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# **THE POWERS OF THE UNREAL: MYTHS AND IDEOLOGY IN THE USA**

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## **AN INTRODUCTION**

As a starting-point, I'd like to quote the opinion of a French historian, Ph. Ariès, who stated in his *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident* (Paris, Le Seuil, 1975) that "*pour la connaissance de la civilisation d'une époque, l'illusion même dans laquelle ont vécu les contemporains a valeur d'une vérité*", which means that to get an idea of a society and its culture one needs a history and a para-history as well, para-history recording not what happened but what people, at different times, said or believed had happened. A famous novelist, W. Faulkner expressed the same conviction in a more literary way when he stated in *Absalom Absalom* that "*there is a might have been which is more true than truth*", an interesting acknowledgement of the power of myths and legends.

This being said, I'd like now to say a few words about my basic orientations; the aim of this course is twofold :

- firstly, to introduce students to the technique of research in the field of American culture and society and give them a good grounding in the methodology of the classic academic exercise known as "analysis of historical texts and documents" ;

- secondly, to analyze the emergence and workings of "*l'imaginaire social*" in the States through two of its most characteristic manifestations : Myths and Ideology. We'll see that every society generates collective representations (such as symbols, images etc.) and identification patterns gaining acceptance and permanence through such mediators or vehicles as social and political institutions (for instance, the educational system, the armed forces, religious denominations) and of course, the mass media (the Press, the radio, the cinema and, last but not least, television). They all combine their efforts to inculcate and perpetuate some sort of mass culture and ideology whose function is to hold the nation together and provide it with a convenient set of ready-made pretexts or rationalizations it often uses to justify various social or political choices.

## **DEFINITIONS OF KEY NOTIONS**

### **A) *Imagination vs. "the imaginary"***

There is no exact English equivalent of the French word "*l'imaginaire*" or "*l'imaginaire social*"; however, the word "imaginary" does exist in English but chiefly as an epithet in the sense of "existing only in the imagination, not real" (*Random House Dict.*) and not as a substantive. It is sometimes found as a noun "the imaginary" as opposed to "the symbolic" in some works making reference to J. Lacan's well-known distinction between the three registers of "*le réel, l'imaginaire et*

*le symbolique*", but its meaning has little to do with what we're interested in. For convenience sake, I'll coin the phrase "the imaginary" or "the social imaginary" on the model of "the collective unconscious" for instance to refer to our object of study. First of all, we must distinguish between "the imagination" and "the imaginary" though both are etymologically related to the word "image" and refer, according to G. Durand – the author of *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* – to "*l'ensemble des images et des relations d'images qui constitue le capital pensé de l'homo sapiens*", they do not share the same characteristics. IMAGINATION means "the power to form mental images of objects not perceived or not wholly perceived by the senses and also the power to form new ideas by a synthesis of separate elements of experience" (*English Larousse*). The IMAGINARY also implies the human capacity for seeing resemblances between objects but it also stresses the creative function of mind, its ability to organize images according to the subject's personality and psyche: as a local specialist, Pr. J. Thomas, stated:

L'imaginaire est essentiellement un dynamisme, la façon dont nous organisons notre vision du monde, une tension entre notre conscience et le monde créant un lien entre le en-nous et le hors-nous [...] La fonction imaginaire apparaît donc comme voisine de la définition même du vivant, c'est-à-dire organisation d'un système capable d'autogénération dans son adaptation à l'environnement, et dans le contrôle d'une tension rythmique (intégrant le temps) entre des polarisations opposées (vie/mort, ordre/désordre, stable/dynamique, symétrie/dissymétrie, etc.) mais en même temps dans sa capacité imprévisible de création et de mutation [...] L'imaginaire assure ainsi une fonction générale d'équilibration anthropologique.

Thus, to sum up, if the imagination has a lot to do with the perception of analogies or resemblances between objects or notions, "the imaginary" is more concerned with binary oppositions and their possible resolution in a "*tertium quid*" *i.e.* something related in some way to two things but distinct from both.

## **B) Myth**

Myth is a protean entity and none of the numerous definitions of myth is ever comprehensive enough to explain it away (cf. "Myth is a fragment of the soul-life, the dream-thinking of people, as the dream is the myth of the individual", Reuthven, 70). Etymologically, myth comes from the Greek "*mythos*". A *mythos* to the Greeks was primarily just a thing spoken, uttered by the mouth, a tale or a narrative, which stresses the verballity of myth and its essential relationship with the language within which it exists and signifies (parenthetically, it seems that many myths originate in some sort of word play cf. Oedipus = *swollen foot*). So bear in mind that the medium of myth is language: whatever myth conveys it does in and through language).

A myth also implies an allegoric and symbolic dimension (*i.e.* a latent meaning different from the manifest content) and it is a primordial "symbolic form" *i.e.* one of those things – like language itself – which we interpose between ourselves and the outside world in order to apprehend it. It usually serves several purposes :

– to explain how something came into existence: it is “a prescientific and imaginative attempt to explain some phenomenon, real or supposed, which excites the curiosity of the myth-maker or observer” (K. R., 17)

– to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (L. Strauss). In simpler terms, myths attempt to mediate between contradictions in human experience; they mediate a "*coincidentia oppositorum*" (cf. examples).

