THE FRACTURED STATES OF AMERICA

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"One of America's two major political parties is, at its core, not just corrupt, not just racist, not just misogynist, not just opposed to truth or science or history. They are, their leaders are, actively enemies of the U.S., our system and what we stand for," wrote David Rothkopf on Twitter on February 23, 2022, the first day Russia invaded Ukraine. A renowned political scientist who held several positions under the Clinton administration, Rothkopf has published extensively on the internal divisions of the US. For instance, in his 2012 essay "The Enemy Within" he purported that America was on the permanent lookout for an enemy. Historically, he claimed, US identity had been (and keeps being) defined and redefined by its interaction with its 'villainous' enemies: "America seems to have a visceral need for them." From this perspective, the 'Indians' that lurked at the Frontier in the 18th and 19th centuries morphed into the Japanese and the Nazis during World War II, retrieving the animosity against the Germans that had typified the first global conflict. These were later replaced by the 'Commies' during the Cold War and, most recently, by the trope of the 'Arab terrorist.' Yet, despite its readiness to intervene on the international military stage and to single out an (alleged) external enemy that could function as its archetypal rival, the US have long been fractured by visceral internal fights often overshadowed by outer antagonists. Indeed, as Rothkopf belligerently writes, "By far, the greatest threats to the United States right now are internal ones […]. They don't come from terrorists. They come from political obstructionists and know-nothings who are blocking needed economic and political reforms" (2012).

Over the past decade, as the debate moved from the academic to the public sphere, Rothkopf's attention to "the enemy within" has sharpened. The comment opening our introduction, shared by Rothkopf in the form of a tweet that received more than 20,000 likes, signals the pervasiveness of a rhetoric of fragmentation and division in public discourse. It is part of a longer thread that publicly condemned the pro-Putin tirades by some GOP members and supporters (Tucker Carlson's infamous defence of Vladimir Putin by Fox News anchor-man comes to mind [Bella 2022]).[1] However, the debate on the "fractured States of America" long predates the current conversation on the American position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since the early days of the nation, the portrayal of the country as divided—along racial, political, or class lines, among others—has been one of the fixtures of a public discourse that focused on the complexity and heterogeneity of the American identity. Indeed, the quest to delimit and describe its true essence predates the founding of the nation, as the British colonies progressively cut ties with their motherland. Yet, scholars traditionally situate the first explicit investigation into what constitutes an American citizen in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). The third of the titular letters, aptly named "What is an American," offers a list of features that de Crèvecœur considered quintessential to Americanness: industry, freedom, individualism, equality, assimilation. All these elements converged in what later became known as American exceptionalism, a doctrine that undergirded (and, to an extent, still undergirds) most, if not all, of US foreign policy.

De Crevecoeur's essay also introduced the concept of the 'melting pot' to describe the yearned-for homogeneity of a nation aspiring to *merge* the different cultures informing it, rather than to *preserve* their differences. The United States has long strived to present a solid front against the rest of the world, returning time and

[1] In the last few weeks, their support for the Russian president has at last in part abated (Rove 2022; Marcotte 2022) but the clash between those in the GOP who believe the Russian aggression must be condemned—now the majority—and those who purport it needs to be justified continues. As of April 7, 2022, *The New York Times* reports that there is "still a meaningful faction of Republican elites who feel an affinity for the Russian president" (Leonhardt 2022).

time again to the defining features of its citizens, and to what sets them apart from their European counterparts. Yet, over the past few decades, it has become evident that internal divisions and differences are increasing rather than decreasing. While the national narrative of the United States insists on advocating the exceptionality of its people, it is also continuously confronted by the hard truth of their lived experiences (Sieber 2005; Hodgson 2009; Grandin 2019; Spragg 2019).

Far from being a side note on the history of the United States, strong internal fractures have typified most of its existence. The nation developed and expanded through the gradual elimination of Native American communities from the continent, inspiring countless western narratives (think, for instance, of *The Leatherstocking Tales* by James Fenimore Cooper [1823-1841], or the "spaghetti westerns" of the 60s). Simultaneously, it framed the white conquerors as civilized men graced with a divine right to cleanse the land (Carter 2014; Pearce 1988), causing a visceral fracture between Native Americans and white Americans that has not yet healed. In the 19th century, the Civil War between Confederates and Unionists represented the most evident domestic conflict, highlighting the peril of an enemy within national borders (Levine 2013). Such divisions sprang from diverging opinions on the legitimacy of preserving the institution of slavery, which featured several dimensions—economic, social, racial. These disagreements continued long past the official end of the conflict. At the end of Reconstruction, as the Unionist army left the southern territories it had occupied to ensure the abolishment of slavery, former Confederate states—first of all Mississippi—started promulgating Jim Crow laws, highlighting the racial element of the conflict (Wells 2011; Levine 2013). As W. E. B. Du Bois famously noted, in the aftermath of the Civil War, "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (Du Bois 1964, 30).

