

Ch. 9 - COLLAPSE OF CONSENSUS,
9 - Collapse of Consensus,
1968-89

Learning Intentions

In this section, you should understand:

- Youth culture.
- The counter-culture.
- Multiculturalism.
- The role of Norman Mailer.

Introduction

Historians look on the 1950s and early 1960s as a time of **consensus** in US history. By the middle of the 1960s, however, the US experienced a series of shocks which undermined that consensus. There was the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963, differences in the civil rights movement and the escalation of the war in Vietnam - all these undermined US confidence in its ability to change the world and to improve its own country. By the late 1960s, American society was **polarised** - divided between different groups and viewpoints. Three aspects of those divisions were:

- Youth culture
- Counter-culture
- Multiculturalism.

YOUTH CULTURE

Youth Culture

America had a **large youth population** in the 1950s and 1960s due to the post-war **baby boom**. In contrast to the early decades of the century, when most children were at work by 15, a higher proportion of the post-war children stayed on in high schools (secondary schools), in colleges and universities - this extended the youthful years. In addition, at this time, the young population shared the benefits of the **affluent society** - some through parental support, others through the rise of part-time jobs. This better-off and more numerous young population developed their own culture.

The word '**teenager**' began to be used to describe this youthful time in life between childhood and adult years. Teenagers became a target for **businesses** who saw a new market. They became the focus of **advertising campaigns**, largely using the new medium of **television**. By the end of the 1950s, American teenagers were spending more on themselves than the national income of some smaller European countries.

The **youth culture** which developed in the 1950s and 1960s highlighted the differences with the adult lifestyle; this became the **generation gap**. Youth wanted to express its independence and freedom: doing things its own way. **J. D. Salinger's** *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951, told the story of the restless life of a teenager, Holden Caulfield, who rejected the phoniness of adult life. '*If you want to know the truth, they're all a bunch of phonies,*' he said. It was banned in high schools in 15 states but it became a must-read for many teenagers.

Rock 'n' Roll

Rock 'n' roll and dance was one way of expressing the generation gap. Parents called rock 'n' roll the devil's music. Radio helped to spread its popularity with disc jockeys and the Top Twenty, along with cheap 45 rpm singles, the invention of the LP (in 1948) and jukeboxes. Record sales soared to over \$500 million in 1960. The stars of the new music were Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. Presley, above all, shocked the older generation with his stage performances - his slicked-back hair, his gyrating hips and his moody look. He became Elvis the Pelvis and his audiences screeched excitedly. Adult critics said his performances were 'not only suggestive but downright obscene'. The car also became a symbol of restless youth. Six million teenagers had driving licences by the end of the 1950s, and 1.5 million of these owned their own cars. Cruisin' around on a Saturday night became a popular pastime. New drive-in diners with carhops and drive-in movie theatres were developed for the mobile teenage and youth market.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What factors divided US society in the 1960s?
2. How did the young population change in the 1950s?
3. What are teenagers?
4. How did they become a market?
5. What was youth culture?
6. What role did stars and cars play in youth culture?

Delinquents

Adults became alarmed at the **rise of delinquents** - young people who ran into trouble with the law. There seemed to be an increasing number of fights and teenage drinking parties. Even the US Senate investigated the delinquent problem. Some blamed the publication of a huge number of **comics**, with their recipe of violence and action. Many states passed regulations to control their publication and distribution.

Others worried about the influence of **movies**, such as *Rebel without a Cause*, which featured James Dean as a rebellious teenager, and *The Blackboard Jungle*, which featured rebellious students. Some blamed rock 'n' roll music. They feared **an open revolt against society**. *'The gangster of tomorrow is the Elvis Presley of today.'*

The Sixties

In the 1960s, the **twist** and the **Beatles** were the highlights of the music scene. When the twist became popular after 1961, adults objected to the movements and exhibitionism. They condemned it as lustful. This coincided with the advent of Beatlemania from 1964 onwards. The Beatles influenced not only the music but also the fashion of the time as they changed from their **mod** style to the long-haired, colourful costumes of the late 1960s. **Drugs** became more freely available. Middle-class youth, in particular, liked to experiment.