So to sum up, in the words of R. Barthes: "*le mythe est un message qui procéderait de la prise de conscience de certaines oppositions et tendrait à leur médiation*", in plain English, myth is a message originating in the awareness of certain oppositions, contradictions or polarities, and aiming at the mediation; myth is "a reconciler of opposites" or to quote G. Durand once more: "*un discours dynamique résolvant en son dire l'indicible d'un dilemme*" (*Figures mythiques*, 306). Lastly, an essential feature of myth: it can be weakened but hardly annihilated by disbelief or historical evidence; myth is immune from any form of denial, whether experimental or historical (e.g. we still think of a rising and setting sun though we know it is a fallacy).

### **C) Ideology**

The relationship between myth and ideology is obvious inasmuch as "*toute idéologie est une mythologie conceptuelle dans laquelle les hommes se représentent sous une forme imaginaire leurs conditions d'existence réelles*".

As far as language in general, and myth in particular, is a way of articulating experience, they both participate in ideology *i.e.* the sum of the ways in which people both live and represent to themselves their relationship to the conditions of their existence. Ideology is inscribed in signifying practices – in discourses, myths, presentations and representations of the way things are. Man is not only a social but also an "*ideological animal*". According to French philosopher L. Althusser, ideology is:

un système (possédant sa logique et sa rigueur propres) de représentations (images, mythes, idées ou concepts selon les cas) doué d'une existence et d'un rôle historiques au sein d'une société donnée [...] Dans l'idéologie, qui est profondément inconsciente, même lorsqu'elle se présente sous une forme réfléchie, les hommes expriment, en effet, non pas leur rapport à leurs conditions d'existence, mais la façon dont ils vivent leur rapport à leurs conditions d'existence: ce qui suppose à la fois rapport réel et rapport vécu, imaginaire (Pour *Marx*, 238-240).

So between the individual and the real conditions of his existence are interposed certain interpretative structures, but ideology is not just a system of interpretation, it also assumes the function of a cementing force for society. According to Althusser, ideological practices are supported and reproduced in the institutions of our society which he calls "*Ideological State Apparatuses*" (ISA): their function is to guarantee consent to the existing mode of production. The central ISA in all Western societies is the educational system which prepares children to act consistently with the values of society by inculcating in them the dominant versions of appropriate behaviour as well as

history, social studies and of course literature. Among the allies of the educational ISA are the family, the law, the media and the arts all helping to represent and reproduce the myths and beliefs necessary to enable people to live and work within the existing social formation. As witness its Latin motto "*E Pluribus Unum*" meaning "*Out of many, one*" or "*One from many*", America, like any nation in the making, was from the very beginning, confronted with a question of the utmost importance *viz.* how to foster national cohesion and achieve a unity of spirit and ideal. Before the Constitution there were thirteen separate, quasi independent States; in the words of D. Boorstin, "*Independence had created not one nation but thirteen*", which is paradoxical yet true since each former colony adopted a Constitution which in practice turned it into a sovereign state. However, the new States shared a common experience and set of values, and in the wake of Independence and throughout the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the new country gradually developed a collective representation and a unifying force counterbalancing an obvious strain of individualism in the American character as well as holding in check certain centrifugal tendencies in the American experience; to quote just a few instances: the mobility of the population, its composite character, the slavery issue, sectional and regional differences, oppositions between the haves and have-nots are part of the disunifying forces that have threatened the concept as well as the reality of a single unmistakably American nationality and culture (the question of making a super identity out of all the identities imported by its constituent immigrants still besets America). For an examination and discussion of the genesis of the nation, the formation of the State, and the establishment of its model of recognized power, we'll have a look at the article by E. Marienstras "*Nation, État, Idéologie*".

However, even if the different people making up the USA have not coalesced into one dull homogeneous nation of look-alikes, talk-alikes and think-alikes, even if one can rightly maintain that there exist not one but fifty Americas (cf. the concept of "the American puzzle") there's no doubt that the USA succeeded in developing a national consciousness which is the spiritual counterpart of the political entity that came into being with the Declaration of Independence. The elaboration of a national identity was inseparable from the creation of a national ideology in the sense we have defined *i. e.* a coherent system of beliefs, assumptions, principles, images, symbols and myths that has become an organic whole and part and parcel of national consciousness. Let me remind you, at this stage, that my use of the concept, derived from L. Althusser, assumes that ideology is both a real and an imaginary relation to the world, that its rôle is to suppress all contradictions in the interest of the existing social formation by providing (or appearing to provide) answers to questions which in reality it evades.

I'd like to point out as well, for the sake of honesty and argument, that some historians and social scientists might question the truth of my assumption: some consider that in view of the vastness and diversity of the New World it is absurd to speak of an American ideology and would sub-

titute for it the concept of ideologies, in the plural; others claim that we have entered a post-mythical age or maintain, like D. Bell, the author of a famous book *The End of Ideology* (1960) that ideology no longer plays any rôle in Western countries, an opinion to which the fall of Communism has given new credence (but ironically enough two years later, in 1962, Robert E. Lane published a book entitled *Political Ideology: Why The American Common Man Believes What He Does ?*, which clearly shows that ideology is a moot point). Now, whatever such specialists may claim, there's no denying that the Americans take a number of assumptions for granted and, either individually or collectively, either consciously or unconsciously, often resort, in vindication of their polity (*i.e.* an organized society together with its government and administration), to a set of arguments or “*signifiers*” in Barthesian parlance, at the core of which lie the key notions of the American way of life and Americanism, two concepts about which there seems to be a consensus of opinion.

