

The American Essence:
On American Intellectualism, Ambition, and Competition

“Americans are at the same time extremely individualistic and yet capable of doing incredible things as a group.” – Loic, my frisbee coach. Sometimes they spend a lot of time and effort on things just because. Flashmobs, marching bands, Guinness World Records, and many other things are not only dominated by Americans, but defined by them. In France, the idea of spending so much effort on any one thing would be inconceivable. And yet at the same time, the French are a people very aware that they are a part of a world. When I described the Silicon Valley mentality (where everyone must be perfect and 90% of the time their perfection must be academic) to my host mom, she replied incredulously, “But you need all sorts in the world! You need both the engineers *and* the gardeners!” Everyone does the best he can, and if it's not enough, he's supported by those who did more than enough. That's called socialism, and it's also called realizing that everything isn't about “fair” and whether you personally will be justly rewarded for your labor. In France, everything is calmer, people go by their own schedules. Why would they do otherwise? It's the fierce individualism in America that drives us to competitive extremes. Every child is instilled with the desire to become someone extraordinary. Maybe it was just my friends and I, but I am *still* terrified of being average. The American Dream is to start off poor, the bastard offspring of some no-good immigrants, but to work your way to the top through cleverness and perseverance. Samuel Gompers is the American Dream; so is Andrew Carnegie. This is less possible than it used to be, but the attitude is still there. The demand to become exceptional. The lack of legitimate excuses. In France I've very commonly heard reference to if someone has the “capacities” to do something or not. “He succeeds/does not succeed in school because he does/does not have the *capacities*.” That's not something very commonly said in the US. If you don't succeed, it must be because you aren't working hard enough. Where is your ambition?

My respect for capitalism has grown so much during my time in France. Capitalism is such an American idea as well – the thought that merit is what counts, and those who are clever and determined enough to succeed in business as well as school should be the ones to reap the benefits. We have very little idea of “natural rights,” despite the infusion of John Locke in our Declaration of Independence. It's a very American attitude to assume that the homeless, the unemployed, and those with failing businesses must have failed through some fault of their own. We feel pity when we learn it isn't their fault – if staggering medical bills made them unable to pay the rent, or if an earthquake destroyed their house and livelihood – but such is life, we say. *C'est la vie*. An expression that comes from the French, but means something very different to each culture. France says “Hey man, *c'est la vie*. *T'inquiète pas*. (Don't worry.) I'll pay for the house until you get back on your feet.” The US says “Well, *c'est la vie*. Shit happens. I hope you work it out.”

This heartless attitude is what makes the fashionable young liberals of my country rebellious. Sitting in their coffeeshops with their thick-framed glasses and flannel button-downs, they long for a country like Finland, a nice socialist country that will give everyone the education, medical care, food, and financial aid that they need. “Where are our basic human rights?” they ask. Yes, it's heartless. But it goes hand-in-hand with our success. A year ago I saw only the upsides of socialism, but now I see where it fails and where America, in its turn, shines. If you don't fend for yourself, you don't come up with brilliant new ways of doing things. That's all, it's as simple as that. Why does the US lead so strongly in technology and innovation? Japan is following closely behind, but they're behind. iPods and iPhones and netbooks and the Internet and everything that is now commonplace technology was pretty much invented in the US. Other countries – Taiwan, China, Vietnam – produce our technology, serving as our factories. Japan and certain European countries follow behind our inventions, tailoring them to meet new purposes, giving them shiny new looks and different forms. But we invent them. In a land of the

truly free, where it's your fault and your doom if you fail, there is all the more glory and honor when you succeed. Each of us, thinking only of ourselves and how we can play off our strengths to win in this game against the world, chooses a passion to follow that we hope will make us stand out. Brilliant programmers don't become pianists, brilliant musicians don't become janitors. There is shame in janitorhood. There is shame in being a failed programmer. It's a dog-eat-dog world, and don't you dare think you can relax. It's your *life* in the game! You can't spend junior year socializing, that's out of the question. It's your *life*! Don't you want to have a good one? Don't you want to succeed?

In France, the idea of stressing for your future to the detriment of your current social/mental/physical well-being seems ridiculous. In the US, the contrary. So maybe that's bad too. We have two tally marks against us while I'm trying to talk about how fantastic the US is – we're heartless to the poor and we're too stressed. Let me get more to the point and talk about why we're so successful a country.

