

Constructed Identities and the “Other”

People have constructed identities for themselves and the “other” since the dawn of time. These identities can differ by many factors, including but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion. On the most basic level, we as individuals develop identities to distinguish ourselves from others and express these differences through clothing, music, language, and behavior. At times, these constructed identities move beyond the self to define who is deserving of resources, work, and citizenship. Consequently, the constructed identities also shape social and public policy. In some cases, especially when people perceive a threat to their individual or collective identity, they react by taking drastic, discriminatory, or violent steps to protect their identities rather than attempt to understand why they feel threatened.

One example of a constructed identity of the “self” versus the “other” outside of the race, class, and gender classification relates to nationalism and the constructed identity of a people. Brain Steele argues in “Inventing Un-America” that one of the so-called founding fathers of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, did not just define the identity of America through the writing of the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, but in the process also outlined who was not American. By suggesting that American held certain “truths to be self-evident,” Jefferson insisted that the British did not hold such characteristics and thus were un-American. Jefferson reiterated throughout the remainder of his life that although Americans had emerged through the British and shared language and appearance with them, their belief in freedom and individual independence would set them forever apart from the British. Jefferson for that reason also favored the War of 1812 because it would forever wean America of British habits. This belief also informed Jefferson’s interpretation of the Federalists as too closely aligned with European ideals – that is un-American – and shaped the political campaigns of 1796 and 1800. The political discourse defining America and its people as different, and perhaps exceptional, initiated during

this time period contributed to the creation of a national identity as well as the definition of the country or person that was/is not American.¹

One example of how this constructed national identity and its opposing “other” became mainstream is the growth of national sports and the Buffalo Bill Wild West production during the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. At that time, playing or watching football, baseball, and basketball reinforced notions of a unique American character and physical form. Baseball became the so-called “National Pastime,” and thus intricately linked to American culture in opposition to non-American people, places, and cultures, through such publications as A. G. Spalding’s *America’s National Game*. Spalding, for example argued that baseball may have had roots in England’s cricket but developed into a uniquely American sport. More crass in its racial undertones was the staging of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West that reinforced constructed ideals of American exceptionalism and superiority in opposition to native primitive behavior. Cowboy activities, rodeos, and shooting exercises presented to American as well as European audiences celebrated not only the conquest of the West but also reflected the superior masculine frontier spirit, skills, and sportsmanship in contrast to the inferior, defeated, pacified, yet also disappearing American Indian culture.²

Although the constructed American national identity may be based on ideology and is nearly unrealizable, Americans have nevertheless defended it from perceived attacks by political parties, and foreign countries, people, or ideologies. In the process they have also justified social and economic policy that discriminated, or currently discriminates, against those who held different ideals. Such policies include the deportation of immigrants who held suspected socialist ideology during the First Red Scare in the early 1920s, the search or witch hunt for the Communist enemy within during the HUAC

¹ Brian Steele, “Inventing Un-American,” *Journal of American Studies* 47 (2013): 881-902.

² David L. Andrews, Jacob Bustad, and Samuel Clevenger, “National Sporting Pastime, Spectacles of Sporting Otherness and American Imaginings, 1880-1920,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 31 (2014): 224-249.

hearings in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the more recent decision to exclude Muslims from the United States.