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**Bakalářská práce**

Adéla Zeimannová

**Emerson's Self-reliance as a Core Value of American Society**

Emersonova Soběstačnost Jako Podstatná Hodnota Americké Společnosti

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Vedoucí práce (Thesis supervisor): Prof. David L. Robbins, PhD

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V Praze dne 14. srpna 2019

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## Abstract

From the time of the establishment of American society till now, themes of self-reliance and freedom belong to the most recognized values of the U.S. Studies have shown that the values of American society, even though they adapted to political and sociological changes, share a common base with their original form. This thesis researches specifically the role of self-reliance in relation to an American essayist, writer and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his direct influence in establishing self-reliance along with freedom and individualism as one of the main values of American society. This study aims to determine how Emerson's theory of self-reliance and his ideology influence the thinking of modern America, and whether the values cultivated by him are still present in modern U.S. society. The focus of this research lies primarily on how Emerson's ideology has implanted into the minds of Americans from the time of the changing nineteenth century American society, and the birth of this ideology, to its present-day significance in modern-day America.

The main source of Emerson's thinking and refinement of his theory of self-reliance is his essay entitled "Self-reliance," in which he defines his theory. His other works, primarily his other essays, *Nature*, "History," and his sermons and journals serve to expand and support the ideas presented in "Self-reliance." For the purpose of explaining Emerson's theory further, literature analyzing Emerson's ideas like George Kateb's *Emerson and Self-reliance*, David Lee Robbins's, "Emerson the Nihilist, Redux Atque Resartus," and Robert D. Richardson's Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, was used. To create a picture of the U.S. society and mentality, in addition to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which offers an extensive account of the U.S. society in the 1830s, books on American sociology like Claude S. Fisher's *Made in America: A social History of American Culture and Character*, were used. Books on U.S. history, mainly George B. Tindall's, *America: A Narrative History*, were used to give background for the most influential changes of the American society, and offer more information about U.S. culture and development of American character.

The first part of the thesis is dedicated to analyzing Emerson's thoughts while describing the background of the development of U.S. society and character. Second part of the text contextualizes Emerson's theory of self-reliance and his thinking with the mentality of modern America, and U.S. society. Surveys and polls from recent years, mainly surveys conducted by Pew Research Center and the Atlantic/Aspen Institute, together with literature on American sociology and mentality served to create an image of the modern U.S. society, and to determine the influence of Emerson's thinking on modern America.

Based on a review of literature on American society, and surveys and polls conducted in recent years, analysis of the respondents' answers demonstrates the rather great amount of impact that Emerson's thinking has had on the modern U.S. society. The values of self-reliance, individualism and freedom, greatly developed and encouraged by Emerson, are still supported by many Americans. Many Americans also see self-reliance, individualism and freedom, as core values of the society, and as values which make up the American character. The values are deeply embedded in American mentality, and they influence a number of decisions Americans take, both in private and public life.

Od doby vzniku americké společnosti až doposud, patří soběstačnost a svoboda mezi nejvíce rozpoznávané hodnoty této společnosti. Studie ukazují, že právě tyto hodnoty americké společnosti, i přes přizpůsobení politickým a sociologickým změnám, stále spojuje jejich původní společný základ. Tato práce zkoumá výhradně roli soběstačnosti ve spojení s americkým esejistou, spisovatelem a filozofem Ralphem Waldo Emersonem, a jeho přímým vlivem na ustanovení soběstačnosti, společně s hodnotami svobody a individualismu jako jedny z nejvýznamnějších hodnot americké společnosti. Cílem této práce je určit, zdali Emersonova teorie soběstačnosti a jeho ideologie ovlivňují myšlení moderní americké společnosti, a zdali hodnoty jím obohacené jsou nadále přítomny v moderní Americe. Výzkum této práce se soustředí především na to, jak se Emersonova ideologie byla schopna vstřípnit do myšlení Američanů od doby devatenáctého století, doby zrodu této ideologie, až po svůj význam v moderní Americe.

Hlavním zdrojem Emersonových myšlenek se stala jeho esej stejnojmenného názvu, „Soběstačnost,“ ve které je tato teorie definována. Další jeho práce, především jeho další eseje, *Příroda*, „Historie,“ společně se sermony a deníky pomáhají s rozšířením a podporou myšlenek vyjádřených v „Soběstačnosti.“ Za účelem hlubšího vysvětlení Emersonovy teorie byla použita literatura, která dále analyzuje Emersonovy myšlenky, jako *Emerson a Soběstačnost* od George Kateba, Davida Lee Robbinse, „Emerson, Nihilista, Redux Atque Resartus“ a *Emerson: Mysl v Ohni* od Roberta D. Richardsona Jr. K vytvoření představy o americké společnosti a její mentalitě byly použity, spolu s *Demokracií v Americe* od Alexis de Tocquevilla, popisující Americkou společnost ve třicátých letech devatenáctého století, knihy popisující americkou sociologii jako je *Vyrobeno v Americe: Sociální Historie Americké Kultury a Charakteru*. Dále byly použity knihy týkající se americké historie, převážně kniha *Dějiny Spojených Států Amerických* od George B. Tindalla, za účelem popisu nejvýznamnějších událostí amerických dějin, podání dalších informací o americké kultuře a vývoji amerického charakteru.

První část práce je věnována analýze a popisu Emersonových myšlenek na pozadí popisu vývoje americké společnosti. Druhá část se věnuje kontextualizaci Emersonovy teorie soběstačnosti a jeho myšlenek s myšlením moderní Ameriky a americké společnosti. Průzkumy a dotazníky z nedávných let, zejména průzkumy vedené Pew Research centrem a institutem Atlantic/Aspen, společně s literaturou popisující sociologii a mentality Američanů, slouží k vytvoření představy moderní společnosti Spojených Států a k určení míry vlivu Emersonových myšlenek na moderní Ameriku.

Na základě těchto průzkumů podpořenými literárními publikacemi o americké společnosti, analýza odpovědí účastníků průzkumu ukazuje, jak velký vliv Emersonovo myšlení má na moderní americkou společnost. Hodnoty jako soběstačnost, individualismus a svoboda, rozvinuty a podporovány Emersonem, nadále zůstávají být podporovány mnoha Američany. Část Američanů vidí tyto hodnoty jako hlavní hodnoty americké společnosti, a jako hodnoty, které tvoří základ amerického charakteru. Tyto hodnoty jsou hluboko zakořeněny v americké mentalitě, a ovlivňují rozhodnutí Američanů nejen v osobním, ale i ve veřejném životě.

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# 1 Introduction

American society is believed to be established on the grounds of three core values; freedom, self-reliance, and individualism. These values continue to develop and modify under the pressures of the ever-changing U.S. society; however, various research demonstrates that most Americans still see them as quintessential attributes of their society. Specifically, the values of freedom and self-reliance are viewed as the ones which characterize the American character, and which are believed to be important to what it means to be American. These values appear with the very establishment of the U.S. society in eighteenth century, and continue to develop under the influence of many new ideologies and theories that formulated at that time. For the purpose of this thesis, the works and ideas of an American author and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson are the most important. Primarily his essay entitled “Self-Reliance,” his sermons and other essays. Emerson develops the original idea of being independent and making decisions for one’s own sake into the theory of self-reliance, a method of continuous self-discovery and self-assertion. He believes that every individual should realize their purpose, and rely on his or her own knowledge and instincts.

This thesis researches the idea of Emerson’s self-reliance and his other major ideas in relevance to modern American society, and attempts to show whether these ideas still bare significance in modern America, and if so, how deeply ingrained they are in American culture. The following chapters are dedicated to historical background of Emerson’s period and the most influential events of the nineteenth century to offer a picture of how U.S. society looked like and thought at the time. This is followed by an analysis of Emerson’s most influential works, his essays, sermons and journals, which contain his most valuable ideas in relation to the topic of self-reliance, freedom, and individualism. The second part of the thesis takes Emerson’s ideas and theories and puts them into context with the thinking of modern U.S. society. With the help of surveys and polls from recent years conducted on the topics of American values, the myth of the American Dream, and U.S. society by research centers and public polling organizations, supported by literature dedicated to social history of the U.S., and to the values valorized by Emerson, the image of the modern American society’s thinking and behavior is constructed. This data is then analyzed together with Emerson’s ideas in an attempt to

determine their impact and to show the scope of presence of Emerson's ideology in U.S. mentality and society.

## 2 Historical Background

### 2.1 Historical Background of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

In the first era of existence of the U.S., from the moment of gaining independence in the year 1776 till the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the priority was on gaining freedom from the oppressive power of the British Empire and developing the newfound independence, while preserving the tenets of puritan theology. The following hundred years continue to bring many changes upon the United States. While the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a critical period for the establishment of the American people and their nation, in terms of escaping from European ideas of religion and ways of life to establish their own without the influence of the Crown, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of many new ideologies, religions, inventions and innovations. Within the span of these hundred years the U.S. went through a series of events that changed the country forever. Among the determining events that shaped the new American society of the 1800s were the War of 1812, the Civil War, the abolition of slavery, and the following era of industrialization.

The War of 1812 was, as Eugene M. Wait describes, “the final hostility between the mother and the offspring, between the British nation and the American nation, between monarchy and republicanism.”<sup>1</sup> The U.S. was dealing with many foreign issues, mainly with the problem of Britain being a powerful competitor in the export of goods. Under the pressure of Napoleon’s imposing a blockade on the British and forcing the U.S. to choose on whose side they were going to stand, the U.S. congress resorted to war in hopes of defeating Britain to gain freedom over the market. Due to both nations’ struggling with other issues, the conflict was resolved by a treaty in 1814. George B. Tindall concludes: “one by one, demands were dropped on both sides, until the envoys agreed to end the war, return the prisoners, restore the previous boundaries, and settle nothing else.”<sup>2</sup> Although the conflict did not resolve the issues of shipping rights, U.S. patriotic sentiment was reawakened in again repulsing British military initiatives. Eugene M. Wait argues that “The majority saw in Britain tyranny and corruption. They believed America was an example of how freedom would work elsewhere.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene M. Wait, *America and the War of 1812* (New York: Kroshka Books, 1999) 74.

<sup>2</sup> George B. Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006) 348.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene M. Wait, *America and the War of 1812*, 94.

