Becoming American

Aufgaben

Der vorliegende Vorschlag enthält in Aufgabe 3 alternative Arbeitsanweisungen.

1 Outline Johann N. Neem's experiences growing up in the USA as an immigrant child. (Material)

(30 BE)

2 Analyze how the author conveys his view on "American-ness".

(30 BE)

3 Choose <u>one</u> of the following tasks:

3.1 "Most of us have multiple communities to which we belong – and which make claims on us – and it is the relations between these sources of our identity that make us who we are." (Material)

Taking the quote as a starting point, discuss the challenges and benefits of having a hybrid cultural identity.

or

3.2 You are participating in an international project on migration in different countries and your group has been assigned the United States.

Write an article for the project website in which you assess immigrants' chances of fulfilling their American Dream today.

(40 BE)

Material

Johann N. Neem: An American Childhood

In the 1970s, the author's family emigrated from India to the USA when he was two years old. They were part of the first wave of immigrants after the removal of a law that favored European immigration in 1965.

Mine was an American childhood. We were middle class and lived on a cul-de-sac whose residents were diverse in many of the usual American ways. There were Japanese-Americans and Catholics and Protestants. There were people without college degrees, and others with graduate degrees. There were Republicans and Democrats. There were immigrants from Germany, and of course we were from India. […]

I imagined that I could become anybody. I had no awareness then that this belief was the result of more than two centuries of activism on the part of African Americans, feminists, and their allies to earn equality within the American nation-state. It was California. The American Dream was alive. Of course, that dream had been deferred for so many Americans for too long. But after 1965, it was hoped, those obstacles would be behind us. Immigrants would be welcome. African Americans would be equal. And despite the thus-far unsuccessful effort to enact the Equal Rights Amendment[1], I grew up in a world that took for granted that women too could be whomever they wanted to be.

There was a kind of amnesia. Maybe that's not the right word. We were new. So maybe it was that I just didn't know the history, and my parents had experienced a different history. Whatever it was, America was, for us, a blank slate. But it was not *fully blank*. It had rituals and traditions for us to learn, such as giving gifts and spending time with family and friends on Christmas or having barbecues on the Fourth of July. We gathered with neighbors to hunt Easter eggs. It had norms, like saying "thank you" for any kind of service, a sign of the respect each American owed fellow Americans for their contributions to society. It had a creed, too – that the United States promised all people a better, freer, more prosperous life.

No doubt, my parents sometimes faced challenges and encountered prejudice. For all that I shared with my neighbors and schoolmates, my family was also *Indian* American. I grew up surrounded by family friends who were immigrants like us. That was fine too. In America, my Indianness was part of a pluralistic civil society and market in which ethnic and religious groups could sustain their beliefs and folkways[2]. Growing up, I experienced no tension between going to Berkeley for masala dosas[3] in restaurants full of immigrants (and a few hippies), and learning in school about *my* Pilgrim forebears. Nor was I told that my recent arrival in America exempted me from responsibility for the evils of slavery and racism. As part of the imagined community of the nation, I understood that the past was also a shared burden.

Most of us have multiple communities to which we belong – and which make claims on us – and it is the relations between these sources of our identity that make us who we are. It is the tensions between some of these obligations, furthermore, that enable invaluable self-criticism. As the political theorist Michael Walzer has written, a self whose identity is made up of only one source is shallow and totalizing. What makes our differences – our pluralism – sustainable is that one of the communities that define us – America – is shared by most of us. We are many, but also one. This was the ideal of

[1] Equal Rights Amendment – proposed in 1923 to guarantee equal rights for men and women in the Constitution but ratification took till 2021
[2] folkways – traditional behavior and customs
[3] masala dosas – an Indian dish made from flat bread and stuffing

the so-called hyphenated American. *All* Americans, native born or immigrant, had their particular ethnic and religious identities, but we shared a common American-ness.

As a child, I thought that to be American was to believe in individuality, to support pluralism and equality, and also to celebrate common holidays and eat common foods, such as the oozy grilled cheeses and bean burritos that the school cafeteria dished up for us, or the sloppy joes and tacos that my mom learned to cook (even though my favorite food remained dahl and rice). On Halloween, it meant carving jack-o-lanterns and, in the evening, heading out with friends for trick-or-treating. On Thanksgiving, it meant gathering with other immigrant families and friends to eat turkey and express gratitude. Being American meant that during the Christmas season, we kids would live in anticipation, poring through the toy section of the Sears catalog. On the Fourth of July, we'd watch fireworks. At school, we said the Pledge of Allegiance.

I lived in a world where we could all be American, not because of our cultural differences but because of what we could share. This shared culture – this sense of being a people – is a precondition to sustaining the universal ideals of American democracy. We like to pretend that principles are enough, but abstract ideas are thin gruel for flesh-and-blood human beings. We are not disembodied reasoners. We belong to groups. We have emotions. Culture connects us to our country and to one another. But that culture depends on shared rituals and experiences. Today, we are so afraid of offense that we risk privatizing the very culture we once could share together.

My childhood memories of a diverse neighborhood and public school where we could all be Americans reflect good fortune. There are many Americans who experience discrimination and prejudice […]. Since the American Revolution[4], activists have struggled to overcome exclusion; we are still struggling today. But there is a meaningful distinction between seeking access to the common life of the nation and deciding that that common life is itself the problem. A shared culture requires *something*. It cannot simply be an absence.

Shared holidays are essential parts of culture. They mark time and endow it with meaning. That is why the so-called "war over Christmas,"[5] while overblown, is not silly. It reflects what happens when rituals with collective meaning become contested and diminished. Just like so much that once could be shared but now must belong to a "group," Christmas has become something that divides rather than unites. If everything and everyone belongs to a subgroup, there can be no group, and with no group there can be no Americans.

(997 Wörter)

Johann N. Neem: Unbecoming American, in: Hedgehog Review, Spring 2020, URL: https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/monsters/articles/unbecoming-american (abgerufen am 14.01.2021).

Hinweise

Sprachliche Fehler in der Textvorlage wurden entsprechend der geltenden Norm korrigiert.

Zwischenüberschriften der Textvorlage wurden entfernt.

[4] American Revolution – war (1775–1783) in which the British colonies broke free from British rule
[5] "war over Christmas" – cultural debate whether the public display of Christmas symbols is politically correct