

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D., thesis supervisor
Bc. Adéla Zeimannová
What It Means to Be American?: Creating American National Identity
M.A. thesis evaluation
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
Charles University, Prague

Ms. Zeimannová's thesis examines the birth of national identity in the U.S. during the Revolutionary era through the time of the Early republic and the period of 1800-1850 in an effort to discover the unifying features of such complex identity and to uncover its origins. The text consults theoretical framework on nation, nationalism and national identity to establish a working definition of a nation and to explain the complexity of the concept which is then further examined in the context of the U.S. In combination with a historical overview of the period 1770-1850, the thesis addresses nationalist feelings and thoughts that permeated the country at the time, examining the first emergence of calls for unified American national identity and the subsequent establishment of such unified identity through the years. Sociopolitical and literary narratives of the time capture the rising nationalist feeling, and, upon further analysis, offer a view of the emerging collective American identity with several unifying features such as American exceptionalism; individualism, self-reliance; the myth of the American Dream, and lastly the legacy of slavery.

The findings suggest that the period of the Revolutionary War followed by the era of the early republic and the years 1800-1850 present one of the most significant stages in America's history in terms of defining its national identity. In her thesis, Ms. Zeimannová suggests that the identified unifying features that emerged during the birth of the new society can be traced directly down to postmodern America, illustrating their deep embeddedness in the American cultural paradigm and their direct influence on American identity.

The thesis traces the major socio-political and historical events of the age of the creation of the U.S. and the early republic in chapters 2 and 3. The information given in these chapters is based on both history and socio-cultural works that analyze the then developing American nation. The lives of the public and ordinary people, in addition to the thoughts on identity and concepts of Americanism of influential thinkers and writers of this period—like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alexis de Tocqueville, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, etc.—are addressed in chapters 4 and 5. The thesis reflects the diversity of the U.S. society of the time and dedicates subchapters to female and African American experience to best capture the actual state of the society. The final chapter of the thesis addresses the consequences, or rather the outcomes, of the origins and construction of American national identity in the following development of the United States and its own national perception.

Ms. Zeimannová has undertaken a difficult, complicated, and sprawling subject, and has managed to produce a thesis comprising important and unifying observations and excerpts that bring a significant degree of cogency and clarity to the study. Both her bibliography and her own analysis are sound, and the resulting scholarly product reflects considerable credit on her intellectual tenacity and the comprehensiveness of her understanding.

In no way to discredit this evaluation, I do want to suggest here several issues (two of which I have previously discussed with Ms. Zeimannová in my role as her thesis supervisor) that it might be helpful to address in any future development of this study:

- 1) The period included in the study (ca. 1776-1850) seems a very extended one to handle in the time and space available, or even for presentation of most relevant considerations in a detailed article-length (or even double-article-length) study. I believe it would be helpful to focus the inquiry on one of the periods 1776-1800, 1800-1830, or 1830-1860.
- 2) I think that insufficient attention is devoted in this study to the inextricable links in the American cultural paradigm—emphasized by both Tocqueville and Emerson—between radical Protestant (antinomian) religious beliefs and practices embedded since earliest days and their parallelisms with and support of democratic attitudes and practices.
- 3) It has recently come to my attention, and I have not had an opportunity to share with Ms. Zeimannová, that Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (J. Hector St. John, a Farmer in Pennsylvania, *Letters from an American Farmer*, London: Thomas Davies, 1782) was much more noticed and appreciated in Europe than in America during the late eighteenth century, and the only contemporary American edition of it that was published was a "homely reprint of the first London edition" in Philadelphia by Matthew Carey in 1793 (W.P. Trent, Prefatory Note, *Letters from an American Farmer*, New York: Fox, Duffield, and Company, 1904, p. v); it was then only republished when urgent attention in the U.S. began to be drawn to the need to "Americanize the immigrants" at the end of the nineteenth century, as part of which the reprinted American edition of the *Letters*—reprinted from the first London edition of 1782—was published in 1904 (*Letters from an American Farmer*, New York: Fox, Duffield, and Company, 1904, Prefatory Note by W.P. Trent, Introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn). Any misunderstanding on this matter is my responsibility, as thesis supervisor.

Overall, Ms. Zeimannová has produced an insightful, comprehensive, and helpful M.A. undertaking. Because of her prodigious efforts, and of the resulting quality and grasp of the subject, I believe that Ms. Zeimannová's thesis merits an evaluation of "1, vyborne."

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne."

Signed:

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D.
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at David.Robbins@ff.cuni.cz.