The events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that had the biggest impact on the succeeding development of the U.S. were the Civil War and abolition of slavery. After the War of 1812, writes George B. Tindall, Americans of multiple interests “began to transform their young nation”<sup>4</sup> in various ways. Encouraged by economic prosperity and a feeling of success, they “experienced a new surge of nationalism.”<sup>5</sup> Over the first forty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both the North and the South underwent economic development in different ways. As observed by Tindal: “By the time Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, many Americans had decided that the nation could not survive half-slave and half-free; something had to give.”<sup>6</sup> The cost the U.S. paid for the Civil War was immense; not only were many lives lost and much of the country destroyed, but it brought multiple economical, and political problems as well. Richard F. Selcer writes:

When the war ended, the Union was preserved, and slavery abolished but at a huge cost. The American Civil War was the single most destructive conflict in Western history until World War I, exceeding any of Napoleon’s wars, the imperial wars of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the wars of the Reformation.<sup>7</sup>

After the war, crucial aspects of U.S. society were in question. Former slaves found themselves in another dire situation, now free but still without property, home, or education. Many other citizens were also struggling with poverty and trying to reconstruct the nation’s economic and political infrastructure. These events had a major influence on the following development of the country; new ideas, innovations, and improvements which emerged from and accompanied them, contributed to the growth of the new democratic society.

## **2.2 The 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Society**

U.S. society in the nineteenth century was undergoing many social and political changes. In part due to the immense economic growth, the character of the society underwent new stresses, which called for restatement of characteristic American values. As Claude S. Fischer notes, “Being able to count on food, shelter, and safety from one day to the next helped more Americans gain confidence in their own power and a sense

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<sup>4</sup> George B. Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*, 357.

<sup>5</sup> George B. Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*, 358.

<sup>6</sup> George B. Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*, 527.

<sup>7</sup> Richard F. Selcer, *Civil War America 1850 to 1875* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006) 223.

of self-reliance.”<sup>8</sup> The fast growing economy also brought new technologies and innovations; cities were expanded. Governments used this economic expansion for “building roads, subsidizing canals, selling public land, [...], dredging harbors, circulating cash, facilitating credit, and providing legal cover for investors.”<sup>9</sup> This allowed for an immense advancement of the quality of life of American citizens. Families could take over free land, and pay for it later, which again improved their way of life. Farmers moved on to crops which gained more profit, like cotton or tobacco. Due to the enormous growth of technology, they “thrived as new transportation technologies cut the cost of shipping from dollars to nickels and dimes.”<sup>10</sup> New systems of production also helped with lowering the prices of food, this way even the quality of life of the poorest families was able to get better. U.S. society had always been very different from its European parent cultures, and now new challenges called for definitive reformulation of those differences. In the nineteenth century growing economy of an independent U.S., a broader and more numerous middle class started to prosper, be it from farming or from business. According to Fisher and his research on American sociology, this allowed for a completely new culture to be built: “They [the middle classes] moved to particular neighborhoods and joined particular clubs and churches. They committed themselves to faith, sobriety, restraint, and the pursuit of gentility.”<sup>11</sup> They were able to establish the future middle class of the modern America. In general, the living conditions of all citizens enhanced, despite this, there were still many that struggled. However, there was not much that they could do to face the newly growing industrial capitalism. Then the Civil War came and while it “devastated many lives, ..., it did not radically alter the American economy,”<sup>12</sup> at least not in the North. At this time, when urban industry continued to expand, America opened its doors for more immigrants to come and join the new prospering society which contributed to more social changes. Millions of immigrants came to “work in the factories and on the construction crews of the booming cities.”<sup>13</sup> And the U.S. started to become even more sociologically diversified. It was at this time, that America started to be seen as the land of opportunity, mainly because of the sheer amount of work possibilities. In Fischer’s words, “Nineteenth-century America offered

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<sup>8</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 17.

<sup>9</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 46.

economic opportunity everywhere, [...], It drew tens of millions of immigrants who, tantalized by letters from relatives who had risked it all before them, scraped together their lira or rubles or krona for boat fare.”<sup>14</sup> The economy continued to grow, the period saw the rapid growth of industry in the North and the development of a national market economy in both industrial and agricultural products and with that the society faced new challenges. In reaction to this, new ideologies, groups, and movements formed that tried to deal with these changes.

## 2.3 Transcendentalism

### 2.3.1 Introduction

The events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, happening both on American soil and beyond it, greatly influenced the mentality of the American society of that time. Many new ideologies and attitudes were introduced that were reacting to the thinking of the past, either revising it or rejecting it. The major dispute was the reaction against rationalism. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century there were considerable changes happening in the religious sphere. The Second Great Awakening, as John E. Findling writes:

refers to a period of intense religious activity in history of the early republic, from about 1790 to 1840. It was marked by significant changes in the nature of the major Calvinist denominations – Methodism, Presbyterianism, and Congregationalism, and by new outreaches in social service and social reform.<sup>15</sup>

These efforts later developed into movements with bigger importance; one of the most influential movements that developed in those years was Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism followed European Romanticism, celebrating the mind and the spiritual rather than material mechanism and reason. The movement was mainly concentrated in New England, although it had some influence in other parts of the country. The Transcendentalists attempted to “free” themselves from already relatively liberal Unitarian religious ideas. As Barbara L. Packer notes: “the Transcendentalists began to think of themselves as something more than a group of young clergy eager to escape the circumspection of traditional Unitarian associations for regions of freer

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<sup>14</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> John E. Findling and Frank E. Thackeray, *What Happened?: An Encyclopedia of Events that Changed America Forever* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2011) 1.

speech.”<sup>16</sup> Their main ideas rested upon the basis of the superiority of the consciousness, the power of thought. The term transcendental refers to pre-experiential structures in the mind/consciousness—Kant’s “categories” for processing and categorizing experience. Kant, as philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his essay “The Transcendentalist”:

replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them  
Transcendental forms.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3.2 The Establishment of the Movement

The movement began as a small group of thinkers, writers, and social reformers, who met and discussed matters at the members’ homes in the area of Boston, forming the so called ‘Transcendental club.’ In addition to Ralph Waldo Emerson, considered the movement’s leader, and Germanic scholar Frederic Hedge, whose name was used more often than “Transcendental” by its members to designate their “club,” scholars agree that the group also included:

the philosopher and educator Bronson Alcott (1799-1888); the liberal thinker Orestes Augustus Brownson (1803-1876); the elder Channing’s nephews, William Ellery Channing (1818-1901), a mediocre poet, and William Henry Channing (1810-1884), a journalist; the Unitarian pastor and Christian socialist Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), the first American woman-journalist and the author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), a pioneering American book on feminism; Elizabeth Peabody (1804-1894), who was interested in social reform and education; and the mystical poet Jones Very (1813-1880).<sup>18</sup>

After in-person meetings of the “club” were discontinued in 1840, the reflections of its members continued to be shared, from 1840 until 1844, in a “transcendentalist” journal called *The Dial*, edited by Margaret Fuller and Emerson. The ideas of the transcendentalists come from the teachings of Unitarianism;

a religious movement brought from England at the end of the eighteenth century by the scientist Joseph Priestly. It stressed the single personality of God in contrast to the Trinity, advocated the

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<sup>16</sup> Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2007) 62.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” *Miscellanies* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1912) 275.

<sup>18</sup> Justin Quinn et al., *Lectures on American Literature*, Third Edition (Univerzita Karlova v Praze: Nakladatelství Karolinum, 2011) 81.

free will of individual, and opposed the doctrines of original sin and eternal punishment of sinners.<sup>19</sup>

This philosophy then developed under the influence of the German philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Schelling. The movement is frequently described as “the most significant romantic attempt to express, both in philosophical and in aesthetic terms, the unity of the individual supported by the vision of universal unity of nature and human soul.”<sup>20</sup> Transcendentalism in New England is considered to be one of the most developed and unrestrained forms of Idealist philosophy. According to Octavius Brooks Frothingham: “[in New England] the philosophy assumed full proportions, produced fruit according to its kind, created a new social order for itself, or rather showed what sort of social order it would create under favoring conditions.”<sup>21</sup> Many scholars regard Emerson’s essay *Nature* (1836) as a manifesto, which contains a preliminary formulation of Transcendentalist ideas. A definition of the movement itself can be found in another of Emerson’s essays, “The Transcendentalist” (1842), where he describes some characteristics of Transcendentalists and equates transcendentalism with idealism; “What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842.”<sup>22</sup>

*Nature* was written by Emerson in 1836, and the reaction to such an innovative text was twofold; “Emerson’s ‘Nature’ broke through the shell of accepted opinions on a very essential subject: true, but only five hundred copies were sold in twelve years; critics and philosophers could make nothing of it.”<sup>23</sup> To Emerson, nature meant “the return to reason and faith.”<sup>24</sup> He believed that only a few, as yet, have the ability truly to perceive nature in its full form; “only those whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other.”<sup>25</sup> For Emerson, the way to approach the world is not to rely on what was written in the past but to create new experiences based on what is presented before man today, not what was then. In *Nature*, Emerson introduces the main thought of Transcendentalism, the importance of unity of nature with the soul;

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<sup>19</sup> Justin Quinn et al., *Lectures on American Literature*, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Justin Quinn et al., *Lectures on American Literature*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1897) 105.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” *Miscellanies*, 267.

<sup>23</sup> Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History*, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1836) 12.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 11.

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name,  
NATURE.<sup>26</sup>

For Emerson, this “external” nature doesn’t impose itself on us; rather, we impose our nature on the world, which is constructed by us, a work of art, of artifice, of each individual consciousness.

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<sup>26</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 7.

## 3 Ralph Waldo Emerson

### 3.1 Introduction

It is evident from the references stated above that Emerson was an essential figure of American Transcendentalism. Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American philosopher, writer and a poet born in Boston, Massachusetts, on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 1803. His thinking is regarded as “to have established the project and generated the problematics for most American literature and philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> In both literature and philosophy he dealt with the ideas of consciousness, the self, nature, God, religion, morality, and the individual. In his lifetime he wrote many works; ranging from sermons, essays and lectures to poems and works of instruction—the common unifying theme being human experience and individual consciousness, where the main thought was that all that man does is construct every aspect of his life, all value through this individual consciousness. Which means, as Professor David Lee Robbins writes, that:

In this Emersonian mode, we happen to experience with a consequent priority given to the experiencer over the experienced – which illustrates the persistence of the idealism that has characterized the bulk of American literary and philosophical production (at least) since Emerson’s time.<sup>2</sup>

To Emerson, the discovery of the self and the realization of one’s own potential was a fundamental commitment of life. Throughout his work, the topic of humans’ being responsible for their own fate recurs many times; in a like manner, the subject of religion and spirituality constantly resurfaces. Emerson attempted to show that one is able to succeed once they discover their own potential, Professor Robbins in his essay, which examines several of Emerson’s works, writes:

One of Emerson’s goals was to revitalize in human consciousnesses the energy or power available for creation and re-creation, construction and re-construction, that was all too often associated by them, alienated and abdicated by them to, god – the creator or first cause, as it was often phrased.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Quinn et al., *Lectures on American Literature*, 83.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Quinn et al., *Lectures on American Literature*, 83.

<sup>3</sup> David Lee Robbins, “Emerson the Nihilist, Redux Atque Resartus,” *Between Romanticism & The Crisis of Modernity*, ed. David Lee Robbins (Univerzita Karlova v Praze: Litteraria Pragensia, 2014) 98.

