

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D., thesis supervisor

Adéla Zeimannová

B.A. thesis evaluation

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

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Ms. Zeimannová's thesis maintains that the themes of self-reliance and freedom have been among the most recognized values in U.S. society and culture since their foundation in the eighteenth (or even seventeenth) century until the present. Research invoked in Ms. Zeimannová's thesis, she argues, shows that the values of American society, even though they have adapted and been adapted to political and sociological changes, share a common base with their original form. According to Ms. Zeimannová, this thesis researches specifically the role of self-reliance in relation to the 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 the American society. Her study, she says, 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, Ms. Zeimannová posits, 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 first part of the thesis is dedicated to analyzing Emerson's thought while describing the background of the development in U.S. society and character. The second part of the thesis 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 the Pew Research Center and the Atlantic/Aspen Institute, together with literature on American sociology and mentality, serve to identify an image of modern U.S. society, and to determine the influence of Emerson's thinking on modern America.

In evaluating Ms. Zeimannová's efforts and results, it is useful first to consider the sources she has located and elected to use. The principal sources for the thesis, as Ms. Zeimannová indicates them, are energetically sought out, thoughtfully chosen, and, as she employs them, fruitful. The main source of Emerson's thinking and refinement of his theory of self-reliance is his essay "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," or Robert D. Richardson's Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, was used. To create a picture of the U.S. society and mentality, books on American sociology like Claude S. Fisher's *Made in America: A social History of American Culture and Character* were used, 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 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.

Beyond Emerson's thought, per se, Ms. Zeimannová has chosen (and perhaps could not avoid choosing) to base many of her findings regarding the impact of Emerson and

Emersonianism on contemporary America 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. Thus guided, she concludes that the values of self-reliance, individualism and freedom, greatly developed and encouraged by Emerson, are still supported by many. Most Americans, her sources indicate, see self-reliance, individualism and freedom, as core values of the society, and as values which make up the American character. In addition, as she argues, polling data confirms that these values are immensely deep-rooted in the American mentality, and they influence a number of decisions Americans take, be it in private or public life.

I have very few disagreements with Ms. Zeimannová's conclusions regarding the nature and substance of Emerson's thought, or with the sources she has used to gain an authoritative overview of that thought. Her use of the still-too-neglected sermons as an early indicator and basis from which to understand the later vectors of Emerson's thought is much appreciated, and, I believe, very helpful both to her and to her readers.

As far as the reliance on polling data to confirm the evaluations by contemporary commentators like George Kateb regarding Emerson's latter-day bedrock influence in American culture, it provides an excellent window into the murky popular-culture presence of Emersonian ideas. There is arguably no fully reliable means by which to access the various beliefs and operational assumptions of any society or its sub-groups; but Ms. Zeimannová's employment of polls as one means of extracting whatever can be usefully extracted, provides further evidence of her scholarly energy and integrity.

I do want particularly to compliment Ms. Zeimannová on her struggle to understand and place in appropriate context the very seductive and totalistic—but also very controversial—work of Christopher Newfield on the "Emerson effect." On this matter, she has heard the siren song, but has remained clear of the reef. If I have had any role convincing her to lash herself to the mast, I am grateful for her openness to my suggestion.

Because of its quality and scope, if not its depth (for how much depth does there need to be in a B.A. thesis?), I believe that Ms. Zeimannová's thesis merits an evaluation of "1, vyborne."

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne."

Signed:

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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at David.Robbins@ff.cuni.cz.