

# American National Identity and Ideology

## American national myth

- Traditional Eurocentric racism: America defined as predominantly northern and western European in its culture and institutions, with a dominant Anglo-Saxon and Protestant foundation (Samovar 36).
- Defining national character and aspirations by suggesting that all people hold certain beliefs as common and shared:
  - America as a 'virgin land', a wilderness 'free' to be civilized and occupied by the pioneers, irrespective of the indigenous population (Campbell 9);
  - the belief that America's progress was divinely ordained (ibid. 24);
  - discourse of American patriotism: flag, emotional music, images of heroism and sacrifice, speeches of resolution and determination from the White House (ibid., 14);
  - the articulation of the American nation "as whole and unified in order that production and economic growth could develop around common goals, shared beliefs and a sense of cohesion (ibid., 23).
- The purpose of the myth: to make the world explicable; to arrange the past and reinforce certain archetypes that are taken for granted.
- Myth also means ideology which defends the status quo and actively promotes the values and interests of the dominant groups in society (ibid.: 9)
- The power that has given preferred meanings to particular past and privileged certain groups (ibid., 10).
- Reality: Not the progress and civilization, "but genocide, slavery and the reckless exploitation of the environment." (Ibid.: 24)

## American national ideology

- The United States founded on the ideology of "classical liberalism":
  - individualism, universalism* ('We are all human' and 'We are all individuals'), and *procedural equality*: 'equal rights' and 'equal opportunities'
  - To be found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights
  - American mainstream ideology is particularly reflected in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Declaration of Independence).

## American Myths in the Presidential Discourse

- The founding myths of American culture: the belief in the fresh start, the new beginning (Campbell 26)
- *Inaugural Address of President Bill Clinton of 1993*: 'the mystery of American renewal', 'a new season of renewal' to once again alter the country and

nourish the nation through the fundamental core myths of American culture; the capacity 'to reinvent America'; to 'define what it means to be an American', to 'begin anew with energy and hope, with faith and discipline'.

- To reestablish American identity "by repeating the past, or the language of the past, and seeking to apply it to the present."
- Mythic framework: fixing certain dominant meanings: of individuality, the nation, Nature, rootedness, divinity, discipline and work.
- "The Inaugural Address speaks to the American people as if they were 'one', seeking to reassure them of presidential new beginnings, of commitment to great visions and old traditions..." (Campbell 32)
- *Reagan's Inaugural Address of 1981*: Dream, Frontier and renewal: 'let us review our determination, our courage, and our strength. And let us renew our faith and our hope. We have every right to dream heroic dreams... Their values sustain our national life' (quoted in Campbell 32)
- Reagan's appeal to 'eternal' values that nobody can disagree with (Campbell 32)
- *George W. Bush (2004)*: "The story of America is the story of expanding liberty ...we will extend the frontiers of freedom...This is the everlasting dream of America and tonight, in this place, that dream is renewed."

#### Literature:

Campbell, Neil, Kean, Alasdair. *American Cultural Studies: An introduction to American culture*. Second edition. New York: Routledge, 2006

Janzen, Rod. "Five Paradigms of Ethnic Relations." In Samovar, Larry A., Porter, Richard, E. (eds.) *Intercultural Communication*. Belmont, USA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003, pp. 36-42.