## 3.2 Ideologies and Beliefs Introduced by Ralph Waldo Emerson

### 3.2.1 Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson earned the title of one of the most influential American writers for his contributions in both American literature and philosophy. In “[h]is preoccupation with and the study of individual subjective consciousness,” observes Professor David Lee Robbins, “their self-fashioning and construction of their worlds became dominant.”<sup>4</sup> Emerson’s early writing can be described as texts recording one’s journey to self-understanding, where a certain development of thought is visible. Susan L. Roberson even goes as far as suggesting that Emerson’s sermons can be read as “a kind of autobiographical text that unfolds the story of its author and ‘the crises of [his] fate.’”<sup>5</sup> His sermons were written under the influence of the theologically liberal Unitarian church, which he entered in his early years for “regeneration of mind, manners, inward and outward estate.”<sup>6</sup> In his sermons, Emerson deals with many of the topics he later develops in his most fundamental works, he touches upon ideas of religion and one’s attitude to Christianity, the importance of discovering the self and realizing one’s potential—themes later expanded on and cultivated in more detailed essays and lectures, like *Nature*, “The American Scholar” and “Self-Reliance.”

### 3.2.2 Knowledge, Self-reflection, Self-discovery and Religion

One of the many topics Emerson touches upon in his writings is the issue of being ashamed of one’s religion. In Sermon XXVIII, Emerson retells the story of Paul of Tarsus, who despite being surrounded by “timid friends and fanatic foes, and before the ragged front of Roman persecution,”<sup>7</sup> was not afraid to proclaim his religion and belief in God. The reason why one should not be ashamed of “the gospel of Christ” is, because “it is the power of God unto salvation, . . ., because it hath divine power for the salvation of every believer.”<sup>8</sup> To Emerson, believing in Christ is the ultimate path to salvation, and he suggests that “if we conceive the feeling that animated Paul, it is easy to adopt the language of Paul.”<sup>9</sup> He regarded the belief in Christ, as one forms his/her own

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<sup>4</sup> Justin Quinn et.al., *Lectures on American Literature*, 83.

<sup>5</sup> Susan L. Roberson, *Emerson in His Sermons: A Man-Made Self* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995) 2.

<sup>6</sup> David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon XXVIII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. von Frank, 4 Volumes (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989-1992) 232.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon XXVIII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 232.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon XXVIII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 232.

understanding of Him, as one of the most important things in a person's life. He went as far as preaching the idea of Christianity being a part of one's identity in the same sense as nationality; "We are Christians by the same title we are New England men, that herein we were born and reared."<sup>10</sup> To be precise, Emerson's idea of "believing in Christ" is rather different than that of traditional Christianity, and, ultimately, from that of Unitarianism. While the traditional idea of Christianity is based on the bible, Emerson's idea of religion is based on the idea of human nature; individual's own understanding of Christ in his or her own way is superior to that of "collective" comprehension of the gospel of Christ. He preferred to regard, think about, and deal with people as individuals, as "churches of one." As Robert D. Richardson Jr. writes: "He wished to feel Christianity with feelings as strong as Paul's. He did not wish merely to report Paul's feelings as though such things were impossible in the modern world."<sup>11</sup> Besides dealing with the idea of feeling shame for one's religion, he also explores the problems of religious teaching and religion itself. He condemns the thought of religion being told through empty phrases, as Emerson rather regards it as the individual's own understanding of it; he believes in eloquence, truth and simplicity of the statements—for him under those circumstances, "nobody could look down upon it [religion]."<sup>12</sup> As he asks in *Nature*, "Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?"<sup>13</sup> Emerson defends Christianity and religion by saying that the only reason why it would have so many enemies is because of "a defect in its teaching."<sup>14</sup> When he himself began his ministry he took this ideology with him and approached the issue very seriously. Some of his ideas were met with criticism; nonetheless, Emerson continued on with his preaching with a renewed fervor. Preaching to him, or at least its usage was "too strained., . . ., It walks in a narrow round; it harps on a few and ancient strings."<sup>15</sup> Later, he expresses this sentiment similarly in one of his essays; "If therefore a man claims to know and speak of God and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old moldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not."<sup>16</sup> He continues on even further: "Man is timid and apologetic;

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXVIII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 232.

<sup>11</sup> Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 91.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 232.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXVIII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 232.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXVIII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 235.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-reliance," *Essays: First series* (Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1850) 58. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

he is no longer upright; he dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage.” (58) By insisting on this, Emerson denounces teachings of the Bible which rely only on the scripture and voices of the past. Thus, in Sermon XXVIII, he vows not to be afraid of innovation and introduction of new allusions; this way his teaching would adapt to the time and situation of his audience instead of his denounced repetition of phrases.

Emerson’s most influential ideology is founded on the belief in oneself and one’s ability—a concept which appears in his earliest works and is later greatly developed in “Self-Reliance.” The idea of transcendentalist individualism previously defined in chapter 2 is adapted and expanded through Emerson’s doctrine of self-reflection. The concept of a person becoming a master of his or her own fate is expressed countless times in Emerson’s works. To Emerson, the belief in one’s self was as important as religion for a person’s success in life. He also suggests that, between the individual and divinity, there is a direct link. First, in order to become “the arbiters of our condition in life,”<sup>17</sup> Emerson asserts the necessity of getting to know the self. This philosophy is based on the idea that the ambition in a person’s life is to do well—“to make best use we can of all the powers committed to us, it becomes an imperative duty to explore our own strength.”<sup>18</sup> Reading history and learning about the past and its heroic figures is not enough, according to Emerson. He suggests looking for one’s own nature and virtue in these readings;

When I am disgusted by the bloody annals of despotism and hideous profligacy, I learn, with alarm, to what depths of depravity, my passions will lead me, if I surrender myself to their solicitations. When I read the story of martyrs of religion and liberty, I see how God has proportioned the strength of the body and the mind; and that my mind may be trained to such firmness of virtue, as to be superior to all torment which the body can bear and live.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, by reading and learning about the events of the past, man has the opportunity to realize his own qualities and faults, and to gain valuable knowledge on how to utilize them. Emerson elaborates on this idea in another of his essays, entitled “History,” where he insists: “The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text and books the commentary.”<sup>20</sup> The element of learning is essential, for Emerson, on the journey of realizing one’s ability. He posits the idea of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon XXVII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 227.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon XXVII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 226.

<sup>19</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon XXVII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 227.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” *Essays: First series* (Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1850) 7.

world's existing "for the education of each man."<sup>21</sup> "All education is to accustom him to trust himself," says Emerson in one of his speeches, "[to] discriminate between his higher and lower thoughts, exert the timid faculties until they are robust, and thus train him to self-help, until he ceases to be an underling, a tool, and becomes a benefactor."<sup>22</sup>

Emerson emphasizes the need for self-reflection before putting blame on others or on circumstances; he believes in acting on oneself first before acting on others. To Emerson, learning and trying to be better means encouraging other people to do the same; "For you do something to raise the standard of virtue in the world which is always the average of the virtue of individuals."<sup>23</sup> He criticizes members of society for justifying their shortcomings by excuses such as being exposed to bad customs. "Men measure what is expected of them by what they see without," he writes in sermon XXXVIII, "and not by what they feel within." "They forget that they are the very persons who should *originate* customs, bring severe virtue, lofty action into use."<sup>24</sup> People pity themselves despite the situation not being as bad as they say. "There are moods in which we court suffering," writes Emerson, "in the hope that here at least we shall find reality, [...]. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit."<sup>25</sup> In Emerson's own experience, the only thing grief teaches is "to know how shallow it is."<sup>26</sup> To Emerson's own experience, society is merely a mirror that reflects one's deeds back onto the individual. If one behaves according to how he wants to be treated, the society will reflect that consideration. Emerson establishes a direct link between the self and responsibility. He proposes: "We forget that we are things of the world, that the reason why society is sensual or dishonest or illiberal or malignant or calumnious is that we are so."<sup>27</sup> "Do you wonder that, being unsound, you were found to be unsound?" he asks, "Have you not learned, what all events teach you, that, nothing can save you from the ill issues of your own acts?"<sup>28</sup> Emerson suggests that people forget their feeling of responsibility, and instead go through life without purpose, wondering what will befall them. To this,

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<sup>21</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," *Essays: First series*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Speech at the Annual Meeting of the Free Religious Association," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1884) 889.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermons XXXVIII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 295.

<sup>24</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermons XXXVIII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 292.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," *Essays: Second series* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, & Company, 1855) 52.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," *Essays: Second series*, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermons XXXVIII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 291.

<sup>28</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXVII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 228.

Emerson replies: “Be not deceived. You carry your fortunes in your own hand.”<sup>29</sup> Learning to own up to one’s own mistakes and not giving up on getting to know oneself is the basis for becoming the creator of one’s future and fate.

Above all, Emerson puts trust in the individual and his/her own ability. He encourages believing in one’s own thought in comparison to submitting to the thoughts of others. Thus, to Emerson, speaking one’s mind and believing one’s opinion means to believe in yourself and believing in God’s power of endowing the self with gifts worth expression. “Trust thyself:” Emerson urges in his essay on “Self-Reliance,” the “heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.” (41) For Emerson, as Professor David Lee Robbins writes: “the moral law is the organic law of self-empowerment, of constantly placing oneself in a more survival positive situation.”<sup>30</sup> “Self-trust is the essence of heroism,” writes Emerson in another one of his essays, “It is the state of the soul at war, and its ultimate objects are the last defiance of falsehood and wrong, and the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agents.”<sup>31</sup> To Emerson, “Each mind has its own method.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the process of self-discovery and self-reflection takes many forms; there is no singular way of getting to know oneself. Given this fact, Emerson puts much emphasis on individual experience and individual consciousness. Emerson’s theory of idealism stems from Immanuel Kant’s transcendental philosophy; to be more precise, it is an adaptation of Kant’s philosophy. Professor Robbins notes: It is “an adaptation in which the uniqueness and subjectivity of each individual consciousness was emphasized to a much greater extent than in Kant’s approach, which tended to focus on the universal characteristics shared by all human consciousness.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, to Emerson, the experiences and thoughts of the individual are superior to the experiences and thoughts of the “society.” Emerson considers individual experience anterior to any subsequent, less reliable, and less authentic “collective” experience. “Every reform was once a private opinion, [...]”<sup>34</sup> claims Emerson. “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think,” (46) is the basis of the Emersonian idea of self-reliance. He urges each

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<sup>29</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon XXVII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 228.

<sup>30</sup> David Lee Robbins, “Emerson the Nihilist, Redux Atque Resartus,” 110.

<sup>31</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Heroism,” *Essays: First series* (Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1850) 229.

<sup>32</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Intellect,” *Essays: First series*, 300.

<sup>33</sup> David Lee Robbins, “Emerson the Nihilist, Redux Atque Resartus,” 100.