Sexual Revolution

The 1960s also experienced a **sexual revolution**. This was part of a feeling of greater freedom for young people. It also arose from the greater freedom from pregnancy due to the invention of the Pill in 1961. The women's movement also encouraged women to seek greater freedom and fulfilment, whether sexual or otherwise. Sexual freedom was also encouraged by Supreme Court decisions which made sexually explicit books and magazines more easily available, even if still illegal for teenagers. Movies also became more sexually explicit and encouraged the view of a right to sexual pleasure.

However, by the late 1970s, the spread of **venereal diseases** and the deadly **AIDS** caused many young people to avoid casual sexual relations. For some the ideas of celibacy and virginity became more common by the late 1980s. Nevertheless, the dominant trends in youth culture remained - independence, freedom, the consumer market and wealth. Pop music, fashion, smoking and drugs continued to be the most obvious expressions of the youth culture.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was delinquency and what caused it?
2. Why was there a sexual revolution in the 1960s?
3. What were the dominant trends in youth culture?

KEY PERSONALITY: NORMAN MAILER

Norman Mailer was brought up in Brooklyn, New York. He is one of America's best-known writers of the twentieth century. He wrote widely on history, psychology, politics and current affairs.

Mailer was educated at **Harvard University** and graduated in **aeronautical engineering**. He was drafted into the US army during the Second World War and spent two years in the Pacific and South-East Asia. His acclaimed novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), is based on his personal experiences of the war. One review of the book said, '*Most people who reach three times twenty-six [his age] never tumble to a fraction of what Mr. Mailer has already found out about the psychology of the men who want power.*'

Mailer was a **prolific** writer. He published 39 books (including 11 novels), plays, screenplays, poems and many articles in newspapers and magazines. Mailer co-founded the Village Voice (one of the earliest underground papers) in 1955, and he edited Dissent for about 10 years. He also wrote essays and short stories. In some of his books, he used the techniques of a journalist to write about real events and people. This was sometimes called the **New Journalism**.

Some called Mailer the prophet of **machismo** - the macho man; '*macho means taking the dares that come your way,*' he said. He had a reputation for aggression, fist fights, head-butting and drunken brawls. He was critical of both the US and the Soviet Union, which he saw as **totalitarian societies**. In the case of America, he felt the country's power structure destroyed individualism. Totalitarianism, he said, is a force that '*beheads individuality, variety, dissent.. it blinds vision, deadens instinct.*' He supported **resistance to conformity**.

KEY PERSONALITY: NORMAN MAILER

Mailer's writings are a commentary on American society:

- In *The White Negro* (1959) he wrote about the hipster who rebelled against cultural conformity: *'Hip is the sophistication of the wise primitive man in a giant jungle.'*
- *An American Dream* (1965), in which a man murders his wife, concerned the sacrifice of personal integrity (honesty) in the pursuit of material success.
- He also wrote *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) about the role of violence in the Vietnam years.
- In *Armies of the Night* (1968) he wrote about the anti-Vietnam march on the Pentagon in which he took part and was arrested.
- His *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970) was an account of the **Apollo 11** moon landing.
- In *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), he wrote about the Republican and Democratic Conventions of 1968. In this book and in *Armies of the Night* he was also concerned with the difficulties of trying to give an accurate account of a mass event.
- In *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) he was critical of the feminist or women's liberation movement. He proposed that gender (male/female) could influence the way a person sees events and happenings. He was attacked as a *'male chauvinist pig'* by feminists. He angered them with his public statement, *'All women should be locked in cages.'* *'This notion of the women's movement that women are good and men are evil is about as useful as Hitlerism or Communism or Political Correctness or any kind of ideology that is limiting or constricting.'*

KEY PERSONALITY: NORMAN MAILER

- He wrote a biography of **Marilyn Monroe** (1973) in which he said that the right wing (conservatives) murdered the sex goddess to frame the Attorney General, **Robert Kennedy**. He claimed later that this 'was *not good journalism*'.
- His book *The Fight* (1975) was an account of the legendary **Rumble in the Jungle** between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman.
- He wrote *The Executioner's Song* (1979) about the life and death of a convicted killer, Gary Gilmore.

