



The Change of American National Identity around WWI Period from the View of Stuart Hall's Identity

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Abstract. Stuart Hall is a leading figure in British cultural studies. He actively absorbed advanced theoretical resources from the Europe and made dialogue and exploration with them, making “cultural studies” developed in a cross-subject way. Historically, the United States experienced a dramatic shift in national cultural identity around the time of World War I. It transformed from a symbol of freedom, a model of the republic, into a worldwide champion of freedom and peace. This paper aims to combine the two and analyze how the national identity of the United States changed during the World War I from the view of Hall's cultural identity theory. This provides a new way of thinking and perspective for the study of national identity of great powers.

Keywords: Stuart Hall · national identity · culture · WWI · transition

1 Introduction

Hall's cultural theories comes from many sources, including Marxism, Louis Pierre Althusser's structural Marxism, Gramsci Antonio's view of cultural rights, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's political philosophy, etc. Hall's culture theory analysis is the research background of this paper, the most important of which is divided into five parts. The cultural theory of dialectical thinking, cultural analysis of historical time and place, the cultural theory of political economics perspective, the cultural theory of problem consciousness and the empirical analysis, and the deep analysis of phenomenon.

America's national identity depends in large part on the words of its president at the time. The effect is even more pronounced when a country is in the midst of a mobilization for war. In the nearly 100 years since the founding of the United States, the American people have had a clear understanding and accurate positioning of their international identity. That is, the United States is a newly emerging free country, completely different from the corrupt and oppressive Britain and European countries. At the end of the 19th century, the United States has become the world's leading economic power, therefore, in this time, the domestic cultural identity has been a huge change, this change is not disposable or instantaneous, but slowly changed in the process of the history of a country. However, the impact of some important time points on national identity is enormous.

The United States, which was far ahead in the world, has to rethink its role on the international stage. Under the leadership of President Wilson, the cultural identity of American citizens underwent a complete and successful transformation.

Then, under the guidance of Hall's cultural theory research methodology, how would American cultural identity and historical mission be defined at that time? What would the political demands of American identity have looked like at the time? In Hall's view, identity politics was not become the main feature of cultural politics until the 1990s, can such features provide new ideas for historical research? If so, what was the direction of American national identity at the time? What would it be like now? With these problems, this paper gives a comprehensive explanation of Hall's theory of cultural identity. Taking the United States during the First World War as an example, this paper analyzes and points out the reasons, process, results and influence of the change of national identity of America from a special view. In addition, this paper tries to give a new idea for contemporary historical research, which will be helpful for the development of international situation forecast.

2 Analysis Within Hall's Identity Theory

2.1 Theoretical Framework

In Hall's opinion, the study of culture needs clear objects. If culture is not clearly defined, then research is meaningless. It is important to understand that the concept of culture was proposed, not as the answer to some grand theoretical question, but as a response to a very concrete political problem and question [1]. All cultures mentioned below will adopt this definition.

2.2 American Principles and Imperialism

Back in the late 19th century, the American people had been guided by Washington, Adams and other founding fathers of America for more than a century. The American people had a clear idea of who their country was, and they wanted to build their country into a model of freedom, equality, and resistance to oppression. Although such an international role satisfied the American people at the time. But the elites of American society had become suspicious of this cultural identity as the American economy was already the world's largest. The international isolationism has to be re-examined. Is this a creditable part for this nation to play? The mission of this country if it has one is not to pose but to act [2].

Ex-Secretary Olney said in a speech at Harvard University. For many imperialists, they thought that the United States should gradually learn to participate in international politics and enter the world stage. This makes it obvious that the imperialists' claim is a stark departure from American past role as the embodiment of virtue. Instead, it would allow the United States, like European countries, to rule foreign lands and build colonies abroad.

The core of the debate between imperialists and anti-imperialists was the question of American identity. The political leanings of the American people were quite clear. The

vast majority of the American people believed that the United States should, as the anti-imperialists said, continue to adhere to the stable development of the country, continue to adhere to the American dream, develop with isolationism (of course, the word was not derogatory at that time) and adhere to “American principles”. Culture is a battle space for ideology and power. According to Hall in his public speeches, one’s ethnic, racial, and civic identities are simply historical, cultural, and political contextualization. Identity governance strategy must rely on the form of national identity and cultural identity, and cultural diversity is ultimately unified in national identity. The meaning of identity is to make people find their psychological and social true self. This applies not just to ordinary people, but to the president of the United States and even to everyone else. As a result, former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, as an imperialist, flatly rejected the annexation of the Dominican Republic on December 6, 1904. He knew that doing so would not only fail to attract support, but would provoke a backlash at home, because the cultural identity of the American people did not align with his own. In addition, he even signed a protocol with the Dominican Republic on January 21, 1905, which provided that America should guarantee the territorial integrity of the republic [3].

2.3 The Essence of Identity

In capitalist society, “identity” represents difference rather than unity. In Hall’s opinion, in capitalist society, the formalization of identity is in a series of cultural activities, such as presidential speeches, newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts and literary books, is essentially the control of ruling class power in a special field. For example, the American government stereotyped the physical characteristics of African Americans as identity through the publication and distribution of a large number of newspapers, literary works, television broadcasts and other means. Ultimately, in late 20th century, “African American identity” became a special difference. Hall believed that racial discrimination is politicized and closely related to the definition of cultural identity.