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” *Essays: First series*, 4.

individual not to conform to others' ideas and opinions, not to be ashamed for putting one's own needs before the needs of others. Too many people, he notes "do not appreciate the value of themselves."<sup>35</sup> Emerson believes that the reason why so many people fail to recognize their ability is because;

they are full of superstitions about fortune, or the power of circumstances, or the laws of destiny, of which they think themselves victims, (and so they are, if so they think themselves,) and overlook the secret power of the human mind over circumstances, and its ability to make its own fate.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, Emerson insists that man is the master of his own fate and that "no events, prosperous or adverse, befall us, of which we cannot find a reason in the inward history of ourselves."<sup>37</sup>

Emerson considers the journey to self-discovery to be intertwined with divinity. "Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul," writes Emerson. He sees spirituality as something always present. He proposes that "the gospel of Jesus Christ has added an infinite worth to the spiritual life, by the objects it proposes."<sup>38</sup> To aspire to perfection and bettering oneself is one of the imperatives of Christianity; "the gospel teaches you to act for yourself, . . . , It teaches you to cease from this poor shuffling to shift your responsibility to any other shoulders. It cannot be done."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, he adds "When a man lives with God, his voice shall be sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn." (60) To Emerson, every action that one performs is a result of one's effort. Everything one does has consequences, that one must endure. He insists on recognizing one's gift given by God, and using it to raise the standard of society through bettering oneself. He declares: "If we live truly, we shall see truly." (59) What Emerson perceives as the biggest gift of God is "a Teacher and teaching is the perpetual end and office of all things."<sup>40</sup> The Teacher here, that Emerson talks about, is "the Spirit of Truth"—the personal experience of each individual, manifested in the constructive (and exemplary) use of his/her experience by each self-reliant individual—always present, always

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<sup>35</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXVII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 226.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXVII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 226.

<sup>37</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXVII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 228.

<sup>38</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXVII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 226.

<sup>39</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon XXXVIII," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 293.

<sup>40</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sermon CLXV," *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 210.

speaking, every day teaching its lessons and “exposing some of the falsehoods that have deceived us.”<sup>41</sup> To this Emerson adds;

If you discern that every step you take not only enables you to make another, but also brings you within reach of influences before inert, that your life is like the Day, which not only shows more objects every moment, but also brings out new properties in every particular object, you will then accept Instruction as the greatest gift of God, and anxiously put yourself in the attitude of preparation.<sup>42</sup>

To this, in his musings on spiritual laws, he adds: “There is a soul at the centre of nature and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe. [...] There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word.”<sup>43</sup> Every man has the ability to prosper and gain success, suggests Emerson, the only thing he needs to do in order to achieve this is to trust in himself and in the gospel of Christ—understood in her or his own particular way by each individual, each “church of one.”

### 3.2.3 The Philosophy of Self-Reliance

All the ideas and theories introduced above come together in one of Emerson’s most influential works: his essay entitled “Self-Reliance.” Emerson’s theory of self-reliance appears not only in this essay, but it resurfaces in various shapes and forms in his other writings, which help with forming the complete idea of what Emerson terms “self-reliance.” The philosophy of self-reliance is considered to be the process of self-discovery and self-realization that leads to individuality. George Kateb argues that “Emerson’s word for individualism is chiefly self-reliance.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the concept of self-reliance is regarded as a central idea of Emersonian individualism. But what is the philosophy of self-reliance and what is its purpose? That is a complex question, because multiple answers can be found even in Emerson’s own writing. George Kateb defines self-reliance as “a method of intellect,” to which he adds, “it presents itself memorably as a principle for the conduct of a whole life.”<sup>45</sup> Defining the philosophy of self-reliance as a principle also invites a few contradictions; it is not a principle in the traditional sense of the word,

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<sup>41</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon CLXV,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 211.

<sup>42</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon CLXV,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 210.

<sup>43</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Spiritual laws,” *Essays: First series* (Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1850) 124.

<sup>44</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) xlii.

<sup>45</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 17.

it is rather viewed as a continuous process of self-knowledge. The best way to explain the philosophy is, perhaps, to state what it is not, or what is opposed to it. Surrounding this philosophy many negative conceptions of it emerged, which view self-reliance as a separation from church or “a celebration of intimacy or of privacy.”<sup>46</sup> Emerson’s attitude towards religion is quite the contrary, “[his] ultimate meaning of self-reliance is to be properly religious.”<sup>47</sup> What he condemns is not the church or religion itself, but he points out their dependency and conformity—their reliance on clerical authority, ecclesiastical tradition, and/or canonical scripture—which, to Emerson, are threatening to the self-discovery of the individual. Neither, however, is self-reliance a celebration of privacy or intimacy, as Emerson writes in “The Transcendentalist”:

Meantime, this retirement does not proceed from any whim on the part of these separators; but if any one will take pains to talk with them, he will find that this part is chosen both from temperament and from principle; with some unwillingness, too, and as a choice of the less of two evils.<sup>48</sup>

Nor it is in any way a doctrine which would support the idea of superiority. Emerson merely supports the idea of the individual and her/his personal expressions over the dependent, conformist thoughts of the society.

Emerson’s account of the philosophy of self-reliance is best recorded in the essay of the same name. At the very beginning he introduces the paramount idea of his philosophy; to speak and believe, not the thoughts of others, but one’s own. A similar idea, in this case the more characteristic Emersonian one, is, that every individual needs to trust his or her own self, the deeper one investigates his/her own self, the greater his or her knowledge of the self will be. “In self-trust all the virtues are comprehended,”<sup>49</sup> concludes Emerson in “The American Scholar.” Emerson urges the necessity of believing in one’s ability and that the ideas of the individual are valuable and worthy of expression. To this idea, he links the phenomenon of creativity; George Kateb concludes: “Every individual is a new individual and can, with self-trust, do in the world something not yet done but worthy of doing. Creativity is always possible; creativity is actual when people trust themselves.”<sup>50</sup> The problem, according to Emerson is that one does not realize his

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<sup>46</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” *Miscellanies*, 277.

<sup>49</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Miscellanies*, 83.

<sup>50</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 19.

ability, that he has the ability of trust. Learning to trust one's own thought is the first part in the process of self-discovery. For Emerson, each individual consciousness is unique, as are its ideas, and that uniqueness is what makes each individual consciousness necessary. Emerson's idea of acquiring self-knowledge begins with history. As Kateb notes: "Knowledge of the world leads in turn to greater self-knowledge."<sup>51</sup> An idea expressed by Emerson in "History;" "The world exists for the education of each man."<sup>52</sup> "The trivial experience of every day," continues Emerson, "is always verifying some old prediction to us and converting into things the words and signs which we had heard and seen without heed."<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the process of self-realization is difficult, it is very difficult to find one's true self. Emerson offers several reasons why many people fail on their journey to self-discovery and are unable to become self-reliant.

The greatest danger to self-reliance is, according to Emerson, conformity. "Conformity," observes George Kateb, "rests on being ashamed. Shame converts virtues into penances and life into one long expiation."<sup>54</sup> Emerson writes: "Self-reliance is its [conformity's] aversion. [...] Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." (43) He condemns imitation and the fear of expression of one's own thought. He argues for absolute trust within oneself and acceptance of God's will, as mediated by one's own consciousness. Emerson preaches the exercise of self-trust with which he believes "new powers shall appear." (67) He advocates for courage and determination. Emerson praises the "integrity of your own mind." (44) To put it differently, Emerson's idea of self-reliance, thus the idea of individualism, rests upon the recognition of the value of one's voice. He insists that only the rules of his own character can be valuable to him; "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature." (44) "To be free and equal is to be self-reliant,"<sup>55</sup> concludes Kateb. Yet Emerson recognizes, in the society around him that it is difficult to find, to discover the self. The reason is not only conformity, but that man often finds himself in temptation to live by traditions, customs and the teachings of the past which prevent one from expressing one's own thought. In reaction to this, Emerson asserts the need of self-expression for all. Many times, people "capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions." (44) Emerson advises himself, and perhaps others as well, to believe in one's own consciousness. He believes in silencing

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<sup>51</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," *Essays: First series*, 7.

<sup>53</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," *Essays: First series*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 20.

<sup>55</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 22.

all influences external to his own mind; “I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me.” (45) To Emerson, the idea of succumbing to the opinions of the society, rather than expressing one’s own, causes immense obstacles on the journey to self-discovery. Emerson insists, “Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away – means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour.” (57) According to Emerson, when one lets oneself be guided by God (as s/he understands God), s/he will find truth and happiness. “Yet see what strong intellectuals dare not yet hear God himself,” observes Emerson, “unless he speaks the phraseology of, I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul.” (59) In other words, anyone can succumb to listening to tradition rather than to his or her own consciousness. Emerson endorses “liv[ing] no longer to the expectation of these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse. [...] I appeal from your customs. I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you.” (63) Thus, no one should be afraid of expressing their opinions even when they are not met with approval. Similarly, he also rejects the idea of a good deed done for appearance; to Emerson, a good action is one done with sincerity. “To be great is to be misunderstood,” (50) concludes Emerson. “Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions.” (51) His fundamental premise is that one should not be afraid to discover what is unique in oneself, and not one’s place in society. That is to say, “Persons must have a conscious feeling of their necessity if their existence is to be justified in their own eyes.”<sup>56</sup> “Society can never prosper but must always be bankrupt,” concludes Emerson, “until every man does that which he was created to do.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 165.

<sup>57</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Wealth,” *The Conduct of Life* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1860) 97.

## 4 The Impact of Emerson's Philosophy on Modern America

### 4.1 Introduction

Over just more than a century the life of everyday Americans changed greatly. From the time of the first Puritan settlements till now, the U.S. went through changes affecting all aspects of society; thinking, behavior, politics, etc. But as Fisher writes, “The fundamental contrast between early Americans and today’s Americans in their circumstances of life, the material and social conditions that influence culture and character, can be captured by the word ‘more.’”<sup>1</sup> The question is how the society changed from its very beginnings in the colonial era until the present. America was often seen as the ideal modern society, that led the evolution of the Western countries. But it is also often criticized for its materialism, superficiality, and its renunciation of past values and ideals. “Writers more commonly describe modern American culture and character,” writes Fischer, “as a break with or even a reversal of the past – and usually for the worse.”<sup>2</sup> However, what Fischer and other scholars, who research the social history of the U.S. believe is the complete opposite; “The availability and expansion of material security and comfort enabled early American social patterns and culture to expand and solidify, to both delineate and spread an American national character.”<sup>3</sup> The lives of Americans are essentially based on the same principles that were established with its foundation back in 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As is stated above, America as it is known today, is a product of many changes, influencing the thinking and attitudes of its citizens, which happened throughout its history. There were many influential figures and ideas that helped to shape the American nation, but the influence of one of the most appreciated figures of the nineteenth century stands out and that is the figure of Ralph Waldo Emerson. As Randall Fuller suggests, “what makes the period immediately following his [Emerson’s] death especially interesting is the unprecedented cultural authority suddenly, [...], attributed to him.”<sup>4</sup> Emerson became a figure canonized already at the close of the nineteenth century by many who were interested in literature but also by those who searched to discover the American culture and identity. As Fuller further explains,

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<sup>1</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Randall Fuller, *Emerson's Ghosts: Literature, Politics, and the Making of Americanists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 27.