He won two **Pulitzer Prizes** for his books. He also wrote, produced and directed several films. Apart from anti-war action, he also sought the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York, but failed to get it.

Mailer was married six times and had nine children.

COUNTERCULTURE

Counterculture

Other influences in the 1960s developed a **counterculture** which rejected the prevailing culture of the decade:

- The influence of the civil rights movement.
- The growing anti-war movement.
- The feeling that everybody had rights.
- The huge expansion of the university population from 16 million in 1960 to 25 million in 1970.
- The rise of drugs.

All these contributed to the development of the counter-culture, which looked for an alternative to the prevailing culture.

Hippies

Those who favoured the counter-culture followed a **hippie** lifestyle. They were mainly middle class and white who **dropped out** of college or university. They rejected material wealth and the consumer society. They also rejected the defects of the established culture - war, poverty and injustice. They promoted freedom of expression and a questioning of authority.

They expressed this rejection in a number of ways. They sought freedom from authority. They wore colourful clothes with beads and they grew their hair long. The men often added beards. They lived together in **communes**, or in **tribes** or **families**, practising free love. They burned incense, took drugs, particularly marijuana and LSD, and listened to **acid rock**. Some experimented with different religions, particularly Asian ones.

Their numbers were small, living in two main areas in the **Haight-Ashbury** district of **San Francisco** and the **East Village** of **New York City**. They spoke of peace, love and beauty. They were the **flower people**.

HAIGHT-ASHBURY IN THE COUNTERCULTURE

'The counterculture was beginning to blossom in the neighbourhood [Haight-Ashbury]... (The area) was soon lined with alternative shops, coffee shops, and bookstores that sold psychedelic gear, posters, drug paraphernalia, hip clothes and books with information about transcendentalism, LSD and mushrooms.. You would get up every morning and you had no idea what the day would bring. You didn't need money; you could get food without it. You could crash at anybody's house. You didn't need to look good or wear your hair in a certain way. It didn't matter if you didn't look like Tab Hunter or Debbie Reynolds [film stars]. There was a sense of adventure...'

Quoted in P. Jennings and T. Brewster, The century

Rock Festivals

The music of **peace and love** of groups like the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane was an important part of the counter-culture. A number of **rock festivals** gave expression to this. In 1967, Crosby, Stills and Nash and others performed at the San Francisco Bay Area **Human Be-In** or **A Gathering of the Tribes**. But the most famous was at **Woodstock**, New York in 1969, when between 300,000 and 400,000 people turned up for a weekend of rock, drugs and sex. In spite of the unexpectedly large crowd on a rainy and muddy three days, there were no disturbances.

This was in contrast to the **Rolling Stones'** Altamont festival later in 1969. Here, hired Hell's Angels acted as security guards and treated the audience brutally, resulting in some deaths. The **Manson family** showed another aspect of the counter- culture. Led by **Charles Manson**, the **family** ritually murdered a young actress, Sharon Tate, and four friends in 1969.

The widespread publicity the hippies received also created a **strong antagonism** among working-class youth, workers generally and much of middle-class America, which increased social or class tensions. Ronald Reagan, as Governor of California, expressed that antagonism when he defined a hippie as a person who *'dresses like Tarzan, has hair like Jane, and smells like Cheetah'*.

End of the Counterculture

The counter-culture did not last long, from about 1966 to 1970. Some claimed the publicity they got destroyed them. It attracted drug pushers, criminals and mentally disturbed people to their areas. Violence increased as hippies became easy targets of rapes, assaults and murders. But their influence lasted longer than this, as some of their ideas, music and fashions were commercialised in the 1980s and 1990s.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What influence of the 1960s developed a counterculture?
2. What was the counterculture?
3. Who were the hippies and what did they believe in?
4. How were rock festivals part of counterculture?
5. How did the counterculture come to an end and why?

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism

Throughout the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, America became a **melting pot** with the arrival of immigrants from many different European countries and from Asia. While people from different countries lived in separate neighbourhoods, they were expected to follow the American way of life. The dominant view was that social unity was needed to develop a strong national state. Gradually many people became **Americanised** through schools, the spread of popular culture and growing prosperity.

