nationalization of the French Revolution” would be one example.*

*Homogeneity itself does not need to substantiate a nation though. ... What is decisive for the process of building a nation is the formation of an awareness, that the special quality of their value, political task of historical mission is bound to a certain national group, that it confronts it with all other groups and that it has adopted its ‘peculiarity’ to be the content of the national ideology. ... Naturally all kinds of contents are thinkable, ... The awareness of being special mainly tends to relate to conjoint natural and historical origins, i.e. a historical or ‘evolutionary’ community. ... In other cases it is also a socio-revolutionary or economic concept, on which the nation is based. Therefore it is said to be a ‘developing or developmental nation’.*

*(Theodor Schieder: Probleme der Nationalismus-Forschung, In: Ders. (Hrsg.): Sozialstruktur und Organisation europäischer Nationalbewegungen; Oldenbourg Verlag: München/Wien)*

Despite whatever kind of homogeneity, nations do not develop naturally though. They are constructs of myths and therefore results of our imagination and intelligence. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm called it ‘invention of tradition’, and the American historian Benedict Anderson spoke of ‘imagined communities’ as basis of a conjoint history.

In the Europe of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nations were mainly built on the idea of racial, ethnic and religious differences leading to dangerous if not fatal emotions and ideologies and consequently ended in the World War II. In the period of the East-West-Conflict, with the so-called iron curtain cutting Europe into halves, political ideology and threat of another World War classified people into ‘invented groups’ again.

But nowadays in times of high mobility, enlightenment and respect for each culture and ethnic group, the absence of apparent threats (except for terrorists and dictators) and the domination of economical interests, the necessity of a national country has come into question. The development of the European Union is one example of this tendency.

## 6. Conclusion

The American nation is an artificial construct just as all the other nations in the world. In contrast to most other countries though, it is based on the ideal of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, rather than on historical, ethnic or racial identity.

Immigrants in the USA who are attracted to this concept will try to achieve integration by linguistic and cultural adaptation. As personal virtue as well as professional and economic success are more important regarding social esteem and prestige than origin and race, traditions are more or less put in the background.

Hence I would conclude that the American identity is a cultural melting pot; not so much because it forces substitution of one’s own culture, but because it does not really matter what your culture is.

What is culture though? Is it not the expression of life in a certain region depending on and actually flourishing through multiple various influences? Is not nature of tremendous importance in this context, explaining why people are more laid back in sunnier areas and rather safety-driven in more inhospitable regions? I believe that culture is a regional phenomenon, not a national one.

The so-called home with remembrance of certain locations and its personal ties also relates to a specific region, not an abstract country. And it is the region you identify with when relating to certain cultural habits, as only the region is small and uniform enough to create strong homogeneity in many aspects. When looking at Germany for instance one will also see a nation rich of many different regional cultures and slangs rather than only one homogenous picture. Regional and historical influence in the long term is more important than ethnic or racial origin for culture, thereby explaining the regional cultural differences of so many countries including the USA as could be seen in the survey.

An identity in a modern society with high mobility that wants to unite people to become one nation cannot and should not merely be based on culture or origin. This nation will not survive. The foundation must be principles and values such as for example the guarantee of elementary personal, social and political rights. The modern man will then have to decide if he can identify with the basic ideas of his country.

If the region classifies the cultural influence but the national community is built on values, then international organizations pursuing the same ideals come into consideration, i.e. “transnational federations”. It must be guaranteed though that each region’s interest is of same importance and that each citizen is heard, otherwise this high-dimensional political building will not be accepted and not be trusted.

The United States of America presents many aspects of this modern so-called “value-based-community”. With its inalienable rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” written down in the declaration of independence, it invites every man, who can identify with its democratic principles, to become an American regardless of his origin or religious belief. On the contrary it even promises to save the personal rights, making this country a truly modern one.

It does not matter whether the American identity is a melting pot or a mosaic of different cultures: What should be decisive is that the identity is a transnational one based on values thereby trying to overcome cultural, ethnic or religious boundaries. It allows you to live your private life free and independent as long as you respect the common ideals. You have the

freedom to decide yourself if you want to have a distinguishing or uniform identity. That is the American identity in its ideal form, it would in fact be the ideal identity in every nation.

Modern federations as the European Union (EU) are aiming to reach a similar objective, namely a Europe of different regions, but with one identity based on common values. It will have to earn its legitimacy and trust by persuasion of its citizen. But the construct of the EU has not grown over centuries as in the United States of America, therefore it will still need much effort. Legitimacy will only be reached by establishing trust in it over years if not decades.