Emerson is more properly understood as a figure of unparalleled cultural influence, an author whose far-reaching concerns and resonant vocabulary helped make available large tracts of late-nineteenth-century American thought to many who never even read his essays.<sup>5</sup>

This proclamation is even more accurate for modern America. To this day Emerson has an important place in literary canons, on lists of school curricula, and in works of literary criticism. However, equally as influential is his presence in the fields of social history and sociology, and that is because his transcendental philosophy and his writing played an important part in forming American identity. According to T.S. McMillin's view, "the definition of America is tied to the definition of Emerson."<sup>6</sup>

## 4.2 Emerson and the American Dream

A large part of the understanding of American culture and identity is formed based on the tradition of a now widely recognized construction called "the American Dream," a belief based on the assumed value of one's own ability. This concept has been present in the U.S. from its very beginnings. It has quickly become a part of the American culture and national identity, and since the concept of the American Dream first appeared, over the years its description has become ambiguous, due to the development of its various types; from the notion of the American Dream believed by the Pilgrims up until its 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding. According to Cullen;

The omnipresence of "the American Dream" stems from a widespread - though not universal - belief that the concept describes something very contemporary. At the same time, however, much of its vitality rests on a premise, which I share, that it is part of a long tradition.<sup>7</sup>

The American Dream is a complex idea, which exists in the minds of Americans in various shapes and forms. The American Dream was first denominated by James Truslow Adams in his book titled *The Epic of America*. Adams understood the American Dream as "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement."<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Adams elaborates on his description;

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<sup>5</sup> Randall Fuller, *Emerson's Ghosts: Literature, Politics, and the Making of Americanists*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> T. S. McMillin, *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson and the Nature of Reading*, (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000) 103.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 5.

<sup>8</sup> James Truslow, *The Epic of America*, (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1931), 404.

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable. [. . .] It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.<sup>9</sup>

The American Dream represents much of the American mentality. Many scholars like John Kenneth White or Sandra L. Hanson confirm that the American Dream is “deeply embedded in American mythology and in the consciousness of its citizens.”<sup>10</sup> The reason why the Dream stays relevant even today is the existence of this deep linkage and its close interconnection with America’s core values. Often, the American Dream is directly linked to such values as freedom or equality of opportunity. White and Hanson affirm that this stays true for the majority of Americans, although what needs to be taken into consideration is that “these values have undergone various iterations over the years.”<sup>11</sup> While the earlier results of polls and surveys conducted on the topic show that most respondents defined the American Dream through connections with material possessions and property, newer surveys show that a spiritual and moral factor was added. In the 2001 Zogby survey 48% of male and 54% of female respondents defined the American Dream as finding spiritual happiness.<sup>12</sup> And this understanding keeps gaining greater following: A survey carried out by the Pew Research Center in 2017 affirms this belief, with only 11% of respondents’ saying that becoming wealthy is essential to achieving the American Dream.<sup>13</sup> However complicated the concept may seem, one widespread understanding of the concept prevails, that it is founded on freedom, individuality, self-reliance, and experience. This perception of the concept correlates closely with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s existentialist philosophy, which highlights the importance of these values, and whose goal was finding a sufficient path to self-realization and enlightenment. In Adams’s words;

In no other author can we get so close to the whole of the American spirit as in Emerson. In him we sense the abounding vitality and goodness of life, [...], the high

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<sup>9</sup> James Truslow, *The Epic of America*, 404.

<sup>10</sup> John Kenneth White and Sandra L. Hanson, “The Making of and the Persistence of the American Dream,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Sandra L. Hanson and John Kenneth White (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) 7.

<sup>11</sup> John Kenneth White or Sandra L. Hanson, “The Making and Persistence of the American Dream,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra L. Hanson, “Whose Dream? Gender and the American Dream,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Samantha Smith, “Most Americans Think the ‘American Dream’ Is Within Reach For Them,” *Pewresearch.org* <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/31/most-think-the-american-dream-is-within-reach-for-them/>> 25 Jul 2019

value placed on the individual, the importance ascribed to the very act of you and me, [...], the worship of culture combined with the comforting assurance that the spontaneous glance may be best, the insistence on a strenuous individuality,[...]”<sup>14</sup>

Emerson’s philosophy is a work of cultural influence, and “as long as that dream [the American dream] persists to strengthen the heart of man,” continues Truslow, “Emerson will remain one of its prophets.”<sup>15</sup>

This statement remains true today; the notion of the American Dream is still very much alive, and Emerson remains one of its most important forefathers. Modern Americans’ view of the American Dream is again derived from these shared traditional values. This is why the Dream persists even today, due to these shared values. In 2015 the Atlantic/Aspen Institute conducted a quantitative online survey on the topic of the American Dream and the perception of America, in which 1,988 of “general population” and 513 of “broad elites” participated. The results of this survey show that the concept of the American Dream is still very much relevant; 72% of “general population” participants and 80% of “broad elites” (individuals with a college degree and a minimum income of \$75,000, who are engaged with politics and technology) responded that the American Dream remains relevant and important to what it means to be American.<sup>16</sup> While the concept itself has undergone redefinition in some parts, the traditional values in its definition prevail. Most of the respondents associate the American Dream with the ability to be self-reliant, achieving personal happiness, and quality of life.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this unprecedented support, many also recognized that the American Dream had “shrunk.” While a lot of respondents still say that they have already achieved the American Dream (36%), or are on their way to achieving it (46%),<sup>18</sup> most also say they believe it is suffering—75% of general population and 65% of broad elites.<sup>19</sup> Still, the American Dream is very much alive, only now more people recognize that it might be harder to achieve, if not for them then at least for their children.<sup>20</sup> The crucial belief of working hard and playing by the rules is also ever-present. As expressed by Emerson, every person has the means to realize their dreams: “We are masters of our own

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<sup>14</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, 198.

<sup>15</sup> James Truslow, *The Epic of America*, 198.

<sup>16</sup> Penn Schoen Berland, “The Atlantic/Aspen Institute Survey 2015,” *The Atlantic.com*, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/american-dream-suffering/397475>> 24 Jun 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Penn Schoen Berland, “The Atlantic/Aspen Institute Survey 2015.”

<sup>18</sup> Samantha Smith, “Most Americans Think the ‘American Dream’ Is Within Reach For Them.” *Pewresearch.org*

<sup>19</sup> Penn Schoen Berland, “The Atlantic/Aspen Institute Survey 2015,” *The Atlantic.com*, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Penn Schoen Berland, “The Atlantic/Aspen Institute Survey 2015.” *The Atlantic.com*, 2015.

condition.”<sup>21</sup> This belief is deeply embedded in the minds of Americans, and can be supported by the fact that most Americans believe that the Dream is achievable for those who are willing to work for it.<sup>22</sup> In John Kenneth White’s words,

The resiliency of the American Dream can be traced to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and its promise that citizens of the new nation were already endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, including life and liberty, and that these same people were entitled to engage in many varied pursuits of happiness.<sup>23</sup>

The American Dream has a strong presence in American culture, and is constantly being brought up in both, politics and popular culture. In White’s view, “achieving the American Dream will always be partly an individual pursuit,”<sup>24</sup> dependent on the individual’s resilience and belief in this phenomenon. The American Dream is unique to the American culture, and that is also one of the reasons why it is still present today. Michael C. Kimmage remarks that “the spiritual component” of the dream is based on the specific mentality of Americans built on the “blend of optimism and happiness, alluded to in the Declaration of Independence, in which happiness is a thing to be pursued.”<sup>25</sup> There is no doubt that the American Dream has changed; many researchers and scholars are now analyzing these changes and in addition exploring the potential hindrances which limit the ability to achieve the Dream. One of these researchers is Sandra L. Hanson, who notes that while the American Dream “has been a dominant theme in the U.S. culture, [...] It is an old dream.”<sup>26</sup> She confirms that while its definition has shifted, it is still assumed that the Dream is for all Americans. Hanson focuses on the potential gender divide within the Dream and on its deciphering. There is also a great number of researches which evaluate how minorities are influenced by the American Dream. For example, from the results of these researches, it is possible to say the minorities are even more likely than the general U.S. public to believe the American Dream. The Pew Research Center conducted a survey in 2018, which supports this belief: “Hispanics are significantly more likely than the general U.S. public to believe in core parts of the American dream – that hard work will pay off and that each successive generation is better off than the one before

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<sup>21</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon XXVII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 227.

<sup>22</sup> Penn Schoen Berland, “The Atlantic/Aspen Institute Survey 2015,” *The Atlantic.com*, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> John Kenneth White and Sandra L. Hanson, “The Making of and the Persistence of the American Dream,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> John Kenneth White and Sandra L. Hanson, “The Making of and the Persistence of the American Dream,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Michael C. Kimmage, “The Politics of the American Dream, 1980 to 2008,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Sandra L. Hanson, “Whose Dream? Gender and the American Dream,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 77.

it.”<sup>27</sup> Even so, many Hispanics also believe that achieving the American Dream is not easy—“about three-quarters (74%) said achieving the dream today is hard for people like them.”<sup>28</sup> All these numbers reflect the fact that, as John Zigby remarks:

For many years now, people have increasingly expressed frustration with government, business, education, media, not-for-profits, and organized religions. [...] Most people want the opportunity to succeed, however they define it. [...] Regardless of whether you consider the American Dream to be something special to this nation or you see it as a fanciful, unrealistic, or chauvinistic notion, it behooves us all to maintain a society where everyone perceives the opportunity to succeed.<sup>29</sup>

The American Dream carries an enduring significance in American life and culture, and despite the gaps that exist for increasing numbers of Americans, be it for their gender, race, or social standing, it remains the “glue” that unites all Americans together. The American dream, especially after September 11, moved on from a material to a more spiritual definition, emphasizing the core values of freedom, self-reliance, and equality of opportunity, which still draw great number of supporters today. “Attitudes about the American Dream,” in Zigby’s view, “are based on how people perceive themselves, America, and the major institutions that shape our lives.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the Dream survives through difficult times, its definition keeps expanding, and now more than ever it is focused on “equity, equality, and community rather than material success and economic mobility.”<sup>31</sup>

#### 4.2.1 Individualism and Individual Experience

The ideals that constitute the American Dream, and that most Americans see as essential to their view of the concept, are freedom and the ability to be self-reliant. Individualism is a term that characterizes both of these features. The importance of individualism has always been stressed throughout U.S. history, and is seen as a central

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<sup>27</sup> Mark H. Lopez, Ana Gonzales-Barrera and Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Latinos are more likely to believe in the American dream, but most say it is hard to achieve,” <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/11/latinos-are-more-likely-to-believe-in-the-american-dream-but-most-say-it-is-hard-to-achieve/>> 29 Jul 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Mark H. Lopez, Ana Gonzales-Barrera and Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Latinos are more likely to believe in the American dream, but most say it is hard to achieve.” *Pewresearch.org*

<sup>29</sup> John Zigby, “Want Meets Necessity in the New American Dream,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 113.

