CONSTRUCTING NATIONALISM IN CRÈVECŒUR'S LETTER "WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?"

Adela Livia Catană
Assist. Prof., PhD., Military Technical Academy

Abstract:This essay aims to offer a close analysis of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur's well-known letter "What is an American?" (1782), *using a nationalist perspective and taking into account some of the principles shared by authors such as Homi Bhabha, Anthony Giddens, Walker Connor, Hutchinson and Smith, Mungiu-Pippidi in their critically acclaimed works. It tries to highlight an important step in the construction of the American cultural identity as Crèvecœur highlights the transformation faced by the immigrants coming to a new land, talks about their social fluidity and amalgam, and foresees the 'melting pot' metaphor. This essay combines the technique of close reading with theoretical interpretations of concepts such as 'nationalism', 'nation', 'identity', 'ethnicity' and 'assimilation', and preserves at its core the idea that "the American is a New Man, who acts upon new principles" revealing the natural changes of the American thought which generates a new type of a national consciousness.*

Keywords:assimilation, ethnicity, identity, nation, nationalism

In his famous texts, "Letters from an American Farmer" (1782), the French American writer, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur, constructs a positive image of his adoptive nation through narration. His fictionalized narrator, James, describes to a London gentleman his experiences as a third-generation farmer in Pennsylvania and, although, he seems to militate for a new agrarian democracy, he actually offers a detailed image of an ideal place to live– of a "perfect society".

Narrating the nation is a seductive as well as an intriguing process which proves that nations are in essence born out of subjective perceptions, which translate from one individual to another, while being simultaneously perpetuated from one generation to another. It is important, however, not to forget that nations like 'narratives' lose, as Homi Bhabha reveals in his introduction to the collective volume *Nation & Narration*, 1990:

> *their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration– might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west.* (1)

The third letter "What is an American?" has been long considered the classic statement of the 'New Man' characterized by pragmatism, individualism, the desire to work hard and high principles and goals. Its historical context should not be overlooked either. Crèvecœur wrote his letters during the first half of the Revolution, and published them in 1782 after the war, when they became an important element in the construction of the American nationalism.

'Nationalism' represents an extremely debatable political ideology which has simultaneous anthropological, psychological, philosophical implications. In general terms, however, it has been defined as a "form of patriotism based upon the identification of a group of individuals with a nation" (Druckman 43). According to Brian Barry, the core of a

BDD-A27943 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:07 UTC)

nationalist movement is the urge to subordinate the common interests which may derive from social constructs such as class, religion or party, for instance, to those that they share not with their fellow citizens but with other members of the national group (353). His approach may correspond to Crèvecœur's opinions regarding the interests which bound Americans together and motivate them to form a nation.

The concept of 'nation', just like that of nationalism faces various definitions. In Anthony Smith's view, a 'nation' is "a named human population sharing a historical territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (qtd. in Mungiu Pippidi, 14). On the other hand, in Anthony Giddens's opinion, a 'nation' can only exist when:

> *a state has a unified administrative reach over the territory over which its sovereignty is claimed. The development of a plurality of nations is basic to the centralization and administrative expansion of a state domination internally, since the fixing of borders depends upon the reflexive ordering of a state system* (qtd. in Hutchinson and Smith, 34).

Crèvecœur's letters exemplify the definitions attributed to the concepts of 'nation' and 'nationalism' and reveal the way in which the American nation forms. The author begins his third letter by enumerating the riches offered by the American territory and provides a detailed image of its newly born society, its people and their lifestyle, by contrasting it with those present in Europe at that particular time.