Important steps have been made in this process as for instance the introduction of a new European currency. But soon an European Constitution will be necessary to formulate the common goals and ideals as a solid foundation of the EU. The transnational identity and the flourishing development of the USA over the past shall be an important role-model on this journey. But it will also need strong efforts to avoid and learn from the mistakes of the USA up to the present day.

Václav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, presented his idea of a European Constitution in his speech to the European Parliament in Strassburg on March 8<sup>th</sup> 1994. In essence he demanded the citizens in Europe to feel as Europeans because of identification with its values instead of taking it for granted as a result of birth in this region.

It is a proclamation to Europeans, Americans and any other person in the world to inform and educate both himself and others about the political system you live in and consequently to make a deliberate decision regarding the question:

What do you want your identity to be? Is it realizable in this political system?

## 7. "Cultural Extra"

Now that I have come to the conclusion that culture is secondary regarding the American identity, I am still very happy about cultural differences and especially cultural misunderstandings as they are the spice attracting me to other countries. The German weekly journal "Die Zeit" presented a facetious meant list of the best clichés between Germans and Americans in 2002.

I would like to present it as "cooling down" after all the dry theoretical discussion above. Enjoy.

## **“Nice to meet you” – and other misunderstandings (Leben 42/2002)**

### **What strikes Americans on Germans**

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1. They call Americans “Amis”.
2. The impossibility to go shopping properly on Sundays or on evenings.
3. The resulting stress when shopping Saturday morning.
4. Germans tend to answer in English even when talking to an American with good German speaking skills.
5. On German TV channels there is incredibly much sex at all broadcasting times.
6. Irony is rarely understood.
7. Humor is mostly at the cost of someone else.
8. Don't know to calculate fractions (because of the comfortable metric system).
9. Wearing Designer eyeglasses is thought to be an expression of individuality.
10. Dogmatism. Yes! Definitely, no discussion.
11. Safety-driven, don't risk anything by any means.
12. They are destructing every film with the ever same synchronizing voices.
13. People are rarely introduced to each other on parties or other occasions.
14. Joint restaurant bills are not simply divided by the number of persons: Instead every part pays exactly his order.
15. The art of conversation is mostly unknown.
16. Germans think their abrupt way of communication is seen as honesty, whereas it actually makes an impression of dreadful aggressiveness to the Americans.
17. C&A artificial leather jackets that are worn by German men, and the funny pale green ‘popeline coats’ that German grandmothers always wear.
18. The notorious trust in authority: Not even three in the morning will German pedestrians cross on red traffic lights.
19. In Germany people have more time: It allows longer dates and more intensive talks, but also leads to idleness. Germans always stay a little bit too long.
20. Customers are looked upon as molestation.
21. The service is terribly slow.
22. Grimm's fairy tales are actually too scary for children.
23. The consummation of cigarettes is archaic, the unrestraint clouds of smoke stand in contrast to the otherwise very pronounced ecological conscience.
24. Wherever they go, they will knock on the walls and say that it should not have been permitted to construct it this way.

25. They always give to little tip.
26. As tourists in the US they carry their money in belly bags/belts as they fear being robbed.
27. Deadly silence in public transport.
28. Neighbors are rarely met personally.
29. Some German families actually have dinner together.
30. The “Musikantenstadl” (a folk music show) is on of the most popular shows on German TV.
31. Many German newspapers present naked women daily – and nobody protests.
32. When meeting first time, Germans behave distinctively distanced.
33. Germans even eat Pizza with knife and fork.
34. German women do not shave their legs and shoulders.
35. Germans have a relaxed relation to their bodies and their ‘related proceedings’.
36. German men urinate on streets.
37. German are often and with pleasure naked: in the park, on the beach, in the sauna, everywhere.
38. Simply the decision between “Du” and “Sie” (two different ways to address another person) kills any spontaneity.
39. Controllers in the public transportation system convey an atmosphere of mistrust and guilt.
40. They are mostly over-represented on touristy places due to the fact, that the German welfare state opens up unknown holiday possibilities.
41. They like wearing American Baseball caps.
42. They are damn proud of their beer.
43. Some drink beer even at breakfast.
44. Germans will only talk to persons they already know.
45. They will only communicate with foreigners to scold or insult them.
46. Germans believe they would have a particularly deep insight into the relation between Whites and Blacks in the USA.
47. They keep their feelings for themselves.
48. They do not know the concept of ‘personal space’: the safety space around each person.
49. Social democrats and the ‘Green Party’ in the government? Pretty radical!
50. Germans continuously make general comments about ‘the Americans’.