<sup>30</sup> John Zigby, “Want Meets Necessity in the New American Dream,” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 114.

<sup>31</sup> John Kenneth White and Sandra L. Hanson, “The American Dream: Where Are We?” *The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 148.

feature of American culture and identity, both then and today. Individualism or, as Fischer entitles it, voluntarism in the later development of the concept, “is believing and behaving as if each person is a sovereign individual: unique, independent, self-reliant, self-governing, and ultimately self-responsible.”<sup>32</sup> The belief in being able to control one’s own fate, and being responsible for one’s life and actions, is what creates the foundation of individualistic culture. Emerson viewed individualism in a like manner; he believed that what one “must do is all that concerns them,” (46) that one should rely on their instincts and not succumb to the opinion of society. He insisted that one should not apologize for what he believes. His views are often criticized as radical, but these sentiments cited in “Self-Reliance” were as much true for Emerson’s America as they are true for America today. U.S. society is often viewed as standing out in comparison with other countries of the world. When compared with global attitudes, certain American attitudes appear exceptional: “Wealthier nations tend to be less religious, but [the] U.S. [is] a prominent exception.”<sup>33</sup> Americans, more than any other nation, “are more likely to believe that hard work pays off,”<sup>34</sup> which once again supports the endurance of the American dream. Fisher adds, “To be sure, observers have described many other ways that Americans stand apart, such as their intense faith, moralism, violence, and cheeriness.”<sup>35</sup> Americans were described as “unusually individualistic,” Fisher continues,

by which they [observers] have meant that Americans are, more than other people, loners, selfish, shrewd traders, self-expressive, defenders of liberty, rebels, or all of the above, [...], that they are detached from family, neighborhood, and other social groups.<sup>36</sup>

This opinion is held by many researchers and observers of U.S. society. A possibly less radical view, but nonetheless a conviction of like manner, is expressed by Alexis de Tocqueville, who writes in his account of American culture and society, that he believes that American individualism is “a calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself, [...], to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that,

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<sup>32</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> George Gao, “How do Americans stand out from the rest of the World?” *Pewresearch.org*, Mar 2015 <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/>> 27 Jun 2019.

<sup>34</sup> George Gao, “How do Americans stand out from the rest of the World?” *Pewresearch.org*

<sup>35</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 97.

after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself.”<sup>37</sup> Tocqueville remarks:

To evade the bondage of system and habit, of family-maxims, class-opinions, and, in some degree of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson used in doing otherwise and doing better; to seek the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone; to tend to results without being bound to means, and to aim at the substance through the form;--such are the principal characteristics of what I shall call the philosophical method of the Americans.<sup>38</sup>

However, this understanding of individualism and the mentality of Americans, which, according to Tocqueville, drives this individualistic character, is not accurate. Scholars like Fischer and other researchers, who base their conclusions on the social history of the U.S., are convinced that to view Americans “as socially disconnected, is a mistake.”<sup>39</sup> While scholars admit that some of these features, which make America stand out, contradict themselves in some ways, in Fischer’s words, “Cultures, as well as individuals, need not be and are not logically consistent.”<sup>40</sup> While American individualism remains a contradictory concept, it is also one of the most crucial parts of American culture. The most contradictory aspect is formed by a certain tension between individualism and community. Emerson is an important articulator of individualistic thinking in America. He strongly rejects the idea of submitting to any group, or that one should apologize for what they believe in when the society does not agree. Emerson supports reliance on one’s instinct and individual experience; he sees self-expression as a fundamental need. These ideas gained a large following, which resulted in the forming of groups supporting individualistic ideals, which created the later contradictory aspect of American individualism. To be able to understand the contradictory nature of it, it is best to compare the beginnings and the current situation regarding this concept.

Early Americans lived in closely nested groups, which “gave individuals more freedom within each group.”<sup>41</sup> They simultaneously could realize their individuality while enjoying the benefits of belonging in a group. The efforts of Puritan leaders such as Winthrop, were to unite these individuals together. Puritan society was based on the belief that, as summarized by historian Perry Miller, “The individual voluntarily promised

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<sup>37</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, trans. Henry Reeve, (London: Longmans, Green, & Company, 1889) 90.

<sup>38</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 96.

to obey civil and scriptural law, ..., that meaningful obedience could only grow out of voluntary consent, never out of coercion.”<sup>42</sup> In comparison, modern America experienced as Fischer notes, “greater social options and looser group constraints than middle-class Americans encountered”<sup>43</sup> in previous centuries. With the expansion of technologies, and with lesser financial and social constraints, the formerly left out members of society could now enjoy the newly available opportunities. With the beginning of the twentieth century, women started experiencing greater independence, “through their greater earning power and through expanding legal rights.”<sup>44</sup> This resulted in the fact that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more Americans gained more options, and greater freedom in pursuing their own interests. American culture has always been highly individualistic; “it depicts society as comprised [sic] fundamentally of individuals, each unique, separate, and self-governing.”<sup>45</sup> However, American individualism forms a distinct brand, combining individuality and community. Ann Swidler even suggests that “America’s brand of individualism may be thought of as the freedom to choose one’s community.”<sup>46</sup> While American society still shows aspects of Emersonian individualism, Americans also still value commitment to community, and social groups. The individualism stands on the premise of having the choice of free entry and exit. Also observed by Tocqueville in the 1830s, and entitled by him as “voluntary association.” As Fischer concludes, “Over three centuries, more Americans emerged from exclusion, [...], or dependent inclusion, [...], to claim voluntary inclusion.”<sup>47</sup>

## **4.2.2 Personal Freedom and Self-reliance**

### *4.2.2.1 Introduction: Contemporary U.S. society*

As was already stated, freedom and self-reliance are closely associated with individualism. All three form the core social values of American society and have been present in the minds of Americans since the very beginning of existence of the U.S. Self-reliance and freedom are linked together through the idea that self-reliance is the path to follow on the journey to obtain individual freedom. To understand how these values work, and how they are or are not present in contemporary American society, it is first important

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<sup>42</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 105.

<sup>43</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 135.

<sup>44</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 138.

<sup>45</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 98.

<sup>47</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 160.

to determine what kind of society that is. There are many features that constitute a society; politics, economy, military, technology, etc. In terms of defining the U.S. society, economy, politics, culture, and mentality are the most telling. The U.S. is considered by many to be one of the most developed and prosperous societies in the world.

In regards to technological and economic growth, America is described as “a technologically advanced industrial society moving towards what is sometimes called post-industrialism or the knowledge economy or the information society.”<sup>48</sup> This level of high productivity and globalized fast-working economy enables the society to prosper, opens new possibilities—and at the same time poses new problems. This development of the economy and industry is fairly recent, less than two hundred years. Wright and Rogers point out, “how different from most of the world it is.[...] Two empirical indicators of these changes are especially striking: the shift from rural to urban living, and the transformation of the occupations people have in order to make a living.”<sup>49</sup>

The economy of the U.S. could also be described as capitalist, that is, its production is driven by and organized for the market. In Wright’s words, “This means that things are produced in order to be sold rather than to be directly consumed by the people who produce them or to be made freely available to others.”<sup>50</sup> The market is then controlled by big, profit-driven corporations, which are in private ownership rather than being owned by the state or public. This means that most workers come from the labor market and thus are not owners of said corporations; in other words that leaves most people with the need to go and seek opportunities of employment to secure their living conditions. This is a radical change compared to the way the system of the U.S. worked two centuries ago, where over 40% of the labor force was self-employed.<sup>51</sup> The first problem that this poses is that the market is essentially ruled by these gigantic corporations and organizations, resulting in smaller businesses’ having a much smaller say in the market. While as Wright and Rogers report, “Small firms continue to exist and play an important role in the U.S. economy, and in some situations, they are particularly important for jobs and local development,”<sup>52</sup> they are still usually dependent on

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<sup>48</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010) 2. < <https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ContemporaryAmericanSoicety.htm> > 28 Jul 2019

<sup>49</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 5.

connections to these much bigger corporations. The second problem with the particular system of economy that is established in the U.S., is the lack of protection for the employees. Compared to other countries, especially those in Europe, labor unions are essentially ineffective. Therefore, “since U.S. unions are so weak,” as Wright notes, “labor markets in the U.S. are generally much less regulated than in most developed countries and involve much more intense competition among individuals.”<sup>53</sup> This, in combination with other factors, results in the contradictory fact that a fast-growing economy has a surprisingly high number of people living in poverty. While economic inequality is present in every capitalist society, in the U.S., a country with potentially the richest society, economic inequality continues to rise. According to the Economic Policy Institute, “In recent decades, the vast majority of Americans have experienced disappointing growth in their living standards—despite economic growth that could have easily generated faster gains in their living standards had it been broadly shared.”<sup>54</sup> One proposed solution would involve the previously mentioned labor unions, which would reduce the marked wage differences. Although economic inequality and poverty are big issues, the U.S. economy, as Wright and Rogers say,

is still extraordinarily rich. This does not necessarily mean that the quality of life of the average American is the highest in the world, or even that their economic wellbeing is the highest. [...] This, then, is one of the crucial defining characteristics of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century: poverty in the midst of plenty, tremendous inequalities in conditions of life and opportunities in the context of an extraordinarily rich society.<sup>55</sup>

Hand in hand with the economic system goes politics. The American political system is very complex. It would probably be best characterized as federal liberal democracy. The system is based on such liberties as having the freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press, along with competitive democratic elections. So prominent is American individualism that here again the U.S. democracy stands out with its distinctive particularities. A major part of the character of the U.S. system is that it is built on federalism. In federal systems, the power and jurisdiction are exercised by both the national government and the respective governments of states belonging to the federation. This creates an enduring conflict between federal and state

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<sup>53</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Elise Gould, “Decades of rising economic inequality in the U.S.” Epi.org, <<https://www.epi.org/publication/decades-of-rising-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s-testimony-before-the-u-s-house-of-representatives-ways-and-means-committee/>> 28 Jul 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 9.

law. And as Wright points out, “it also means that sometimes the decentralization and fragmentation of the political system can obstruct the process by which constructive solutions to national problems can be forged.”<sup>56</sup> The U.S. system is also presidential; the president is both head of the state and head of the government, while in most European countries these two functions are divided. The American president thus concentrates more powers than a president in a parliamentary system.