America is a "new continent" − Crèvecœur says − where "the industry of his native country is displayed in a new manner" as well as the "arts, sciences, and ingenuity which flourish in Europe" (23). It is a world of intense transformations with "fair cities, substantial villages, extensive fields, an immense country filled with decent houses, good roads, orchards, meadows, and bridges" replacing the "wild, woody and uncultivated" (Crèvecœur 23). It is the birth place of a modern society very different from the European one represented by "great lords who possess everything and of a herd of people who have nothing" (Crèvecœur 23). This is a place which has no aristocratic families, no royalties or ecclesiastical representatives and this makes it immune to the immense power of a few wealthy and invisible people over the many visible and impoverished ones. In this line of ideas, Crèvecœur praises the American freedom and equality of chances, and states that "We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free; as he ought to be; nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are" (24). Likewise, there are no big manufacturers who enjoy the great refinements of luxury while employing thousands of poor workers to slave for them. In America the gap between social classes is not as big as on the old continent and grants people the opportunity of a fresh start in their personal development.

Mutual respect and religion continue to play a very important role in the American society just like anywhere else in the world. Thus, Americans might use "lawyer" or "merchant" as fairest titles for specially trained people or "farmers" for rural inhabitants, but they do not really waist their energy and time with distinctions and names of honour. Similarly, their religious rituals lack the sophistication of the European ones and are delivered by "a parson as simple as his flock, a farmer who does not riot on the labor of others" (Crèvecœur 24). Simplicity and respect are the key words in this society which does not need embellishments to prove its dignity or faith.

In the same line of ideas, Crèvecœur praises the advantages of this new land such as: the immensity of the territory, the good roads and navigable rivers, the equitable government, and the respect for laws and the industry. He compares the images of the rural districts on both

BDD-A27943 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:07 UTC)

continents. The European environment is represented by "the hostile castle, and the haughty mansion, contrasted with the clay-built hut and miserable cabbin, where cattle and men help to keep each other warm, and dwell in meanness, smoke, and indigence" whereas the American countryside is characterized by "a pleasing uniformity of decent competence which appears throughout the habitations" (Crèvecœur 24). These descriptions mark the schism between the two worlds−the old corrupted Europe and a newly born ideal America. The comparison between Americans and Europeans as well as the differences that the author underlines in his text reflect the presence of two huge homogenous groups. This distinction enforces the idea shared by Mungiu Pippidi in her work, while quoting Tajfel, that "a positive social identity is obtained via differentiation and competition among groups" (14). Americans are different and compete against Europeans, and this thought unites the people living on this new continent and strengthens their trust in their unity as a people, as a nation.

Crèvecœur focuses as well on the concept of 'ethnicity' and the idea of 'diversity' when he states that the "race now called Americans is actually a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes" (24). Ethnic diversity is, indeed, at the heart of this new nation and a key element in the construction of American nationalism, but as contemporary readers, we should take into account that Crèvecœur limits his enumeration to certain groups, mostly Anglo-Saxon. 'Ethnicity', instead, should be perceived − as Walker Connor indicates− more like a subjective thing which depends on individual will rather than on real facts such as the territory (36). Moreover, when dealing with 'ethnicity' it is advisable to take into consideration the elements that determine its very existence:

> *1. a common proper name, which expresses 'the essence' of the community;*
> *2. a myth of common ancestry and origin, that gives an ethnie a sense of fictive kinship, what Horowitz terms a 'super-family' (Horowitz);*
> *3. shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events and their commemorations;*
> *4. elements of common culture, which usually include religion, customs or language;*
> *5. a link with a symbolic homeland, the attachment to the ancestral land;*
> *6. a sense of solidarity* (Smith ch 2)

Crèvecœur adds a new element to this list, as at the center of the American blend lies a very important attribute: the respect/ admiration Americans have for the things they have done. The American self-esteem derives from various things that the author carefully outlines: the accurate and wise organization of their territory, the decency of their manners, their early love of knowledge and institutionalised education, the flourishing industry and the enumeration may very well continue.