The American way of life is too familiar a notion to look into it in detail; everybody knows it suggests a certain degree of affluence and material well-being (illustrated by the possession of one or several cars, a big house with an impressive array of machines and gadgets etc.), and also implies a certain type of social relations based on a sense of community which does not preclude an obvious strain of rugged individualism and lastly, to strengthen the whole thing, an indestructible faith in freedom and a superior moral worth. As far as Americanism is concerned, it suggests devotion to or preference for the USA and its institutions and is the only creed to which Americans are genuinely committed. Although Americanism has been in common use since the late XVIII<sup>th</sup> century no one has ever been completely sure of its meaning, and it is perhaps best defined in contrast to its opposite *Un-Americanism*, *i. e.* all that is foreign to or opposed to the character, standards or ideals of the USA. Be that as it may, the concept of Americanism apparently rests on a structure of ideas about democracy, liberty and equality; through Americanism public opinion expresses its confidence in a number of hallowed institutions and principles: the Constitution, the pursuit of happiness, the preservation of individual liberty and human rights, a sense of mission, the free enterprise system, a fluid social system, a practical belief in individual effort, equality of opportunity, etc., in short a set of tenets that prompts the Americans' stock reply to those who criticize their country: "If you don't like this country, why don't you go back where you came from ?" a jingoistic reaction which is sometimes even more tersely expressed by "America: love it or leave it". Thus Americanism is the backbone of the nation and it has changed very little even if America has changed a lot. To sum up, the vindication of Americanism and the American way of life aims at reaffirming, both at home and abroad, the reality and permanence of an American identity and distinctiveness. However if such identity and specificity are unquestionable, they nonetheless pertain to the realm of the imaginary: why? There are at least two reasons for this :

A) First of all, America is the outgrowth – not to say the child – of a dream *i.e.* the American Dream which has always been invoked by those in charge of the destiny of the American people whether a presidential candidate, a preacher or a columnist : "Ours is the only nation that prides itself upon a dream and gives its name to one: the American Dream", wrote critic L. Trilling. The Dream is the main framework of reference, it comes first and History comes next. One can maintain that from the very beginning of the settlement the Pilgrim Fathers and the pioneers settled or colonized a dream as well as a country. America originated in a twofold project bearing the marks of both idealism and materialism and such duality, as we shall see, was sooner or later bound to call for some sort of ideological patching up. At this stage, a brief survey of how things happened is in order: the first permanent settlement on American soil started in May 1607 in Virginia. The settlers, mainly adventurers, and ambitious young men employed by the Virginia Company of London were attracted by the lure of profit: they hoped to locate gold mines and a water route through the continent to the fabulous markets of Asia. A few decades later the colonists were reinforced by members of the loyalist country gentry who supported the King in the English Civil War (1642-52) – the Cavaliers, who deeply influenced the shaping of Antebellum South and gave Southern upper classes their distinctively aristocratic flavour.

In 1620, some five hundred miles to the North, another settlement – Plymouth Colony – was set up under the leadership of the famous *Pilgrim Fathers*, a group of Puritans who were dissatisfied with religious and political conditions in England. Unlike the the planters of Virginia the settlers of New England were motivated less by the search for profits than by ideological considerations. They sailed to America not only to escape the evils of England, but also to build an ideal community, what their leader J. Winthrop called "A Model of Christian Charity," to demonstrate to the world the efficacy and superiority of true Christian principles. So, the beginnings of America were marked by a divided heritage and culture: the Puritans in the North and the Cavaliers in the South, Democracy with its leveling effect, and Aristocracy with slavery as its "mudsill". And these two ways of life steadily diverged from colonial times until after the Civil War.

Now I'd like to embark upon a short digression to show you an interesting and revealing instance of ideological manipulation : on Thanksgiving Day, *i. e.* the fourth Thursday in November, a national holiday, the Americans commemorate the founding of Plymouth Colony by the *Pilgrim Fathers* in 1620. This event has come to symbolize the birth of the American nation, but it unduly highlights the part taken by New England in its emergence. The importance that history and tradition attach to the Puritan community should not obliterate the fact that the colonization of the Continent actually started in the South 13 years before. Jamestown, as you know now, was founded in 1607 and one year before the "*Mayflower*" (the ship in which the *Pilgrim Fathers* sailed) reached Massachusetts, a Dutch sailing ship, named the "Jesus" (truth is indeed stranger than fiction) had

already unloaded her cargo of 20 Negroes on the coast of Virginia. Small wonder then that in the collective consciousness of American people, the *Pilgrim Fathers*, with their halo of innocence and idealism overshadowed the Southerners guilty of the double sin of slavery and Secession.