For starters, school in the US – or at least, in the Silicon Valley where I grew up – is a gauntlet. If innate capability x work = success, those with an insufficient combination of talent and motivation will be labeled failures, the derogatory term “high school dropout” to haunt them for the rest of their days. We weed out the weak. And we strengthen the strong. At Homestead High School, I learned real science and math, in a way that made sense to me so I could apply it to any other type of problem, instead of just blind repetition (think Asian countries) or blind guessing (what I've mostly seen in France). I took courses that demanded hours of work per night – hours of being productive, not just hours of sitting there complaining about stuff that would take half an hour if you just focused. APUSH made us efficient. There was a choice between efficiency, no sleep, and bad grades. And sometimes you got bad grades even if you *were* efficient and did all your work – that's where natural talent comes in. All these factors got taken into consideration, and we learned how to deal with what we were given. Those who could never succeed in school, like I said, got weeded out. Those who could succeed if they worked really hard learned to work really hard. And those like me who were bad at working hard but had the brains to succeed learned to cultivate our strong points – enough sleep and focus can boost your intelligence and make up for a lack of productivity. It's a game, a game that everyone is desperate to receive the highest score on.

“I am not unique. That is okay, though; really, it is. I don't need to be special, but apparently that is what is necessary to get into college.” – Ali, a friend of mine writing about applying to college.

We live in fear, but it's only half-imagined. It's not for nothing that we worked like madmen. To get into a good college, you need good grades. Granted, a good college isn't *necessary*, any more than having a nice car is necessary. You can still find a job with a degree from CSU Stockton, even though it would be easier with a degree from Harvard. But it's partly to make our future easier and more fruitful, partly a status symbol, and mostly simply because we think of ourselves as the sort of people who go to nice colleges – that is where we belong, and to not go to a good college would be failure because we would not end up where we feel we belong. But we do create this for ourselves, mostly. There are plenty of options for those who don't take all AP classes and work like madmen – I'm not going to pretend all Americans are like that. My friends and I are the minority, not the majority. But we create this for ourselves, create this world of intense competition, and decide we'll win it. Just like in the future we'll create goals for ourselves above and beyond making a living. Like Jobs and Wozniac and Gates and Zuckerberg. We'll create new things and never be satisfied and always have this crazy drive to do *more*, more, it's never enough.

French people know how to be satisfied with themselves. That is why they are not the technology and business capital of the world. We are.

What I'm trying to describe is that our school system is (perhaps unintentionally) modeled after our economy. My high school was competitive because of the students in it. The teachers helped too, but it was the students who made it that way, the offspring of Chinese Tiger-mothers who will disown you if the envelope from Harvard is thin instead of fat. They sign up for AP courses, increasing the demand for higher level classes and bringing in skilled teachers who have the training and the desire for such courses. They work like madmen, so when the majority of them have As in the majority of their classes, the teachers realize that this doesn't give very much discrimination between the good students and the better students, so it becomes harder to get an A. Teachers grade harder, and the curve changes with the increased competence of the students. There are still non-AP options, so this upward spiral of competition is not derailed by the students who lack the intellect or the willpower to compete with the others. There are plenty of high schools where this doesn't happen. If I went to high school in Wyoming, I would get all As without ever working, because the competition never got started and the expectations remained low. It's a free market. Unregulated. It's capitalism. In France, schools are mostly all the same because the idea of tracking classes – having separate AP or Honors classes for the more skilled students – doesn't exist. They all take the same classes to pass the same Bac at the end of junior and senior year, except for the different specialties in science, economics, or literature. So it's hardly possible to have that inflation of expectations because of the way it's structured and controlled by the state, even if the French attitude would permit such ridiculous competition (which it doesn't). It's socialism.

Again, I want to be very clear that most of America is not at all like this. But the pockets of the US that are like this dominate our international image. So really, when I talk about America, I'm talking about the Silicon Valley, Massachusetts and especially Cambridge, and the urban and well-educated parts of New York, New Jersey, Texas, and all those other states with a few highly intellectual pockets. It's a minority, but it's enough, it's what makes us stand out, and it's what I grew up in.

So in the US we do some silly things like marching band. Marching band, at least a competitive one like at Homestead High, takes about 20 hours a week of practice and competitions. Actually, at Homestead we can't call marching band a sport because there's a California law against having more than 16 hours of practice per week for sports. So we do marching band anyway, but we don't get sports credit for it. Hah. It's crazy – what do we get out of it? That is a question, by the way, that would never be asked by someone in band. It's a question a French person would ask, though. We get friends and companionship and physical discipline and musical training and the satisfaction that comes from being good at something. Some of us do it for college apps, but fortunately not too many. But because it looks like so much effort and doesn't even give you a concrete end product, I can't possibly imagine that the French would have marching bands. What a uniquely American, incredibly silly idea. It's silly ideas like marching band that turn out high school students with a level of discipline, leadership, and determination that will make them great.

There's a marching band motivational speaker named Scott Lang who comes to talk to my high school band every year or two. I disagree with many of the things he says, but one thing we do agree on is how great marching band kids are. A couple years ago he said that it will be a marching band kid who finds the cure for cancer. It will be marchers who will invent new technologies to improve our quality of life, who will end wars, who will fight for peace and freedom and a better society. I couldn't agree more. We have taught these kids both the meaning of hard work *and* that when you work hard you can achieve truly amazing things. That is a valuable knowledge.