The author, further, underlines the fast development that characterises these people. He acknowledges that Americans have been united by common goals and that in a very short time they have done more things than any other people especially because they were able to find on this new continent an "asylum"− a home. America appears to be a place of the regeneration which offers "new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system" and where men are not treated as "useless plants" but rather as transplanted trees that grow roots and bear fruit in abundance (Crèvecœur 25). In their old countries these people "were not numbered in any civil lists except in those of the poor" and here they are citizens with full rights protected by the rule of the law (Crèvecœur 25). The government which is derived from "the original genius and strong desire of the people ratified and confirmed by the crown" plays a very crucial role in bounding these people. As for the influence that the British Crown

BDD-A27943 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:07 UTC)

over the American territory at that time, Crèvecœur becomes quite ironic pointing out the events that took place in Nova Scotia:

> *[the Crown] has done all; either there were no people who had genius, or it was not much attended to: the consequence is, that the province is very thinly inhabited indeed; the power of the crown in conjunction with the musketos has prevented men from settling there.* (25)

Apparently, the old British Crown is not destined to succeed in this new world and its greatest political error ever committed in America, is "to cut off men from a country which wanted nothing but men!" (Crèvecœur 25).

American nationalism can be easily defined by the Latin motto: "Ubi panis, ibi patria" (Where there is bread, there is my country). The European emigrants who gave up their own languages and the love of "a few kindred as poor as [themselves]" began to love their new home because it offered them "land, bread, protection" and the fruit of their work − "the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of their labor; their labor is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest" (Crèvecœur 26). The new American is in Crèvecœur's opinion, someone who:

> *leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.* (26)

This famous definition of the American focuses not only on the changes that an immigrant has to face but also on his desire to make part of a great nation. This description resonates deeply with the idea that although "identity may vary from group to group, the self-definition, a sense of belonging and the pride in one's group seem to be the norm" (Pippidi 14). The American is, indeed, a New Man with new principles, ideas and opinions; a New Man who enjoys the great blessings of a vast and rich land and the protection of the law; a New Man who becomes the creator as well as the subject of a new culture.

Crèvecœur's letter "What is an American?" describes assimilation in idealistic terms and foresees the 'melting pot' metaphor. By definition, 'assimilation' is an intense process which involves gradual changes that take place at various levels: linguistic, cultural, social, institutional and political. Its final goal is accomplished when the new members of a society become indistinguishable from the old ones. Assimilation is deeply based on the ability to understand the *Other* (Todorov 230). The members of the dominant group have certain interests in the *Other* and with the cost of empathy or temporary identification, they not only reaffirm their own identity (which they have never left), but they also assimilate the minority group in their own world (Todorov 230). In turn, the minority group becomes eager to forget its old ways of life and embrace the new ones, practiced by the dominant group, which are usually presented as being better and superior. For Crèvecœur, the natural way in which assimilation should take place is represented by the gradual integration of different ethnic minorities into the dominant group of the Anglo-Saxons. Crèvecœur has never used the 'melting pot' metaphor, which did not emerged until 1875, when Titus Munson Coan used it in his article, "A New Country", but anticipated the fact that "individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world" (26). Just like his follower, who wrote that the uniformization of institutions, ideas,

BDD-A27943 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:07 UTC)

language, under the influence of the majority, is meant to bring people to "a similar complexion" and melt down the individuality of the immigrant (Coan 463), Crèvecœur strongly believed in the American fusion.