B) The second reason is that the American socio-political experience, and consequently ideology, roots itself, for better or for worse in “Utopia” (from Greek “*ou*”/not + “*topos*”/place ; after *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More, 1516, describing an island in which ideal conditions existed; since that time the name has come to refer to any imaginary political or social system in which relationships between individual and the State are perfectly adjusted). The early Puritan settlers in New England compared themselves with *God's Chosen People* of the Old Testament and America was seen as a second *Promised Land* where a New Jerusalem was to be founded (“We shall be as a city upon a hill...,” proclaimed their leader , J. Winthrop). What the early settlers'experience brings to light is the role of the fictitious in the making of America: the Pilgrim Fathers modelled their adventure on what I am tempted to call a Biblical or scriptural script. The settlement of the American continent was seen as a re-enactment of various episodes of the Old testament and was interpreted in biblical terms: for instance, the *Pilgrim Fathers* identified themselves with the Hebrews of Exodus who under the leadership of Moses fled Egypt for the Promised Land. The English Kings whose policies were detrimental to the Puritan community were compared to Pharaoh and the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean was interpreted as an obvious parallel with the wanderings of the Hebrews across the Sinai Desert. Even the Indian tribes, who made it possible for the early colonists to survive the hardships of settlement, were readily identified with the Canaanites, the enemies of the Hebrews, who occupied ancient Palestine. Another corollary of the Promised Land scenario was, as we have just seen, that the Pilgrim Fathers had the deep-rooted conviction that they were endowed with a double mission: spreading the Word of God all over the new continent and setting up a New Jerusalem and a more perfect form of government under the guidance of the Church placed at the head of the community (a theocracy). Parenthetically, the identification with the Hebrews was so strong that at the time of the Declaration of Independence some delegates suggested that Hebrew should become the official language of the New Republic! Thus the Pilgrim Fathers were under the impression of leaving the secular arena to enter the mythical one: they looked forward to an end to history *i. e.* the record of what man has done and this record is so gruesome that Byron called history “the devil's scripture”. The Puritans planned to substitute God's scripture for the devil's: myth redeems history. The saga of the Pilgrim Fathers is evidence of the supremacy of the mythical or imaginary over the actual; it is also an illustration of the everlasting power of mythical structures to give shape to human experience: the flight from corrupt, sin-ridden Europe was assimilated to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Now it is worthy of note that if utopia means lofty ideals, aspiration, enterprise and a desire to improve the order of things, it also tends to degenerate and to content

itself with paltry substitutes, makeshift solutions and vicarious experiences: as M. Atwood puts it the city upon the hill has never materialized and: “Some Americans have even confused the actuality with the promise: in that case Heaven is a Hilton Hotel with a coke machine in it”.

Such falling-off is illustrated by the evolution of the myth of the Promised Land which, as an ideological construction served a double purpose: first of all, there is no doubt that this myth and its derivative (the Idea of the Puritans as a Chosen People) reflected an intensely personal conviction and expressed a whole philosophy of life but at the same time it is obvious that these religious convictions readily lent themselves to the furtherance of New England's political and economic interests. The consciousness of being God's chosen instruments in bringing civilization and true religion to the wilderness justified a policy of territorial expansion and war on the Indians: their culture was all but destroyed and the race nearly extinguished. As you all know, the Indians were forced into ever-smaller hunting-grounds as they were persuaded or compelled to give their forests and fields in exchange for arms, trinkets or alcohol. This policy of removal culminated in the massacre of *Wounded Knee* and the harrowing episode of the *Trail of Tears*. So this is a perfect example of the way ideology works: in the present instance, it served as a cover for territorial expansion and genocide. As a historian put it, “the American national epic is but the glorification of a genocide”.

What the early days of settlement prove beyond doubt is that the American experiment took root in an archetypal as well as in a geographical universe, both outside history and yet at a particular stage in the course of history. The *Pilgrim Fathers'* motivations were metaphysical as well as temporal and the ideological discourse held by those founders was inscribed in the imaginary: it was rich in fables, symbols and metaphors that served as a system of interpretation or framework of references to give shape and meaning to their experience. Thus the American Dream was intimately related to *the Sacred* and eventually regarded as sacred. Later, under the influence of the writings of such philosophers as John Locke (1632-1704) or Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), the American Dream was gradually remodelled and secularized but it has always kept a mystical dimension.

Nowadays, it is obvious that ideology in present-day America is mostly concerned with what the Dream has become and the most striking feature of it is its permanence – however changeable its forms and short-lived its manifestations may have been. It is of course an endless debate revealing great differences of attitude; some like John Kennedy in *A Nation of Immigrants* (1964) maintaining the Dream has materialized (“Les occasions que l'Amérique a offertes ont fait du rêve une réalité, au moins pour un bon nombre de gens; mais le rêve lui-même était pour une large part le produit de millions de simples gens qui commençaient une nouvelle existence avec la conviction que l'existence en effet pouvait être meilleure, et que chaque nouvelle vague d'immigrants ravivait le rêve”) while others contend that it has vanished into thin air or again claim like John M. Gill in his introduction to *The American Dream* that the American Dream has not been destroyed because it has

not materialized yet; it is just, in the words of the Negro poet Langston Hughes "a dream deferred"  
*i.e. "ajourné"* :

What happens to a dream deferred ?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore -  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over -  
like a syrupy sweet?  
May be it just sags  
like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.  
(America never was America to me.)  
Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed -  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never Kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.  
(It never was America to me.)  
O, let my land be a land where liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is the air we breathe.  
(There's never been equality for me  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free".)

-----  
O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet, I swear this oath -  
America will be!

The Dream is all the more enduring as it is seen as being deferred. Note as well that the definition of the Dream has continually changed as the notion of happiness evolved, but if some elements have disappeared, others have been included and the Dream still embodies a number of obsessions and phantasms that haunted the people of Massachusetts or New Jersey four centuries ago. Such perennity and resilience are most remarkable features and prove beyond doubt that myth cannot be destroyed by history. The main components of the American Dream are well-known; it is a cluster of myths where one can find, side by side or alternating with each other :

– the myth of Promise ("America is promises") in its quasi theological form, America being seen as God's own country

- the myth of plenty : America = a Land of plenty, a myth which originated in the Bible and then assumed more materialistic connotations
- the Myth of Adamic Innocence
- a sense of mission, at first divine and then imperialistic (Manifest Destiny)
- the Frontier
- the Melting-Pot etc., the list is by no means exhaustive and might include all the concepts at the core of Americanism such as the pursuit of happiness, equality of opportunity, freedom, self-reliance and what not.