## What strikes Germans on Americans

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1. They are more obese than the Germans. Even though almost every package of potato chips is declared 'low fat' in the supermarkets.
2. Whoever is not obese, turns out to be a fitness fanatic.
3. Their money bills all have the same color and size – pretty strange in a country that adores money.
4. They are so superstitious that there is no 13<sup>th</sup> floor in the hotels.
5. They will say 'excuse me' each time they block your view in bookstore for less than a second while passing by.
6. Many female Americans pronounce statements like it were a question. Annoying.
7. The belief that you are responsible yourself for everything that happens to you (resulting in a lot of stress).
8. Even a simple melancholic mood is called 'depression'.
9. Americans speak of love, although just talking about a chocolate bar.
10. Man and woman cannot go to the cinema together without others calling it a date, i.e. a meeting with erotic potential.
11. There are very precise ideas about what needs to happen in the first, second and third date.
12. Weak geographic knowledge: Bombs over Beirut (Iraq) will result in less US-visitors at the classical music festival in Bayreuth (Germany).
13. They believe actors to be absolutely competent in all kinds of issues (take a look at the talk shows).
14. Peanut butter with marmalade.
15. Their conversation in restaurants and public transportation is much too noisy.
16. They love comfort. Any esthetics will have to subordinate.
17. They love the label 'heavy duty' as it signals indestructibility. Their 'heavy duty' laundry machines therefore look like army tanks.
18. They do not regard it necessary learning a foreign language.
19. They are passionately patriotic (and cannot understand others not being it).
20. They even drink milk with ice cubes.
21. Million Dollar suits against everything and everybody.
22. American breasts are artificial.
23. American elbows are sharper.
24. No fear of self-advertisement – the louder, the better.
25. Nothing actually costs the declared price: you always have to add tax of tip.

26. You do not have to pack the plastic bags yourself in the supermarket. But again that costs a couple cents tip.
27. Indistinct sale offers ('Buy two shirts, get one pair of socks absolutely free')
28. Childish enthusiasm even at older age.
29. 'Frappuccino Decaf' with strawberry flavor is regarded Italian lifestyle.
30. Because they are so obese, you are not able to differentiate between the monsters and the trucks at the popular 'Monster Truck Rallies' in the country site.
31. They take a shower several times a day.
32. Short periods of attentiveness.
33. They swallow pills constantly. Vitamins, Minerals, pills for and against everything.
34. They tend to talk about relationships like accountants: "I invested so much in her..."
35. Many have a prominent nape (bull's nape). Maybe as a consequence of the hormones in their food.
36. They are even more trustful in technology than the Germans.
37. Each politician shows extreme parting of his hair.
38. General tendency of wearing hair-styles that resemble helmets, in particular the female TV news speakers.
39. Europe in seven days (Wednesday: Venice, Thursday: Paris, Friday: Heidelberg).
40. For some reason Heidelberg is thought to represent Germany ( I thought it was the Oktoberfest in Munich, the author).
41. They drink beer out of brown paper bags.
42. Knowledge of the German language (if at all): "Danke scheen" (Thank you, 'American spelling'), "Achtung" (Attention/Take care), "Mach schnell!" (Hurry up!), " Ein Beer bitte" (One beer please, 'American spelling').
43. They order a Double-Whopper, French fries extra-large, and ... a big diet coke.
44. Casual wear as uniform: khaki shorts, flannel shirt with button-down collar over white T-shirt.
45. Plastic surgery is accepted as normal part of life.
46. Call each other mostly by their first names.
47. Even better: by their nickname (Bob, Dick, Rick, Bill, Jim, Judy, Liz, Maggie).
48. The TV is turned on when coming home just like the light.
49. They sleep on thick, soft mattresses.
50. Americans are by far not as interested in Germans, as we are interested in them.

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## Questionnaire Part II

A. Do you think that there are typically American character traits distinguishing Americans from other nations' citizens?  
Yes  No

Aa. If Yes, please name some (e.g. punctual, narrow-/open-minded, affable, humble, self confident...)

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B. Do you identify yourself with some of the traits you named above? Which ones?

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C. In your opinion, are there also regional differences in character traits in the US? I.e., is there for instance a typically North Carolinian character as opposed to a (let's say) Californian?  
Yes  No

Ca. Please name a short example

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D. How does your cultural or ethnic origin have an influence on your identity?  
(E.g. is it merely your appearance or do you actually cultivate certain traditional habits?)  
Please specify shortly:

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Da. Which influence is stronger in you? Cultural/ Ethnic roots or regional origin?  
Please specify shortly:

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E. How would you define your national identity? Are there other important influencing factors not addressed above?

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F. Finally, how do you feel emotionally connected to the USA most?

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Thank you very much!

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