

COMPREHENSION CHECK ➔

Sweet Land of... Conformity?

Claude Fischer

DIRECTIONS: Complete the following items after you finish your first read.

1. What surprising result did the researchers find about how much respondents prioritize individual interests over the needs of groups?

2. Out of respondents from nine different countries, how likely were Americans to say that people should follow their consciences, even if it meant breaking the law?

3. According to a 1991 ISSP survey, how do Americans feel about putting individual happiness above the institution of marriage?

4. How does the author describe “communal voluntarism”?

5. How is the notion of community in Europe, or the Old World, different from this idea of communal voluntarism?

6. To confirm your understanding, write a summary of “Sweet Land of... Conformity?”

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RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of the story?

Research to Explore Choose something from the text that interests you and formulate a research question.

TEXT QUESTIONS

DIRECTIONS: Respond to these questions. Use textual evidence to support your responses.

1. **Relate** Give an example of a position someone who believes in communal voluntarism might take.

2. **Connect** How does Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” relate to this text?

3. **Connect** How do Thoreau’s ideas about government, which he discusses in “Civil Disobedience,” resemble those of Americans described in this text?

4. **Make a Judgment** Does the author take a positive, negative, or objective tone in his examination of American attitudes toward individualism? Support your response with evidence from the text.

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5. **Essential Question:** *What role does individualism play in American society?* What have you learned about the individual and society by reading this text?
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Sweet Land of... Conformity?

Americans aren't the rugged individuals we think we are

By Claude Fischer

June 6, 2010

Americans like to see themselves as rugged individualists, a nation defined by the idea that people should set their own course through life. Think of Clint Eastwood rendering justice, rule-bound superiors be damned. Think of Frank Sinatra singing “My Way.”

The idea that personal liberty defines America is deeply rooted, and shared across the political spectrum. The lifestyle radicals of the '60s saw themselves as heirs to this American tradition of self-expression; today, it energizes the Tea Party movement, marching to defend individual liberty from the smothering grasp of European-style collectivism.

But are Americans really so uniquely individualistic? Are we, for example, more committed individualists than people in those socialist-looking nations of Europe? The answer appears to be no.

For many years now, researchers worldwide have been conducting surveys to compare the values of people in different countries. And when it comes to questions about how much the respondents value the individual against the collective — that is, how much they give priority to individual interest over the demand of groups, or personal conscience over the orders of authority — Americans consistently answer in a way that favors the group over the individual. In fact, we are more likely to favor the group than Europeans are.

Surprising as it may sound, Americans are much more likely than Europeans to say that employees should follow a boss's orders even if the boss is wrong; to say that children “must” love their parents; and to believe that parents have a duty to sacrifice themselves for their children. We are more likely to defer to church leaders and to insist on abiding by the law. Though Americans do score high on a couple of aspects

of individualism, especially where it concerns government intervening in the market, in general we are likelier than Europeans to believe that individuals should go along and get along.

American individualism is far more complex than our national myths, or the soap-box rhetoric of right and left, would have it. It is not individualism in the libertarian sense, the idea that the individual comes before any group and that personal freedom comes before any allegiance to authority. Research suggests that Americans do adhere to a particular strain of liberty — one that emerged in the New World — in which freedom to choose your allegiance is tempered by the expectation that you won't stray from the values of the group you choose. In a political climate where "liberty" is frequently wielded as a rhetorical weapon but rarely discussed in a more serious way, grasping the limits of our notion of liberty might guide us to building America's future on a different philosophical foundation.

The image of America as the bastion of libertarianism is a long-established one. Our Founding Fathers stipulated a set of personal rights and freedoms in our key documents that was, by the standards of that day, radical. The quintessentially American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, in "Self-Reliance," extolled the person who does not defer to outside authority or compromise his principles for the sake of any collectivity — family, church, party, community, or nation.

This quality in the American character struck observers from overseas, including Alexis de Tocqueville, who in his 1830s book, "Democracy in America," famously tied the relatively new word "individualism" to what seemed so refreshingly new about the Americans. Popular culture today reinforces this image by making heroes of men (it's almost always men) who put principle above everything else, even if — perhaps especially if — that makes them loners.

But in modern America, when you look at real issues where individual rights conflict with group interests, Americans don't appear to see things this way at all. Over the last few decades, scholars around the world have collaborated to mount surveys of representative samples of people from different countries. The International Social Survey Programme, or ISSP, and the World Value Surveys, or WVS, are probably the longest-running, most reliable such projects. Starting with just a handful of countries, both now pose the same questions to respondents from dozens of nations.

Their findings suggest that in several major areas, Americans are clearly *less* individualistic than western Europeans. One topic pits individual conscience against the demands of the state. In 2006, the ISSP asked the question "In general, would you say that people should obey the law without exception, or are there exceptional occasions on which people should follow their consciences even if it means breaking the law?" At 45 percent, Americans were the least likely out of nine nationalities to say that people should at least on occasion follow their consciences — far fewer than, for example, the Swedes (70 percent) and the French (78 percent).