Throughout the 19th and 21st centuries, the danger and perception of an internal enemy spread not only along racial lines but also along lines of class, gender, religion, politics, and more. All these strands of different internal enemies shared a common bottom line: these domestic Others disrupting the US on its own soil had to be evened out for the sake of a uniform—rather than united—nation.

In terms of racial fractures, one of the most notable examples remains the conflict between the African American community and the government security agencies, especially the FBI, which, throughout the 20th century, tried to dismantle those radical associations promoting Black rights, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), but also Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association in the 1930s, or the Black Panther Party in the 1970s (Maxwell 2016). Recently, these dynamics have surfaced again, targeting Black Lives Matter activists, who are viewed as potential national security threats (Farmer 2017).

Federal policing had more than one target throughout the 20th century. In the 1950s, fear of the expansion of communism gave rise to the repressive practice known as McCarthyism, which aimed at uncovering the 'red plot' within the nation. This led to the spread—in politics and public opinion—of the fear of an 'outside' infiltration from the Soviet Union that would lead to the collapse of American values and freedom from within. The witch hunt perpetrated by the federal administration—and by zealous citizens keen on denouncing each other—caused the dismantling of several leftist political organizations and harsh personal and professional consequences for those believed to be communists (Doherty 2005; Morgan 2020). Similarly, groups working for women's rights in the 1970s were infiltrated by the federal authorities to disrupt their operations and cause their implosion (Enke 2003).

As of today, tears in the social fabric of the United States remain visible, if not more exacerbated than in the past. Especially after 9/11, Muslim Americans—identified as a racial minority even though no one racial group constitutes more than 30% of the Muslim population (Ramadan 2021)—have suffered increasing discrimination, with repercussions to their personal and professional lives (Carosso 2021). First- and second-generation immigrants are similarly ostracized. Women's rights, the achievements of decades of protests, are on the line as several states pass legislation that limits access to abortion (Kitchener, Schaul, Santamarina 2022), and the class divide is increasingly sharper, as richness is accumulated by the so-called 1% (Schaeffer 2020) referenced by the "we are the 99%" slogan of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement.

A kind of internal splintering is especially noticeable in the polarization of contemporary political and public discourse, namely in the way it has fractured the country into factions, causing bitter divisions across identity lines. Long overdue civil, political, and social rights battles have radicalized most public debates, from racial issues connected to voting rights and disenfranchisement (*e.g.*, the long fight to ensure voting rights for African Americans, from the birth of the NAACP at the beginning of the twentieth century to the recent Fair Fight Action movement), to questions of representation and cultural appropriation (*e.g.*, the debate surrounding Jeanine Cummins's 2018 novel *American Dirt*, Scarlett Johansson's casting as a Japanese character in the 2017 movie *Ghost in the Shell*, or the controversial use of fashion and hairstyles belonging to different cultures, as in the case of Katy Perry's 2013 American Music Awards performance or Justin Bieber's latest hairdo).

After the January 6, 2021 attacks on the Capitol prompted by a toxic combination of conspiracy theories and political fanaticism, an especially American tradition of internal violence has taken center stage. The exposure of its undeniable pervasiveness has led to a reckoning that the enemy oftentimes lies within the nation itself, as President Biden himself remarked in his Inaugural Address: "We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal" (Biden 2021). This issue of *JAm It!* features contributions that address how different iterations of real and/or symbolic internal enemies have been generated and represented, covering issues of race, gender and class. The authors, with their contributions, highlight social divides across time and space, from the 18th to the 21st century. Their specific case studies exemplify the fractures that have permeated American society from its inception.

Anna Ferrari opens this issue with an essay that tracks the use of Fifties and Eighties imagery in popular culture and their role in shaping the definition of Americanness, highlighting the contrast between the idealized portrait of US society and its underlying tensions. Using Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985), Rob Reiner's *Stand by Me* (1986) and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) as examples of nostalgic representations of the Fifties, the author underlines how these directors

offered an either polished or haunted version of an idealized Fifties suburban area that has, in turn, been retrieved in more recent productions. According to Ferrari, works like *Stranger Things* (2016–) offer an equally dream-like portrait of 1980s America and, simultaneously, introduce a second revival of the Fifties imagery. In doing so, they sketch both an idealised depiction of and a critical take on these two decades.