Ethnic Pride

However, in the 1960s there was a growth of **ethnic pride**, as well as the beginning of the women's movement. These challenged the existing American culture. A number of factors were responsible for the growth of ethnic pride:

- The growth of the **civil rights movement** made people aware of their cultural identity. The growth of rights consciousness in the 1960s led to demands to respect the many different cultures of the US.
- Many people wanted to establish a distinct cultural identity to counteract the spread of the consumer culture of the 1950s and 1960s.
- **US immigration laws** were changed in 1965. They eliminated the **national origins** quota which had previously favoured European immigration. Now more could come from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. From 1965 to the 1990s, over 80 per cent of all new immigration was non-European.

As a result of the growth of ethnic pride, racial and dialect jokes were frowned upon. Descendants of European emigrants discovered their roots. Some of this was encouraged by the home country, who saw a market for tourism and a source of influence in America. In other cases, the **white ethnic** movement, as it was called, did not last long.

Black, Chicano and Native American

During the 1960s, **black leaders** encouraged black pride in themselves and their history. They wanted to trace their heritage and roots to Africa. They demanded the establishment of black studies courses in schools and colleges. Some wanted to be called African-American to highlight their origins.

In the late 1960s, **Mexican-Americans**, inspired by earlier battles for improved economic conditions, demanded to be called **Chicanos**. They formed groups in the south-western states where many lived - New Mexico, Colorado, California and Texas. They rejected the main American values. They also wanted education in **Spanish** and the teaching of **Chicano culture** in public schools and universities. Some used the slogan **Brown Power** to express control of their own community.

Mexican-Americans were part of the wider **Hispanic** community - people from Latin America and the Caribbean. By the 1990s, they had surpassed blacks as the largest minority group. They sometimes adopted **Latino** as an alternative to Hispanic. Latino music and dancing gained popularity, and some traditional food - tacos, fajitas and salsa - entered the main US diet.

Native Americans (Indians) saw their culture largely wiped out in the nineteenth century. But in the 1960s American Indians, numbering about 1 million, recalled their origins and culture. They shared in the general feeling of **cultural revival**. They asserted their rich heritage and forced the white government to help their economic and social conditions.

Cultural Diversity

The growth of ethnic pride emphasised the **cultural diversity** of America. Many believed that multiculturalism should be encouraged. They saw **multiculturalism** as the study of the social, cultural and historical influences that shaped the development of America's different peoples.

In that way, multiculturalism influenced many aspects of education from elementary school to university. In particular, **US history and literature curricula** changed to include the experiences and writings of Americans of different backgrounds. They included new courses on black studies and women's studies. Multiculturalists believed that this provided **greater tolerance and inclusiveness** in society.

Opposition to Multiculturalism

Those who opposed multiculturalism argued that previous migrants were integrated into American society to create a **united country**. By stressing multiculturalism they said that this created divisions between Americans and undermined the beliefs that held the country together. Those against multiculturalism were part of the **New Right** under President Reagan.

Some have argued that multiculturalism has led to a **dumbing down** (reducing to a lower level of understanding) of education. They said that reading levels had declined in elementary schools by trying to accommodate the various cultures. Higher education also became a battleground between multiculturalists and those opposed to them. The largely white, male-dominated system had to change to allow for other cultures and viewpoints.

