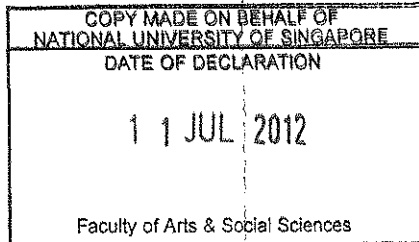


One Hundred Percent American

RALPH LINTON



How much of the values and material aspects of our "American Way" do we take for granted? This very brief article by Ralph Linton, written in 1937, directs us to question our concepts of international superiority and ethnocentrism. Historically, we owe so much of our heritage to the ideas and inventions of people and cultures from distant lands. What does this article, as significant today as it was over sixty years ago, instruct us as to the issue of cultural relativism?

Ralph Linton (1892–1953) received his B.A. from Swarthmore College, and he earned his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1925. He taught at University of Wisconsin, Columbia University, and Yale University. Linton began his training as an archaeologist but, during his 1920 to 1922 research in the Marquesas Islands, developed an interest in living peoples and switched to cultural anthropology. From his broad-reaching studies in the South Pacific, Americas, Africa, and Madagascar, Linton developed insights into the process of acculturation and complex cultural-psychiatric relationships. He was the first to formally introduce the concepts of status and role to anthropological analyses. Among his most important works are *The Study of Man* (1936), *The Cultural Background of Personality* (1945), *The Science of Man in the World Crisis* (1945), and *The Tree of Culture* (1955).

There can be no question about the average American's Americanism or his desire to preserve this precious heritage at all costs. Nevertheless, some insidious foreign ideas have already wormed their way into his civilization without his realizing what was going on. Thus dawn finds the unsuspecting patriot garbed in pajamas, a garment of East Indian origin; and lying in a bed built on a pattern which originated in either Persia or Asia Minor. He is muffled to the ears in un-American materials: cotton, first domesticated in India; linen, domesticated in the Near East; wool from an animal native to Asia Minor; or silk, whose uses were first discovered by the Chinese. All these substances have been transformed into cloth by methods invented in Southwestern Asia. If the weather is cold enough he may even be sleeping under an eiderdown quilt invented in Scandinavia.

in P.R. DeVita & J.D. Armstrong (eds.) "Distant Mirrors: America as a Foreign Culture", Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002.

On awakening he glances at the clock, a medieval European invention, uses one potent Latin word in abbreviated form, rises in haste, and goes to the bathroom. Here, if he stops to think about it, he must feel himself in the presence of a great American institution: he will have heard stories of both the quality and frequency of foreign plumbing and will know that in no other country does the average man perform his ablutions in the midst of such splendor. But the insidious foreign influence pursues him even here. Glass was invented by the ancient Egyptians, the use of glazed tiles for floors and walls in the Near East, porcelain in China, and the art of enameling on metal by Mediterranean artisans of the Bronze Age. Even his bathtub and toilet are but slightly modified copies of Roman originals. The only purely American contribution to the ensemble is the steam radiator, against which our patriot very briefly and unintentionally places his posterior.

In this bathroom the American washes with soap invented by the ancient Gauls. Next he cleans his teeth, a subversive European practice which did not invade America until the latter part of the eighteenth century. He then shaves, a masochistic rite first developed by the heathen priests of ancient Egypt and Sumer. The process is made less of a penance by the fact that his razor is of steel, an iron-carbon alloy discovered in either India or Turkestan. Lastly, he dries himself on a Turkish towel.

Returning to the bedroom, the unconscious victim of un-American practices removes his clothes from a chair, invented in the Near East, and proceeds to dress. He puts on close-fitting tailored garments whose form derives from the skin clothing of the ancient nomads of the Asiatic steppes and fastens them with buttons whose prototypes appeared in Europe at the close of the Stone Age. This costume is appropriate enough for outdoor exercise in a cold climate, but is quite unsuited to American summers, steam-heated houses, and Pullmans. Nevertheless, foreign ideas and habits hold the unfortunate man in thrall even when common sense tells him that the authentically American costume of gee string and moccasins would be far more comfortable. He puts on his feet stiff coverings made from hide prepared by a process invented in ancient Egypt and cut to a pattern which can be traced back to ancient Greece, and makes sure that they are properly polished, also a Greek idea. Lastly, he ties about his neck a strip of bright-colored cloth which is a vestigial survival of the shoulder shawls worn by seventeenth-century Croats. He gives himself a final appraisal in the mirror, an old Mediterranean invention, and goes downstairs to breakfast.

Here a whole new series of foreign things confronts him. His food and drink are placed before him in pottery vessels, the proper name of which—china—is sufficient evidence of their origin. His fork is a medieval Italian invention and his spoon a copy of a Roman original. He will usually begin the meal with coffee, an Abyssinian plant first discovered by the Arabs. The American is quite likely to need it to dispel the morning-after effects of overindulgence in fermented drinks, invented in the Near East; or distilled ones, invented by the alchemists of medieval Europe. Whereas the Arabs took their coffee straight, he will probably sweeten it with sugar, discovered in India; and dilute it with cream, both the domestication of cattle and the technique of milking having originated in Asia Minor.

If our patriot is old-fashioned enough to adhere to the so-called American breakfast, his coffee will be accompanied by an orange, domesticated in the Mediterranean region, a cantaloupe domesticated in Persia, or grapes domesticated

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in Asia Minor. He will follow this with a bowl of cereal made from grain domesti-
cated in the Near East and prepared by methods also invented there. From this he
will go on to waffles, a Scandinavian invention, with plenty of butter, originally a
Near-Eastern cosmetic. As a side dish he may have the egg of a bird domesticated in
Southeastern Asia or strips of the flesh of an animal domesticated in the same
region, which has been salted and smoked by a process invented in Northern
Europe.

Breakfast over, he places upon his head a molded piece of felt, invented by the
nomads of Eastern Asia, and, if it looks like rain, puts on outer shoes of rubber, dis-
covered by the ancient Mexicans, and takes an umbrella, invented in India. He then
sprints for his train—the train, not sprinting, being an English invention. At the sta-
tion he pauses for a moment to buy a newspaper, paying for it with coins invented
in ancient Lydia. Once on board he settles back to inhale the fumes of a cigarette
invented in Mexico, or a cigar invented in Brazil. Meanwhile, he reads the news of
the day, imprinted in characters invented by the ancient Semites by a process
invented in Germany upon a material invented in China. As he scans the latest edi-
torial pointing out the dire results to our institutions of accepting foreign ideas, he
will not fail to thank a Hebrew God in an Indo-European language that he is a one
hundred percent (decimal system invented by the Greeks) American (from
Americus Vespucci, Italian geographer).

NOTE

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California.

STUDY QUESTION

1. Provide five examples of how, in your daily life, you employ something that had
its historical origin in a culture that was not invented in the United States. Do not
use examples provided in the article.