However nebulous this series of elements may be, it played at one time or another in American history – and for the most part still plays – the rôle of motive power or propelling force for the American experiment: this is what makes Americans tick! I shall now embark upon a more detailed examination of the major ones.

### ***THE PROMISED LAND***

The significance of the Promised Land varied according to what the settlers or immigrants expected to find in the New World. For some it was chiefly a religious myth (America was seen as a haven of peace for latter-day pilgrims); for those who were more interested in worldly things it was supposed to be an *El Dorado*, a legendary country said to be rich in gold and treasures, lastly, for a third category of people, it symbolized a prelapsarian world, a place of renewal and the site of a second golden age of humanity. As we have seen, most of the colonists who left Europe for the New World did so in the hope of finding a more congenial environment and for the Pilgrim Fathers New England was a modern counterpart of the Biblical archetype and the success of the settlement was seen as evidence of their peculiar relation to God (a sign of divine election). But from the outset, the myth also served different purposes:

- it was used as propaganda material and a lure to stimulate immigration from Europe;
- it provided the colonists with a convenient justification for the extermination of the Indians;
- it offered an argument against British rule since God's Chosen People could not acknowledge any other authority but God's, which resulted in a theocratic organization of the colony.

What is worthy of note is that even if subsequent settlers did not share this explicitly religious outlook stemming from radical Protestantism, most of them did think of America as in some sense a gift of Divine Providence. But the secularization of the myth set in very early; in the late XVIII<sup>th</sup> and in the early XIX<sup>th</sup>, with the rise of capitalism and incipient industrialism which made living conditions worse for large numbers of people, a reaction set in which revived the pastoral ideal, a pagan version or new avatar of the concept of the Promised Land. The myth of a rustic para-

dise, as formulated by Rousseau for instance, postulates that the beauty of nature, the peace and harmony of the virgin forest have a regenerative, purifying and therapeutic effect both physically and morally.

Thomas Jefferson, 3<sup>rd</sup> President of the U.S. was the originator of the pastoral tradition in America: he maintained that the independent yeoman farmer was the true social foundation of democratic government: "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people," he wrote. If the pastoral myth played an obvious role in the conquest of the Continent, it was nonetheless a sort of rearguard action doomed to failure: the advance of progress, industrialization and urbanization was irresistible, but the ideal of a life close to nature was to persist in the realm of fiction where it repeatedly crops up in the works of Cooper, Emerson, Twain or Thoreau.

However, the religious interpretation of the myth survived and continued at intervals to reassert itself through much of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century; see for instance the saga of the Mormons who trekked westward across the prairie to settle in Utah and found Salt Lake City, their Jerusalem. The motif of the journey out of captivity into a land of freedom also found an answering echo in Black slaves on Southern plantations; for some of them the dream did materialize when they managed to reach the Northern free states or Canada thanks to the "Underground Railroad", a secret organization helping fugitive slaves to flee to free territory. But the most important consequence of the idea of the Promised Land was the Messianic spirit that bred into Americans a sense of moral and endowed them with the conviction that God had given them a world mission *i.e.* America's "Manifest Destiny", an imperialistic slogan launched by Horace Greely a journalist and political leader. According to the doctrine it was the destiny of the U.S. to be the beacon of human progress, the liberator of oppressed peoples and consequently to expand across the continent of North America. The notion of "Manifest Destiny" is perfectly illustrative of the way ideology works and turns every principle or doctrine to its advantage: from a sense of mission in the field of religion, the concept evolved into a secular and imperialistic justification for territorial expansion. This self-imposed mission served as a most convenient pretext to justify acts of imperialistic interventions in the affairs of foreign countries but one must also acknowledge that on occasion it also provided the moral basis for acts of altruism or generosity toward other nations. Thus there was a shift from spreading the Word of God to spreading the American model of government and way of life; the impetus or drive was kept but the goal was changed: spiritual militancy evolved into imperialism.

## ***THE AMERICAN ADAM***

As was to be expected, the myth of the Promised Land gave rise to a novel idea of human nature embodied by a new type of man, the American Adam i.e. *homo americanus* having recaptured pristine innocence. Sinful, corrupt Europe was an unlikely place for the emergence of this new avatar of humanity, but the American wilderness being a virgin environment was to prove much more favorable to the advent of a mythic American new man. As St John de Crèvecoeur stated in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782): “The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions”. The forefather of the American Adam was "the natural man" or "the noble savage" of Locke's and Rousseau's philosophies i.e. an ideal type of individual seen as the very opposite of the corrupt and degenerate social man. The American farmer, hedged in by the forest, partaking of none of the vices of urban life, came to be regarded as the very type of Adamic innocence. In the wake of Independence, the new country elaborated a national ideology characterized by a strong antagonism towards Europe and towards the past: cf. John L. O'Sullivan (1839):

Our National birth was the beginning of new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; so far as regards the entire development of the rights of man, in moral, political and national life, we may confidently assume that our *country is destined to be the great nation of futurity*.