Similarly complex is the society itself. U.S. society is one of the most diverse societies in the world, and is often presented (with questionable accuracy) as the exemplary multiethnic and multiculturalist society. American society is composed of different races, cultures, religions, languages, beliefs and morals. This, however, poses many challenges and difficulties. To unite such a diverse group of citizens takes exceptional effort. Still, as different as the people are, there is a number of features that many share and that shape the American national identity. The notion of national identity in the U.S. once again contrasts with the usual understanding of identity; while for example many European nations build their national identity on common history, language, traditions, etc., the American sense of national identity is connected rather to the spiritual and political principles embedded in the Declaration of Independence. Therefore, American culture and mentality originate from these principles and continue to build on them. Such strongly ingrained myths as the American dream still persist today. The complexity of the American Dream was explained in the previous section; however, the idea of a self-made man, who can achieve anything as long as he works hard for it, is probably the single most uniting idea that most Americans understand and relate themselves to. That is why the principles of individualism, and therefore freedom and self-reliance are still prominent in the minds of Americans today.

#### **4.2.3 Self-reliance and Freedom in Modern America**

With a better understanding of what type of society, the U.S. society is, and how it functions, it is easier to explain how these principles are or are not actually present in modern American thinking, and how they influence it. As Fisher comments, “Stressing self-reliance was common long before Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s that Americans ‘look after their own needs. [They] owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody.’”<sup>57</sup> Self-reliance has been around since the very beginning—seventeen century

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<sup>56</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 103.

New England Puritan ministers emphasized reliance on one's own heart rather than on written theology, on looking for God in themselves. While they also enforced strict moral codes and the importance of community, the significance of individuality remained superior. The new society was much more individual than the transplanted Europeans were used to, and therefore they needed new principles to build on. "Colonial political writers," as Fischer remarks, "harped on self-reliance as the prerequisite for sustaining freedom and democracy."<sup>58</sup> In contrast to this, then, "slavery provided stark illustrations of what awaited those who lacked 'competency,' that is independence."<sup>59</sup> The society continued to stress these values, shaped by Puritan descendants like Emerson, Hawthorne, and Longfellow. This type of mentality persisted and "as Emerson best illustrates, [the Puritan's descendants] emphasized religious voluntarism, personal expressiveness, and self-reliance."<sup>60</sup> The following decades only multiplied the significance of these values. In the twentieth century, more opportunities of extending rights and liberties were offered to American citizens; many used those to achieve better social standings, and to improve their living conditions. The 1980s became a time of "liberalizing trends" where American youths started to claim their independence "by increasingly living on their own."<sup>61</sup> New types of questions were brought into discussion like the topics of extramarital relationships, sex and sexuality. Generally, the public started being more open about their lives, which was something that most Americans were brought up to do; "[their parents] nurtured their children's self-direction and self-expression."<sup>62</sup> And while they still encouraged community-based relationships, they also strongly supported the principles of retaining one's individuality and personal freedoms. As much as these values sound like they only started to occur after a lot of changes that happened throughout the twentieth century and were related to the current situation of the society, these values were already highly established by Emerson's time. Furthermore, it was his [Emerson's] own work and ideology, his direct influence, that is responsible for keeping these values and beliefs alive in the minds of Americans. His most famous line from what is probably his most influential essay ("Self-Reliance") postulates: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." (41) Emerson valorized reliance on one's own instincts and abilities. According to recent research, this is such a deeply rooted belief in U.S. society

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<sup>58</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 104.

<sup>59</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 104.

<sup>60</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 106.

<sup>61</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 142.

<sup>62</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 142.

that “Americans believe more than others that, at least in principle, a person is responsible for his or her fate.”<sup>63</sup> Analyzing the data from recent surveys on American values and the concept of the American Dream, it is also visible how much these beliefs still affect the thinking of contemporary Americans, which only demonstrates how deeply embedded in U.S. mentality, these ideas are. A survey that was conducted in 2017 by the Pew Research Center shows that while the American dream means different things to different people, personal autonomy is centrally important to the American Dream. More than 77% of respondents answered that most essential to the American Dream is the freedom of choice in how to live.<sup>64</sup> Another survey conducted by the Atlantic/Aspen Institute on the topic of the American Dream illustrates how important the values embedded in the Dream are: 72% of “general public” respondents answered that they remain relevant and important to what it means to be an American.<sup>65</sup> The ultimate belief that Emerson endorsed persists; if individuals work hard enough, they will be able to achieve whatever they want; but first they have to realize their true potential.

Emerson’s influence does not stop here; his ideas, according to Professor Christopher Newfield, create the basis for American society, and the U.S. political approach. The U.S. is still fighting a long-term battle of trying to determine whether personal freedoms or public laws should take priority. The individualist (or perhaps better described as voluntarist) ethos of the society, as was already discussed, also attempts to deal with this issue, and the outcome is a type of moderation. This could also be characterized as a centrist type of politics. “Too much power to the community or the state,” as Newfield notes, “erodes the personal freedoms to which American life has long been devoted.”<sup>66</sup> Emerson offers his own solution, later described as “democratic individualism” —where maximum freedom is emphasized, but not at the expense of “the needs of the democratic society.”<sup>67</sup> This struggle between private or personal freedom and public order is what the “American greatness always depended on, its ability to balance individualism with civic responsibility, simple liberty with community.”<sup>68</sup> Emerson’s attitude towards this constant battle may seem contradictory; while (as he

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<sup>63</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 211.

<sup>64</sup> Samantha Smith, “Most Americans Think the ‘American Dream’ Is Within Reach For Them.” *Pewresearch.org*

<sup>65</sup> Penn Schoen Berland, “The Atlantic/Aspen Institute Survey 2015,” *The Atlantic.com*

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 1.

<sup>67</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 3.

expresses in “Self-Reliance”) he is most focused on the self, and one’s ability to discover it, on realizing the individual’s potential, rejecting “society”, and its established norms, he, on the other hand, also calls for “submission.” In Newfield’s words, “Rather than rejecting submission in the names of freedom, as we’d expect, his individualism defines freedom as submission to unmodifiable law.”<sup>69</sup> Newfield’s version of Emerson’s theory demonstrates how specific the notion of American individualism is; his individual is still a part of a community with laws that should be respected while personal freedoms still hold very high value. Contemporary U.S. society remains very much focused on the same ideals; most Americans continue to believe strongly in the American Dream and the values that it represents, including personal freedom and self-reliance.

The notion of freedom in contemporary America, is based on the same principles that it was born from and as they appear in the Declaration of Independence—which grants “unalienable rights [of]...life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,”<sup>70</sup> to every individual so that s/he may be able to find his or her own purpose. Nonetheless, the definition of those values has expanded over time, in ways which seem, to some, contradictory and/or redundant. And while freedom stays a crucial value of American society, some scholars have opined that something is out of alignment with the original ideas proposed by the Founders.

To find out what has happened, most turn to the events of September 11, 2001. This tragic event induced such strong reaction by the whole nation that it is continuously brought up years after, and has left such a powerful impact that it is one of the few events that were able to connect the whole nation. According to John E. Schwarz, the “thing” that was missing was the “common bond and a common goal,” something that would unite the nation again. The idea of individual liberty, of freedom, in Schwarz’s words is “the idea that that gave birth to the nation and still supplies our country with its moral reason and end purpose.”<sup>71</sup> Schwarz suggests that the event of September 11 recommenced the process of the nation’s search for unity. However, the path to restore the original meaning of freedom—the idea that every individual is to be treated equally, to be able to acquire their personal liberty and achieve their purpose—still has a long way to go. What is believed to be happening in modern America is that although this value

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<sup>69</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2007) ix.

<sup>71</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 3.

carries a sacred integrity within itself, the idea of freedom has taken up a “terribly mistaken road.”<sup>72</sup> One can look at freedom from two points of view, the first one allows the individual to be as free as possible without the existence of any restrictions or laws that would hinder his or her personal liberties—sometimes called the “freedom from” or even “negative freedom.” Schwarz remarks, this “particular view of freedom that prevails today emphasizes being left alone by others and the state.”<sup>73</sup> The freedom that is needed now is the more fundamental form of liberty, which is based on the individual’s ability to choose, to be able to freely pursue their happiness, but also on honoring obligations that the individual has toward others. Both types of freedom are represented in the contemporary society, albeit one of them stands out more than the other; in Schwarz’s view, the society is now living in an era of “free-market liberty,” focused on “simply being left alone to follow one’s own best self-interest.”<sup>74</sup> Then again a “genuine” type of freedom still exists in modern society, the type of freedom not focused only on the self but also on fulfilling obligations toward other individuals that “are required for freedom to be moral,”<sup>75</sup> and are based on the original idea and purpose. Regardless of its existence, the view of freedom in the more “individualistic” sense prevails. This means that individuals will prefer their own needs and self-interest over fulfilling their obligations that tie them to others.

This, then again, creates the everlasting problem of tension between private interests and public conviction. With more time, more and more individuals “with more freedom and confidence to plan their own futures, to demand autonomy, and to expand equality,” according to Fischer, would emerge. As historian David Potter notes, “Abundance, [...] made liberty and equality – and democracy – possible for the masses.”<sup>76</sup> For Schwarz, the state of the society fluctuates; the fact that everything revolves around the individual, and his or her journey is what is making it so difficult for the nation to stay united. He asks, in relation to the events of September 11, “Why, however, did we need reminding that we are one nation? And why did it take such attacks upon the nation to remind us?”<sup>77</sup> This absence of unity of the felt need to fulfill obligations towards each other, is what is making the American society to feel disconnected. While

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<sup>72</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 3.

<sup>73</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 4.

<sup>75</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 243.

<sup>77</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 6.

Schwarz recognizes the values of freedom and self-reliance as the values with which the nation identifies, he also notes its “individuality” results in “an absence of shared sense of solidarity.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, the battle between the individual and “society” continues.

The values of freedom and self-reliance, the values the nation is characterized by, became “virtually a synonym for the autonomy of the individual and the pursuit of individual self-interest.”<sup>79</sup> The contradictions in trying to solve the issue of following your self-interest while trying to honor the commitments one has to others, as has been noted, are already expressed by Emerson. He once again emphasizes the importance of the self, and the need to realize one’s purpose with his most often quoted idea; “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. [...] Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.”(43) This Emerson is known as the radical Emerson, his thoughts appear focused on the individual alone. He seems to counsel complete abandonment of society and its opinions in favor of one’s own beliefs. He expresses these thoughts in many of his works; in “Self-Reliance,” he remarks: “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages.”(39) or “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”(44) But they also appear in his Journals;

Nature implants with life the instinct of self-help, perpetual struggle to be, to resist opposition, to attain to freedom, to attain to a mastery and the security of a permanent, self-defended being; and to each creature these objects are made so dear that it risks its life continually in the struggle for these ends.<sup>80</sup>

To Emerson, reliance on one’s own instinct and experience is the indispensable posture. On the other hand, Emerson is also known for often being “contradictory” in his statements and beliefs. It is rather a case of a statement of a major and a minor premise than contradiction. Emerson “privileges,” individual consciousness, because he believed that society’s traditions and precepts were over-valued by Americans in his time; but he does not forget, nor does he want other to forget, the important influence exerted by collectivities. He struggles with the conflict of personal freedom and public order as much as the rest of the U.S. society does. His “trust thyself” is actually immediately contradicted by its following sentence; “Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.”(41) In other words, while

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<sup>78</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 6.