Nowadays, the United States of America is home to over 327 million people, who (except for Native Americans) immigrated or descended from immigrants coming from all the corners of the world in search of economic prosperity, social mobility, political and religious asylum, a better education. Their ethnic identity has been submitted to numerous transformations as these people try on one hand to preserve the language and traditions learned from their families, and on the other hand, to adjust to the new world they became part of, learn English, conform to the US laws and institutions, customs and life style. The effort of preserving diversity in unity, shows according to Carl N. Degler that the metaphor of the 'melting pot' might be "unfortunate and misleading" and that "a more accurate analogy would be a salad bowl, for, though the salad is an entity, the lettuce can still be distinguished from the chicory, the tomatoes from the cabbage" (qtd. in Freese, 184). Likewise, it is a given fact that American culture is successful especially because Americans are able to "dissect patterns of traditional and organic cohesion while feeling free to rearrange the component parts into new wholes" (Kroes 324). They should only be careful not to lose their special traits, as Amy Chua cautions in her book *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance and Why They Fall* (2009). Americans − Amy Chua says – should promote tolerance and the coexistence of different races, ethnic groups, and cultures with their own unique forms instead of a forced assimilation into one dominating majority, because this is the only way their big country can continue to be so strong (220).

Crèvecœur's vision of "individuals of all nations [melting] into a new race of men" (26) may not be as well received today as it used to be in the past, but this does not mean it should be totally rejected or that it does not contain a bullet of truth. New censuses prove that Americans tend to form a homogenous combination of races and ethnicities: White or European, Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and others (Jones 1-6). The process of amalgamation seems to follow its natural course and the number of interracial/ interethnic marriages and multiracial Americans is growing faster now than it did in the last years (Pew Research Center 2015). Enhanced by the policy of multiculturalism, this process does not encourage the assimilation of minorities into the dominant Anglo-Saxon group (in the sense of the 'melting pot' policy) but the formation of a totally new people; a people who will not feel the need to divide itself into dominant/dominated ethnic groups.

To conclude, Crèvecœur's letter "What is an American?" represents, without doubt, an important step in the construction of the American nation through narration. It marks the beginning of the American nationalism, it acknowledges its birth and underlines the elements which continue, even today, to motivate so many immigrants coming from all the corners of the world, to unite and form a distinctive and homogenous nation despite their ethnic diversity and personal interests.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BARRY, Brian. *Nationalism, Intervention and Redistribution*. IIS-Arbeitspapier, Institut für Interkulturelle und Internationale Studien, Volume 3 of Institut für Interkulturelle und Internationale Studien Bremen: InIIS-Arbeitspapier,Bremen University, 1996.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Introduction: narrating the nation" in *Nation & Narration*, Homi K Bhabha(Ed.), New York: Rutledge, 1990.pp. 1-7. Print.

CHUA, Amy. *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance--and Why They Fall*. New York: Doubleday, 2007. Print.

BDD-A27943 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:07 UTC)

COAN, Titus Munson “A New Country”. *The Galaxy Volume 0019*, Issue 4. April 1875. 462-471.Web.
CONNOR, Walker. *Ethnonationalism: the Quest for Understanding*. Princeton University Press, 1994. Print.
CREVECOEUR de. J. Hector St. John. Letters from an American Farmer. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 2005 Print.
Druckman, Daniel. “Nationalism, Patriotism, and Group Loyalty: A Social Psychological Perspective” in *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Apr., 1994), Blackwell Publishing, pp. 43-68 WEB.
FREESE Peter. "America", Dream Or Nightmare?. *Reflections on a Composite Image*. Essen:Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1994. Print.
HUTCHINSON, J. and A.D.Smith. *Nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. Print
JONES Nicholas, SMITH Amy Symens. *The Two or More Races Population: Census 2000 Brief*. US Census Bureau. Washington, DC: 2001. Print.
KROES, Rob. “Americanization: What are We Talking About?”. *American Literary Studies: A Methodological Reader*. Elliott, Michael A., and Claudia Stokes (eds.). New York: New York UP, 2003.pp.318-340. Print.
MUNGIU-PIPPIDI, Alina. *Transilvania subiectivă*. Bucureşti: Humanitas, 1999. Print
Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends. "Multiracial in America: Proud, Diverse and Growing in Numbers." Project.N.p., 10 June 2015. Web. 01 July 2017.
SMITH, Anthony D. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford:Blackwell, 1986. Print
TODOROV, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984. Print.

BDD-A27943 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:07 UTC)