XIX<sup>th</sup>-century authors like Thoreau, Emerson or Cooper were the principal myth-makers: they created a collective representation, the American Adam, which they described as:

An individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. (R. W. Lewis)

As immigrants from Europe contaminated the east of the American continent, the western part of the country, being thinly populated and therefore unsullied, became the repository of American innocence. An interesting political development from the fear of European corruption and the myth of the American Adam was isolationism. It proceeded from the assumption that America was likely to be tainted in its dealings with foreign nations and resulted in the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823: a declaration enunciated by James Monroe (5<sup>th</sup> President of the US) that the Americas were not to be considered as a field for European colonization and that the USA would view with displeasure any European attempt to intervene in the political affairs of American countries. It dominated American diplomacy for the next century, and came, in the late 19th century to be associated with the assertion of U.S. hegemony in Latin America. One of the objectives of the Monroe Doctrine was to preserve the moral purity of the nation. However with the sobering experiences of

the Civil War, WWI and WWII, and above all the War in Vietnam, the myth lost some of its credibility for experience conclusively proved that the Americans did not belong to a radically different species. America was to be, in the words of M. Lerner, “an extended genesis” but it fizzled out with the outbreak of the War between brothers; then America entered or rather fell into History again: “*We've had our Fall*” said a Southern woman of letters (E. Welty, Flannery O'Connor?). Though it suffered severe setbacks, the myth of the American Adam remains deeply rooted in the American psyche and is a leitmotif in American fiction, in the Press or in political speeches. The very stereotype of the self-made man (“*l'homme qui est le fils de ses oeuvres*”), totally dedicated to the present and the future, testifies to the all-engrossing and abiding power of the Adamic idea in American life.

### ***THE MELTING-POT (Facts and Fiction)***

As we have seen, building a new polity required the development of a national sense of peoplehood but in the U.S.A the question of national identity was from the start inseparable from assimilation *i.e.* America's ability to absorb unlimited numbers of immigrants, a process of massive cultural adaptation symbolized by the image of the "Melting-Pot". Thus the motto "*E Pluribus Unum*" sums up the essence of America's cosmopolitan faith, a conviction that this new country would bring unity out of diversity, but the national motto may assume two widely different meanings depending on whether one places greater stress on the "*pluribus*" or the "*unum*". Should "*pluribus*" be subordinated to and assimilated into "*unum*", or the other way round *i.e.* should unity/"*unum*" be superseded by diversity/"*pluribus*"? Although the question is of crucial importance, its relevance is relatively recent: why? Simply because the original colonists were all coming from England and thus the American nationality was originally formed in a basically Anglo-Saxon mold. As long as the settlers came from the British Isles, Germany and Northern Europe *i.e.* were mostly Protestant in religion, the process of assimilation or melting-pot worked smoothly and resulted in the emergence of culturally and politically dominant group which though it also contained strong Celtic admixtures (the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish) came to be referred to as *WASPS*, an acronym formed from the initial letters of the words "White Anglo-Saxon Protestants".

Now the melting-pot idea of immigrant assimilation and American nationality was first put forward by Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur in the oft-quoted passage from *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782):

What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an America by being received into the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals are *melted*

*into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one cause great changes in the world.*  
(emphasis mine)

The term Melting-pot which remains the most popular symbol for ethnic interaction and the society in which it takes place, was launched by Isreal Zangwill's play *The Melting-Pot* which had a long run in New York in 1909. Now what must be pointed out is that in spite of its liberality and tolerance, the cosmopolitan version of the melting-pot was far from being a catholic or universal process. It seemed obvious that from the outset some allegedly unmeltable elements such as the Indians or the Blacks would be simply excluded from the process. Besides, the Melting-Pot was first of all and still is a theory of assimilation. The idea that the immigrants must change was basic; they were, as Crèvecoeur put it, to discard all vestiges of their former culture and nationality to conform to what was at bottom an essentially Anglo-Saxon model. If, before the Civil war, the first big wave of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Sweden and Norway was easily melted into a new race of men in the crucible of American society, in the 1880s, the second wave, an influx of Catholic people from the mediterranean area, followed by Slavic people and Jews, strained the assimilationist capacity of the so-called melting-pot. The flood of immigrants whose life-styles and ways of thinking were conspicuously different from American standards raised the problem of mutation and assimilation; it also gave rise to a feeling of racism towards the newly-arrived immigrants. Xenophobia was then rampant and found expression in such movements as the Ku Klux Klan (the 2<sup>nd</sup> organization founded in 1915 and professing Americanism as its object), Nativism (the policy of protecting the interests of native inhabitants against those of immigrants) and Know-Nothingism (from the answer "*I know nothing*" that the members of the organization were advised to give inquisitive people). The program of the Know-Nothing party called for the exclusion of Catholics and foreigners from public office and demanded that immigrants should not be granted citizenship until twelve years after arrival. From the 1880s on, increasing numbers of Americans came to doubt that the mysterious alembic of American society was actually functioning as it was supposed to: the melting-pot gave signs of overheating and the USA assumed the disquieting appearance of "*AmeriKKKa*". (Parenthetically, I'd like to point out that the strain of xenophobia has not disappeared from American culture; there have been several resurgences of the phenomenon, *e.g.* McCarthyism "Red-hunting during the cold war and nearer to us various campaigns in favour of "100 percent Americanism"). To return to the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the public outcry against overly liberal immigration policies and the increasing number of "hyphenated" Americans (*i.e.* Afro-American) led U.S Government to pass legislation restricting entry to the Promised Land (quotas, literacy tests, or the Exclusion Act in 1882 to put an end to Chinese immigration). That period brought to light the limitations and true nature of the melting-pot theory which was just a cover for a process of *WASPification* in an essentially Anglo-Saxon mold which was almost by definition and from the outset

unable to assimilate heterogeneous elements sharply diverging from a certain standard. In the words of N. Glazer and D. Moynihan, "the point about the melting-pot is that it did not happen" *i.e.* it was just a fallacy and an ideological argument masking the domination of one social group, the Wasps, under the guise of universal principles.