<sup>79</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 6.

<sup>80</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Miscellanies* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1902) 183.

Emerson encourages individuals to seek their own place in the society and to realize their own self-interests, he also calls for “submission” to a higher power.

Notwithstanding, “as Emersonian as Americans sometimes seem,” Fischer affirms that “they are committing themselves to churches, neighborhoods, and marriages – but only insofar as they choose those groups and are not shackled to them.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, Americans participate in so-called “contractualism,” which according to Fischer is “central to American individualism, [...] Individuals make this implicit contract by joining the group: I am free to stay or leave, but while belonging I owe fealty to the group.”<sup>82</sup> For this reason, American society’s idea of freedom is understood rather as the ability to choose rather than the ability to do. To clarify, there are still examples of Emerson’s “libertarian individualism,” or, to simplify, of his more radical beliefs. Similar examples of Emerson’s more “radical” ideas are: “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think”(46) and “No law can be sacred to me but that of my own heart.”(44) They still appear in modern U.S. society. Thus, as Schwarz notes, for example:

We learn from opinion polls that while good numbers of Americans support additional governmental action in some areas, popular pluralities are also prone to look upon big government as the greatest threat to the country, greater than big labor, greater than big business, this even in the wake of the thundering waves of corporate scandals that became known at the time of the polls.<sup>83</sup>

The value of personal freedom wins over the government and public “order” in this case. While the government is supposed to be there to make sure that personal freedoms of individuals are protected, it is also often seen as a principal potential antagonist against them. To this persistent conflict, Emerson reacts. He believes that to be able to unite and form an equal community, the union “must be inward, [...], The union is only perfect when all uniters are isolated. [...] The union must be ideal in actual individualism.”<sup>84</sup> The actions of an individual influence the whole community, thus, when one does “something to raise the standard of virtue in the world,” s/he automatically raises “the average of the virtue of individuals.”<sup>85</sup> Emerson builds on a principle based on achieving liberty through the individual for the whole society. Newfield’s understanding of what he calls Emerson’s “democratic independence” is based on a “liberalism of moral relations, which is meant to suggest, [that] liberty exists only through ethical ties with the members of the

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<sup>81</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 99.

<sup>82</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 99.

<sup>83</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 8.

<sup>84</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “New England Reformers,” *Essays: Second Series*, 257.

<sup>85</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermons XXXVIII,” *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 295.

overlapping communities to which one belongs.”<sup>86</sup> This idea originates from the fundamental liberal desire of Emerson’s Transcendental predecessors who tried “both to unite individual with community and to preserve individual liberty in the face of community.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, it was not as much of an invention as it was an innovation of the idea of “relational individuality” on Emerson’s part. Emerson heavily relies on the existentialist ideology of both the “radical” individualism and the importance of relations with others. Again, and again, is Emerson put in direct link with “a reconciliation of personal freedom and otherness.”<sup>88</sup> For him, the relation between the community and the individual is actually what makes one free.

According to Newfield’s reading of Emerson, there is no “synthesis of individualism and democracy in self-reliance, [nor] collective democracy,”<sup>89</sup> to be found. Neither does he find in Emerson’s “famous radical individualism,” probably the most researched feature of Emerson’s work, the radicalism “that privileged the self-possessed individual over collective self-governance.” Newfield affirms the idea that, “Emerson did not repudiate democracy in favor of radical individualism in his youth. or vice versa in his maturity, for he consistently repudiated both at the same time.”<sup>90</sup> As was already stated, Emerson ideas stand on two propositions, in the first, the major premise, he encourages the individual to separate him or herself from the society, to rely on his or her instincts, and then his second, less typical premise of emphasizing the importance of accepting “the place that the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events,”(41) which is exactly what seems like one should distance his or herself from according to the initial premise. Therefore, self-reliance should not be understood as a “simple possessive individualism – self-ownership, freedom of contract, autonomy – but a complex relation to actually existing society.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, Emerson’s answer to the problem of balance between personal freedom and public “order” is not as straightforward as Newfield believes is needed; it works (according to Newfield) rather as a recommendation than an answer how to resolve the problem. The values that Emerson emphasizes in his work; self-reliance, freedom, individualism, etc. —are cultivated by him to such a degree that they are so deeply embedded in the mentality

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<sup>86</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 18.

<sup>88</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 22.

<sup>89</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 22.

<sup>90</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 22.

<sup>91</sup> Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, 23.

of Americans that they continue to influence not only their thinking and decisions in private life but also the actions that they undertake in their politics, economy, and overall public life. As Wright and Rogers remark in their thorough look at the state of U.S. society,

The problem, [...], is that there is no hard and fast, unambiguous boundary between decisions which only affect the person making the decision and decisions which have broader ramifications for the lives of others. This means that the politically recognized boundary between the “public” and the “private” – between the realm of issues subject to democratic control and the realm of decisions left to individual persons – will always be a contested one, since there will always be disagreements about how to deal with the balance and trade-offs between individual autonomy and collective responsibility.<sup>92</sup>

This issue will continue to be present simply because there is no real answer how to deal with the question of priority between individual and collective matters. The fact that the previously-mentioned “Emersonian” values carry such merit in American culture results repeatedly in the “private” personal freedoms winning over democratic collective control. Some scholars posit that this creates a “form of hyper-capitalism that generates huge inequalities, perpetuates poverty, under-produces all sorts of public goods, and generally devaluates the common good of the many relative to the private advantage of the few.”<sup>93</sup> And it is suggested by such scholars that this can only be resolved by a potential extension of democracy which would allow for greater democratic collective process. In order to do this, it is once again necessary to understand the development of the society and its values, to gain comprehension of the “voyage” towards the state of the country in which the U.S. is now. Schwarz concludes, “It enables us to see how resolution of the age-old conflict that has characterized America from the beginning,” the conflict of freedom and personal autonomy versus the public purpose and community, “actually lies within a fuller understanding of the morality of liberty itself.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 2.

<sup>93</sup> Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How It Really Works*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, 41.

## 5 Conclusion

American society and culture are known for their visible individualism. The stark differences between the U.S. and many other countries make them stand out, and even Americans themselves are aware of these distinctions and recognize them. According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center more than eight-in-ten (85%) Americans said that the U.S. either “stands above all other countries in the world” (29%) or that it is “one of the greatest countries, along with some others” (56%).<sup>1</sup> The values of the American nation that have sustained the country ever since its foundation—freedom, self-reliance, equality of opportunity—persist in forming the core of the American culture, and continue being the prime source for these kinds of feelings of uniqueness and greatness. American thinking and mentality are so closely built with these values in mind that many decisions or steps that many Americans take are directly impacted by this. To be able even to talk about an American nation, one must understand these values, and the merit that they carry in U.S. society. Since its foundation, the nation has gone through a plethora of political, economic, social and technological transformations. Many of the individual changes have been debated and discussed by many different scholars in hopes of understanding the influence of these developments, but also to help determine where the society is heading next. The fundamental difference between earlier Americans and modern Americans is the amount of opportunity that they are exposed to. In the words of historian David Potter, “Americans began as people of plenty,” but “became even more so.”<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to determine in which particular features the U.S. culture did or did not change, nonetheless probably the most telling strategy in recognizing and evaluating differences is to look at the above-mentioned values, which sustained the nation during these changes.

Many outsiders deem the American nation as a society full of selfish individuals who prioritize their needs and wants over the needs of the community; however, many scholars suggest the complete opposite. While individualism and personal freedom are the country’s core values, Americans also value community. Their specific approach and treatment of personal freedom and individuality is labeled as “voluntarism;” key elements of voluntarism are “believing and behaving *as if* each person is a sovereign individual:

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Geiger, “How Americans see their country and their democracy,” *Pewresearch.org* <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/04/how-americans-see-their-country-and-their-democracy/>> 29 Jul 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 2.

unique, independent, self-reliant, self-governing, and ultimately self-responsible.”<sup>3</sup> The value of independency—or, more often used, freedom and self-reliance—have been repeatedly stressed and emphasized by most Americans. Not only are they the values that were present in the early society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but they continue to bear a significant amount of merit in the modern society. The reason why values like freedom and self-reliance still prevail to this day, is because of how deeply rooted they are in the American culture and mentality. The question why they are so ingrained in the culture and thinking is not as complex as one might think. On one hand, it is because of the actual state of the society of settlers that founded the country. The settlers were driven by the desire for new opportunities, to gain freedom from persecution and harsh political environments in the hopes of establishing their own society based on these values. The second most influential factor is the prominent figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—writers, philosopher, politicians—like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, but also Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry D. Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, etc. All these people and their works—and the work of many more—contributed to the mentality that freedom and self-reliance represent. The work and ideology of Ralph Waldo Emerson, particularly, is the one that has seen the most effect. Emerson did not invent most of his ideas or beliefs many elements of his ideology come from the beliefs of the Transcendentalist movement, which based its thinking on the ideas of New England Unitarianism. Emerson, however, did refine and cultivate these ideas and assimilated them with his own convictions. The self is Emerson’s most scrutinized topic, which is, not by accident, also understood as his greatest contribution to American culture. These are also not coincidentally the values on which stands one of the most recognizable myths that characterize the American culture: the American Dream—an exceptionally persistent belief that as long as one works hard enough, s/he will be able to achieve anything he or she wants, to be a self-reliant individual and take advantage of her/his abilities. Thus, again, the traditional values of freedom and self-reliance reappear. The idea that the American Dream represents is dependent on these values; it stems from them. Again and again, individualism and the values that it encompasses are brought up. The power of Emerson’s endorsement can be seen in the way that his ideology and beliefs can provide a path to understanding one of the U.S. society’s biggest conflicts: the conflict between personal freedom and public “order.” While he does not provide an actual answer how to

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<sup>3</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 10.

resolve this, and occasionally remains ambivalent in privileging one over the other, he actually manages to nourish the ideas in such a way that they stay ingrained in the minds of Americans today and still impact their decisions, in private as in public matters.

While American society has gone through many changes and developments, its traditional values still remain. Freedom, self-reliance, and individualism remain historic and influential aspects of U.S. society and culture. Emerson's reliance on oneself doggedly persists, as does the genetically-related master-myth of the American Dream. In the words of Claude S. Fischer, "This continuity is a striking feature of American culture."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, 241.

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