Similarly, America’s national identity was changing dramatically during World War I. It was clear that every public speech Wilson made was not accidental. It was carefully thought out. Every example, every word was carefully chosen. In fact, he succeeded. He not only succeeded in changing the cultural identity of every American citizen, but also in charting a long-term and feasible way for the future of the United States. He was later considered one of the greatest presidents in American history.

2.4 Before the World War I

World War I broke out on July 28, 1914. Actually, it was a big challenge for a president who has only been in office for a year. During his first year in office, President Woodrow Wilson focused on solving problems such as farmers’ credit, food supply, and opposing private monopolies, etc. Wilson took a more humane approach to American colonies like the Philippines, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico than Roosevelt had. He believed that government was needed to win the trust of the local people. However, from March 1914, Wilson began to constantly emphasize the particularity of American international role. At this stage, he was acutely aware of the dramatic changes in the international situation, Wilson strongly emphasized that the United States should not be involved in the world

war, but should take an active role in providing security for the suffering nation during the war and in the process of postwar reconstruction. “Here are markets which we must supply, and we must find the means of action” [4]. He made this plea to the people, and then turned to point out that the United States did not have a proper means of carrying out the relief and reconstruction activities mentioned above. “To speak plainly, we have grossly erred in the way in which we have stunted and hindered the development of our merchant marine”. During this period, he continued to instill in the American people the fact that the international status of the United States was obviously not matched with the national strength. European countries were in deep war, and the developed and rich United States wanted to provide market support to countries in war, but found that there was no appropriate means and status.

2.5 During the World War I

US-German relations deteriorated rapidly after a German submarine sank the RMS Lusitania in 1915. In April 1917, the United States officially declared war on Germany. Next, President Wilson redefined the United States as the guardian of freedom. He described Germany as an evil spirit, ruthlessly trampling on human nature “and I think that we can claim that the task was undertaken with a true and disinterested enthusiasm for the freedom of the Americas and the unmolested Self-government of her independent peoples [5]”.

Wilson’s control of identity politics was very shrewd, and he changed the ideological tide of the American society bit by bit. He put the justice of the United States in the first place, that is to say, Americans was at the highest moral point in the war. He knew the ultimate goal of identity politics is very simple, that is to answer the question “Who we are going to be”. This answer includes self-identification and social-identification, and the social identity here depends on whether the individual identity is successfully achieved. However, in the framework of the American society at that time, the social main body part who should show their identity were transformed. Destined to be what Wilson called the “guardian of freedom”. In fact, all the sources of war and competition between countries are national interests. In a letter to the President, Page made it clear that the United States should enter the war immediately, that European countries would go bankrupt, that Germany would be doomed to disappear from the world, and that perhaps the whole world would be American in the future. It is also true that anti-war sentiment in the United States was very high both before and during the war. President Wilson had to release the secret German and Mexican cables to the United States in order to anger the Americans and win the majority of public support. “Identity” is supposed to be a social attribute, but in this change, “identity” is completely separated from the social attribute and becomes an objective thing that can be changed by words.

According to Hall, governments should view culture as a discursive means of expressing differences as solidarity, rather than seeing differences as congruent. President Wilson clearly and accurately used the means of discourse, all Americans, it seemed, were willing to play the role of guardian of freedom, as he put it. The job of cultural politics, According to Hall, is to mobilize all resources to understand what shapes our lives and our societies. Use every possible means to deprive people of their ability to live with differences. That is to say, to create a kind of superficial politics that reflects

people's free will. For example, the use of all media, education, and policy to deconstruct the antithesis of black and white identity. Let this definition itself be the antithesis of freedom. After the end of the First World War, Wilson created an idealistic image for the United States. A guardian of liberty and a leader on the world stage. In his view, the United States would serve the world with its principles and dreams, and show the right way to people living in all parts of the world.

3 Conclusion

In short, the First World War was both a disaster and a redemption for the United States, which showed the most ruthless struggle for interests in human history and gave Americans a new understanding of their national identity. Under the guidance of Hall's thought, the change of American national identity can be understood as: through political interpretation, the self-identity of social subjects is distorted, the ability of society to accept its differences from the original cognition is promoted, and the binary opposition between "world leader" identity and "isolationist" identity is gradually deconstructed. People's willingness to accept differences has grown so strong that the government's plans for the future of the country have become people's rethinking of the country. In capitalist society, national identity is often transformed in this way. A country's international identity and cultural identity often do not necessarily represent the real will of the people, but can often be reshaped through discourse.

While the Frankfurt School argued that world culture was increasingly Americanized by the expansion of capital, Hall argues that this view should be more dynamic. Like the evolution of America's national identity, the process must be gradual, especially in Hall's prediction of global post-modernization has been gradually confirmed by facts. Culture reflects the characteristics of social development, so it can predict the future. However, whether it is historical research or cultural research, it is most important to constantly find more accurate propositions of the times. Since the beginning of the founding of the United States, the propositions of the times are changing constantly, so the research in different periods also means that different world cultural backgrounds are needed. In any case, it is undeniable that Hall's theory of cultural identity can still give unique insights and play an important role in historical research.

Authors' Contributions

This paper is independently completed by Bohan Yang.

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The combination of Hall theory and historical research is my personal whim. Due to my limited level and ability, I only hope that this attempt can contribute to the study of history and culture.

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