What is the situation today? Immigration laws are a little more liberal and new Americans are still pouring in by the million (nearly 5 million immigrants were admitted from 1969 to 1979). The 70's were the decade of the immigrants and above all the decade of the Asian (refugees from the Philippines or Vietnam etc.). A new and interesting development is Cuban immigration, concentrating in Florida and the influx of illegal immigrants from Mexico, the Wetbacks, settling in the South-West. The most dramatic consequence of the presence of fast-growing communities of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, or Mexicans is the increasing hispanicization of some parts of the USA. Spanish is already the most common foreign language spoken in the States and in some cities or counties it may one day replace American English.

The last three decades were marked by a revival of ethnicity and the rise of new forms of ethnic militancy; the 60s witnessed not only an undeniable heightening of ethnic and racial consciousness among the Blacks (pride of race manifested itself in the purposeful promotion of black power, black pride, black history, and patriotism), the Hispanic Americans and the native Americans, but also an emphatic rejection of the assimilationist model expressed in the idea of the Melting-Pot. Nowadays, foreign-born Americans want the best of both worlds *i.e.* enjoy the benefits of the American system and way of life but at the same time preserve their customs, traditions and languages. They refuse to sacrifice their own cultural identities on the altar of Americanism and claim a right to a twofold identity.

By way of conclusion: the two decades from 1960 to 1980 witnessed a severe weakening of confidence in the American system, in the principles on which it was based and in the efficacy of its institutions. This crisis in confidence originated in the realization that in the words of Harold Cruse, "America is a nation that lies to itself about who and what it is. It is a nation of minorities ruled by a minority of one--it thinks and acts as if it were a nation of White-Anglo-Saxon Protestants".

The debunking of the melting-pot theory will hopefully pave the way for a different type of society: what seems to be emerging today is the goal of a society that will be genuinely pluralistic in that it will deliberately attempt to preserve and foster all the diverse cultural and economic interests of its constituent groups. The motto "*E Pluribus Unum*" is coming to seem more and more outdated and one may wonder whether the country's new motto should not be "*Ex Uno Plures*".

## **Conclusion**

What must be pointed out, after this survey of some of the basic components of national consciousness and ideology, is that they constitute the motive power of the American experiment, what moves or prompts American people to action and stimulates their imagination, in other words, it is what makes them tick.

A third feature of American ideology is that the ideals and goals it assigns to American people are consistently defined in terms of "prophetic vision", whether it be the vision of a brave new world, of a perfect society or whatever. One of the most forceful exponents of this prophetic vision was Thomas Paine, the political writer, who wrote in *Common Sense* (1776): "We, Americans, have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand".

Nearer to us F. D. Roosevelt stated in 1937: "We have dedicated ourselves to the achievement of a vision" and we're all familiar with Martin L. King's famous opening lines: "I had a dream that one day the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood" (August 1963 in Washington).

What is noteworthy – and the previous quotation is a case in point – is that there is an obvious relationship between American ideology and religion. As an observer put it: "America is a missionary institution that preaches mankind a Gospel". As we saw, American ideology, as embodied in the American Dream, is inseparable from the Sacred and buttressed by the three major denominations in the States: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. It must be borne in mind that myths, religions, ideology and of course politics are in constant interplay: they often overlap and interpenetrate with each other, cf. Tocqueville : « *Je ne sais si tous les Américains ont foi dans leur religion, mais je suis sûr qu'ils la croient nécessaire au maintien des institutions républicaines* ». An opinion borne out by President Eisenhower's contention that: "Our Government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply religious faith – and I don't care what it is" (« *Notre gouvernement n'a pas de sens s'il n'est fondé sur une foi religieuse intensément ressentie, et peu importe de quelle foi il s'agit* »). It seems that in the States the attitude toward religion is more important than the object of devotion; the point is to show one has faith in something – whether God or the American way of life does not really matter.

In the words of a sociologist, "we worship not God but our own worshiping" or to put it differently, the Americans have faith in faith and believe in religion. Thus the nation has always upheld the idea of pluralism of belief and freedom of worship. The State supports no religion but even nowadays religion is so much part of American public life that there seems to be a confusion between God and America, God's own country: dollar banknotes bear the inscription "In God we trust" and the President takes the oath on the Bible. Public atheism remains rare: it is regarded as

intellectual, radical, un-American and is accompanied by social disapproval. Since 1960 church attendance has declined steadily, but experimentation with new forms of worship still continues, as witness the increasing number of sects of every description vying with the three main religious groups *viz.* Protestants, Roman Catholics and Jews.