The kids I know at my high school in France have ideas already about what they want to be when they

grow up. There's a lot of pressure in France to decide what you want to do from a young age. Going into junior year you have to choose to specialize in science/math, economics/social stuff, or literature, unless you want to pass the Professional Bac in something technical. Even before you get to high school you're asked to make a choice – general high school, vocational high school, or straight into the uneducated work force. Compared to the US, there's far less shame in choosing a lower level of education to do a more manual or less intellectually demanding job. It's just a choice they make. As such, most of my friends already have ideas about what they want to be: a psychologist, a mid-wife, a physical trainer, an interior designer, a journalist... My friends back home in the US have no idea what they want to do. They have vague ideas in the realm of science or programming or teaching, but the choice is still far away. We go to big, unspecialized colleges, and don't even have to choose a major right away, and we can keep switching majors until we find what we like. As such, we have a wild ambition to be something great. We haven't been asked for a concrete, realistic plan for the future, so our dreams are far from realistic. I change dream-jobs every couple of months, but I'm currently debating between an anthropology or linguistics professor, or a Bill Bryson – a writer who makes a living by doing awesome things and documenting them. Because our school system doesn't demand any choices until we're 18 or older, it allows our imaginations to run a little wild. Steve Jobs didn't decide he just wanted to be a programmer and sat in a cubicle programming all day. He decided he wanted to create a product that would change the world. A user-friendly PC in every household. So he did. Because why not? This is America. (DISCLAIMER: I don't actually like Apple.)

America, land of the insanely motivated, the ambitious, the unrealistic dreamers with a lot of pressure to make it big, to be special. It can be brutal. I know a few kids who've cracked under the pressure of the Silicon Valley mentality. And it can be great. Junior year, which is supposed to be the most brutal, was the best year of my life so far. I took APUSH, which is a brutal class that deprives you of sleep and makes you a walking textbook of US history. I loved it. Our teacher was charismatic, funny, interesting. The class was less about memorizing dates and more about seeing how history fit together – was FDR's New Deal successful? Why? Why not? In what ways was WWII just an extension of WWI? How did the Paris Peace Treaties differ from the Treaty of Versailles to really end the war? History became a story, and the details that fleshed it out were sometimes hard to memorize, but actually added meaningful information. I took calculus, which is the first time ever that I liked a math class. What a beautiful subject – a math so useful in the real world that practically all the questions in our book were really physics questions. Yes, it was difficult, but I was happier than I'd ever been before. I was interested. I didn't even have time for normal teenage social drama, and it was better that way. My favorite classes were the AP classes, and I got better grades than I'd ever gotten before. If you didn't know before that I'm a nerd, I guess you know it now.

But what I'm trying to say is that the gauntlet of Silicon Valley schools is not only detrimental to some students' mental health, but it also causes other students to flourish. And the ones who crack under the pressure will still go on to have fine lives – after a little bit of therapy, they'll go on to community college and become a social worker or some other not terribly high-status but unobjectionable job. So it's not the end of the world, and it's no coincidence that Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak both graduated from my high school. True, they hated school. But not because it was too difficult. Because great minds like that hate restrictions, and they were ready to go off and program brilliant things long before society was ready to let them. They were born and raised in the Silicon Valley, and they grew old here. It is a melting pot of intellectual snobbery, high-tech industry, and a cultural bonanza of immigration.

I won't really get into this because it's a whole other topic, but places like the Valley that have lots of immigration but high costs of living are actually self-filtering environments. It's hard to live in the Valley because you have to have enough money to pay the rent. Being an engineer or a programmer

gives you a very high salary, enough to pay the rent. So immigrants who are determined to give their children the very best education the US can offer them can't do better than to educate themselves in a technological domain and move to the Silicon Valley. It's incredibly difficult to live near good Silicon Valley schools if you don't speak English and work at a McDonald's. You just can't afford it. So the Valley draws the best and the brightest and the most ambitious from every country, while filtering out those who want to come and profit from the education but don't yet have an education themselves. Again, it's brutal, but effective. It also means that the Silicon Valley is one of the least racist places I ever been.

Okay, this is getting way too long, and I don't even know who's going to be interested in it. But to summarize, after living in France, this is what the US means to me:

- Individualism *and* knowing how to work together, driven by collective competition
- Capitalism of the economy *and* of political structures like public education
- More pressure to succeed
- Less pressure to choose a job from a young age, leading to more reckless, unrealistic ambition (which is a good thing)
- Competition, competition, innovation

And this is why the US is the world leader in business and education, and why I've learned that capitalism isn't that bad after all. This is why, despite my wanderlust to see as much of the world as possible and learn about other cultures, I know I will spend most of the rest of my life in the US, in one of the pockets of intellectualism that I mentioned (Silicon Valley or others). This is why high school in France is really boring for a Silicon Valley-raised nerd like me. This is my culture, that I can identify much better now that I've discovered a different culture. It defines me, but I'm okay with that, because I like it a whole lot better now that I've learned about the alternatives.

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