Similarly, in 2003, Americans turned out to be the most likely to embrace the statement “People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong.”

Such results contradict the message we send when we assign students the work of say, Henry David Thoreau, a follower of Emerson’s who wrote “Civil Disobedience,” or celebrate the bravery of Martin Luther King Jr. They contradict much of the justification for the Second Amendment, whose supporters see it as empowering the individual with a gun to say no to the state.

But what about more intimate arenas of life? In 1991, the ISSP asked respondents whether they agreed that “Right or wrong should be a matter of personal conscience.” Americans came in next to last of seven nationalities with 47 percent agreeing, one point ahead of the Norwegians, but almost 20 points behind the Dutch and more than 40 points behind the Austrians. Americans are also unlikely to put individual happiness before the institution of marriage — they were second most likely (after the British) to agree that even a childless couple should “stay together even if they don’t get along.” (The Italians, overwhelmingly Catholic, were much more likely to support divorce in these circumstances.) And Americans were the least likely, in the 1998 ISSP, to accept the idea that it might be acceptable for “a married person [to have] sexual relations with someone other than his or her husband or wife.” (Coming in first were — no surprise — the French, 31 percent of whom endorsed this sort of individual liberty.)

The nature of individualism is complex, however, and there are at least a couple of ways that Americans in the ISSP and similar surveys *do* appear more individualistic than Europeans. For one, Americans are usually the most likely to say that individuals determine their own fates. What happens to you is your own doing, not the product of external circumstances. For Americans, things are the way they are because individuals made choices.

Also, the closer survey questions get to matters of economics and government, the clearer it is that Americans are strong believers in *laissez-faire*. Americans are much likelier than Europeans to reject government or workers interfering with owners’ authority to run their businesses. Americans are the most likely to choose freedom over equality, when equality is defined as a situation in which “nobody is underprivileged and...social class differences are not so strong.” Not surprisingly, Americans are the most hostile to having the government redress economic inequality.

Nonetheless, the libertarianism of Emerson does not characterize Americans’ broader understandings of the role of the individual in society. In fact, Americans seem much more willing to submerge personal liberty to the group than Europeans are.

Yet, the notions of individualism and liberty have lost none of their rhetorical power in today's America — we clearly see ourselves as individualists, far more so than Europeans do. How do we explain this contradiction, between the celebration of America as the land of individual freedom and Americans' actual tendency to favor the group?

The answer, I think, is that Americans have historically adhered to a distinctive view of the individual's place in society, a view that can be called "communal voluntarism."

Americans insist on the reality and value of individual free choice, including, critically, free choice to join or leave groups, be they companies or countries. However, Americans also believe that, once individuals are members of the group, they must be loyal. You could think of this philosophy as "love it or leave it" — with the understanding that you aren't forced to join and are genuinely free to leave.

In the Old World, communities were more commonly imposed on individuals, and constraining. Traditionally, one was born into a clan, ethnicity, church, village, or nation and pretty much locked into it. In the New World, with the noted exception of Indians and slaves, membership became a matter of free choice and voluntary commitment.

Americans believe in contracts — or covenants, to use religious language. Our culture insists that if you marry, if you take a job, if you join a club, and so on, you are signing an explicit or implicit contract to cooperate and conform. If the group no longer works for you, the door is open. American-style individualism lies in the freedom to choose; American-style collectivism lies in the commitment to the group that freely choosing entails.

We can see this impulse, too, in the very earliest days of American settlement. In 1630, John Winthrop, who would be the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, addressed his shipmates sailing to the New World. They were a mix of Puritan refugees and those simply traveling to seek their fortunes. He urged each one to submit to the group: "We must be knit together in this work as one man...[W]e must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor, and suffer together, always having before our eyes...our community as members of the same body." How un-Emersonian; how un-libertarian to urge such submission to the "body." But how American. Winthrop's plea underlines the choice; he is asking his listeners to voluntarily submit. The settlers simultaneously made the highly individualistic choice of leaving their old ties behind and the communal choice of binding themselves with others in a new community.

Communal voluntarism characterized the Protestant congregations that sprung up all over the United States in the late 18th and the 19th centuries. They provided the archetype of the American community — freely formed but highly absorbing. Americans are especially likely to switch denominations and churches, but also to be religiously enthusiastic members of the ones they are in. Americans behave much the same with regard to neighborhoods, clubs, friendships, and even marriages. Western

Europeans' connections to churches are almost a mirror image: born into a lifetime membership in a national religion, they are more often indifferent to religion.

There are several strands to what makes Americans a distinctive people. One strand is certainly the antigovernment impulse; and one is the embrace in the 19th-century of laissez-faire ideas. But another, perhaps greater strand is the communalism that emphasizes making, in Winthrop's terms, "others' conditions our own." If we want to celebrate Americanism, we can emphasize dumping taxed tea off the ship — or we can, with even more justification, emphasize that we are all in this boat together.