Liliana Santos also takes into consideration contemporary works of fiction, but she compares several stories of Latinx (im)migration to the United States: Yuyi Morales's picture book *Dreamers*, Elisa Amado's graphic novel *Manuelito*, Margarita Engle's poetry memoir *Enchanted Air,* and Jacqueline Woodson's young adult novel *Harbor Me* lie at the core of her discussion. In analyzing the notable impact of racial discrimination on immigrant children and families, Santos uses Critical Race Theory, Latino-critical and Critical Multicultural Analysis as a theoretical framework in order to juxtapose the expectations of Latinx (im)migrant characters and the reality they encounter in the US as depicted in children and young/adult literature.

Matthew Harrington takes us back to the 19th century to explore racial and social fractures, spotlighting the concept of masculine degeneration in the 'Indian Hater' character so typical of frontier fiction. In his critical reading of James Hall's *The Pioneer* and Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods*, Harrington shows how the authors expose a tension between negative individualism and lack or distortion of civic duty. The Indian Hater narratives of Hall and Bird express anxiety about men turned into the very 'savage' they are hunting because of their desire for vengeance and violence, a "degeneration" that will bar them from returning to civil society. Hall and Bird seem to detect the irony of such degeneration and confront readers with the self-destructive nature of uncontained Indian Hating. In doing so, Harrington claims, these narratives do more than present the Indian Hater as a self-sacrificial hero. Rather, they closely diagnose how a man lost in his passions can become an Other within his very society when lacking civic constraints.

Christina Cavener describes the historical contribution of women to the definition of an exclusively white American citizenship in the 18th and 19th centuries. Contributing to slavery institutions, at times even as slaveholders, white women

reinforced white supremacy by distancing themselves from Black women, whom they considered wild, masculine and promiscuous. Even after the abolition of slavery, white women participated in southern segregation and used their whiteness and feminity to insist on a 'Whites Only' citizenship during their struggle for suffrage. Cavener remarks how even Italian and Irish migrant women adopted nationalism and anti-Black sentiments to be assimilated into the American conception of white citizenship. Her article, spanning across the whole history of the nation, contributes to the necessary historical reconsideration of white women's role in the racial definition of American citizenship.

Amílcar A. Barreto and Edward F. Kammerer also explore the notion of whiteness, focusing on its relationship with sexual orientation. While investigating how mainstream media has been redefining non-heterosexual people as partial insiders of American civil society, they highlight that this process is not neutral: since most mass media target a specific American audience—often white and heterosexual—the representation of the LGBT community has to be shaped to meet the expectations of said public. In order to merge the LGBT community into the idealized American national identity, mass media have structured sexual minorities into a hierarchy based on class and race. This has led to the current whitewashing of the LGBT community in media representation, where it is depicted as white, middle-class, and heterosexual-looking, leaving out all other instances of class and race.

Niklas Thomas and Till Neuhaus close the issue with an essay on the history of the National Basket Association (NBA) and its management of the racial tensions that permeated it, tracing how it chased a coherent racial image aligned to the audience's expectations and desires. According to the authors, in the last fifteen years the NBA has changed its position on Blackness, shifting from infantilizing Black players to strongly advocating for social justice. Such a shift was caused primarily by the social unrest following the murders of several Black unarmed men at the hands of police forces between 2014 and 2020, which led to the widespread and enhanced interest of American society in Black Lives Matter's activism. Thomas and Neuhaus show how American corporations' actions and choices have aligned with, and impacted on, several internal

fractures in the US context. Nevertheless, they remark that this corporate interest in social causes is strictly tied to the need for businesses to assuage customers and remain profitable, regardless of the significant causes of a given set of social frictions.

In their uniqueness and individual import, these essays depict the 'particular'—that is, the very specific instances of internal tears in the fabric of American society concentrated in time and space, and tied to a specific (and at times limited) context. Taken together, they make a macroscopic trend emerge, highlighting its pervasiveness and endemicity: the unity the name of the nation recalls has never been a given. Rather, it resists *despite* the US's many internal fractures, representing, perhaps, more a hope than a reality, a beacon not to the world, but to American citizens themselves.

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