It is a well-known aspect of religious life in the USA that an American church is in many ways very similar to a club: it is a center of social life and an expression of group solidarity and conformity. People tend to change religious groups or sects according to their rise in social status or their moving into a new neighbourhood. Little emphasis is laid on theology, doctrine or religious argument: morality is the main concern. Tocqueville once remarked: "Go into the churches (I mean the Protestant ones) you will hear morality preached, of doctrine not a word...". The observation is still valid, for churches and religious denominations are expressions of group solidarity rather than of rigid adherence to doctrine. However, this religious dimension is so firmly entrenched in the mind of Americans that Hubert Humphrey a presidential candidate campaigned for "the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God", something unthinkable on the French political scene, and President Jimmy Carter was a Baptist preacher. The American people do have their common religion and that religion is the system familiarly known as the American way of life. By every realistic criterion the American way of life is the operative faith of the American people, for the American way of life is at bottom a spiritual structure of ideas and ideals, of aspirations and values, of beliefs and standards: it synthesizes all that commends itself to the Americans as the right, the good and the true in actual life. It is a faith that markedly influences, and is influenced by, the official religions of American society. The American way of life is a kind of secularized Puritanism and so is democracy which has been erected into a "superfaith" above and embracing the three recognized religions; cf. J. P. Williams: "Americans must come (I am tempted to substitute 'have come') to look on the democratic ideal as the Will of God" so that the democratic faith is in the States the religion of religions and religion, in its turn, is something that reassures the American citizen about the essential rightness of everything American, his nation, his culture and himself. So, to conclude this series of observations, one can maintain that the Americans are "at one and the same time, one of the most religious and most secular of nations".

If one of the functions of religion is, among other things, to sanctify the American way of life, if democracy can be seen as a civic religion then the core of this religion is faith in the Constitution as well as in Law and Order. Without going into too much detail, I'd like to point out that the implications and connotations of the two terms are quite different from those they have in other cultures. Law for instance is endowed with a prestige that comes from the Bible through its association with Mosaic Law and British tradition (the Common Law) which accounts for its sacred, self-evident nature and its being seen as a "transcendental category": cf. M. L. King's statement that "an

unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law or in natural law". Despite King's lofty conception, American law embodies many of the moralisms and taboos of the American mind and aims at enforcing an order that is dear to the establishment. At the apex of the American legal system stands the Supreme Court as interpreter of the Constitution which enshrines the nation's cohesive force and lends itself to idolization. The Constitution is America's covenant and its guardians, the justices of the Supreme Court are touched with its divinity.

Lastly, among the key values underpinning American ideology, there's common sense, the very foundation of the American Revolution as witness Thomas Paine's pamphlet. Common sense or sound practical judgment is akin to what R. Barthes used to call *Doxa* (i.e. « *l'opinion courante, les fausses évidences, c'est-à-dire les masques de l'idéologie, le vraisemblable, ce qui va de soi: le propre de l'idéologie est de toujours tenter de faire passer pour naturel ce qui est profondément culturel ou historique* », L-J Calvet, *R. Barthes*). Thus there is in American ideology an enduring relationship between the notion of common sense and that of the common man, a stereotype, the main constituent of the middle-class and mainstream America, the backbone of the system. The high valuation of the "common man", endowed with all the virtues that are dear to Americanism, dates back to Jacksonian democracy; the common man has undergone a series of avatars: the frontiersman, the farmer of the Middle-West, the man in the street, in lastly the middle-class citizens forming the so-called silent majority which is, in spite of its name, quite vocal on the defense of its interests and values and considers itself the guardian of normalcy. But, paradoxically enough, what must be emphasized is the complementary link between the mass of ordinary people advocating common sense and belonging to the middle-classes and hero-worship, the cult of individuals out of the common run. American culture has given rise to an impressive gallery of national or comic strip heroes such as Kit Carson, Davy Crockett, Paul Bunyan, Superman or Batman... In the same way, the perfect President is the one whose life follows the well-known pattern set by such national heroes as Jackson or Lincoln *i. e.* a trajectory leading the individual from the log-cabin to the White House, a fate which is evidence of the openness of American society and equality of opportunity.

All the elements we have reviewed account for the remarkable stability of American ideology: I grant that there have been periods when that very ideology was questioned – the Americans are currently undergoing one of these cyclical crises in confidence – but national consensus though somewhat shattered is still going strong. Ideology continues to play its traditional rôle of cementing force aiming both at neutralizing all potential conflicts or disruptive tensions and at revitalizing the key values of Americanism. Its flexibility is its main asset and accounts for the multiple adjustments it resorted to ward off all threats to the system: Populism, Progressivism, the Square Deal, the Fair Deal, and the New Frontier – "to get America moving again" – were all attempts to avert disin-

tegration. It is the same fundamental ideology that underpins the particular position on this or that issue that the Republicans, the Democrats, the Liberals or even the Radicals may take up. In spite of great differences of opinion and interests, there's general agreement, with the usual qualifications, on such basic principles as the defence of:

- Americanism, set up as a universal model;
- a regime of free enterprise and free competition;
- a free world;
- national safety;
- American leadership.

It is worthy of note that opposition to the system and criticisms levelled against Americanism, the consumer society or the society of alienation, are more often than not inspired by the same values and ideals that its opponents accuse American society of having forfeited; besides, those who challenge traditional values and the goals of official culture *i.e.* adherents to the so-called counter-culture, whether it be the youth culture, the drug culture, the hippie movement and flower children, can seldom conceive of any lasting alternative to the American way of life.

The wiles and resilience of national ideology are such that it never fails to absorb or "recuperate" subversive practices by turning them to its advantage. As I said earlier, the USA is currently undergoing a period of self-doubt and loss of confidence; in spite of some outstanding achievements in the field of foreign policy there's a rising tide of discontent and disenchantment at home. Some Americans have come to question their country's ability to materialize the promise and the dream upon which America was founded. Is the age of ideology passing away to give way to the age of debunking and demythologizing? The question is uppermost in the national consciousness but as far as I am concerned it will go unanswered.