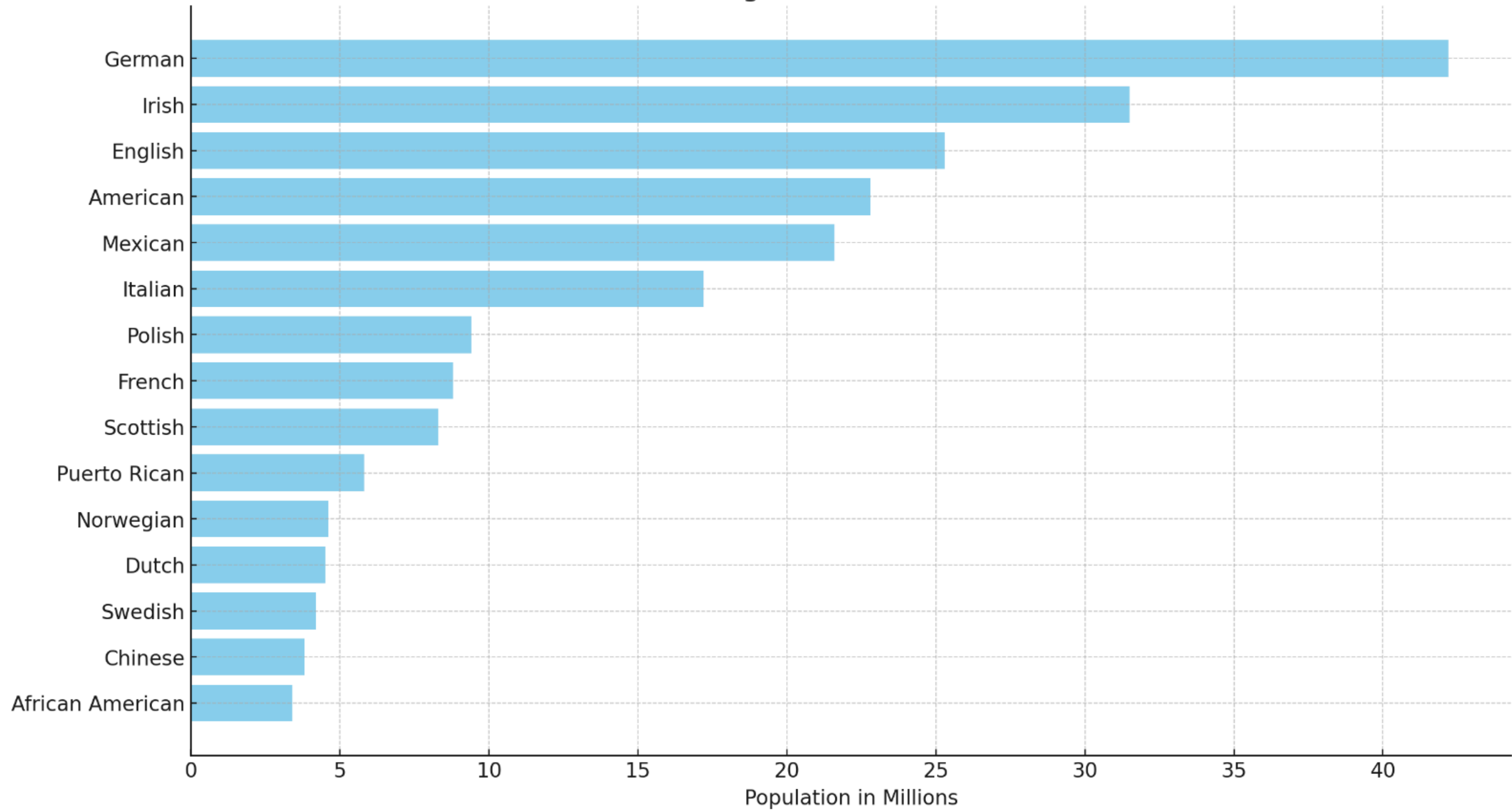
The **problem for America**, as one historian argued, was how to cherish different cultures and traditions without breaking the common political institutions, language, culture and ideals *'that hold the country together'*.

Opposition to Multiculturalism

The difficulty faced by the country was that often the different ethnic groups, while living together, **operated separately**. In the past, for example, the blending of races through marriage was rare. Interracial marriage increased a little from the 1960s. But all the different racial groups from European Americans to African, Asian and Latino Americans have almost entirely chosen their husbands and wives (or partners) from within their own ethnic group.

In the circumstances, those opposed to multiculturalism argued that increasing cultural divergence and rivalry could cause **serious social problems** and conflicts if developments continued. They argued that in cities there was a likelihood of fragmented and separate communities, which could cause **racial and class conflict** in the future. In response, those who favour a multicultural society said that neglecting the various cultures is more likely to cause this conflict.

Fifteen Largest Ancestries in the USA



REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the melting pot?
2. How were people Americanised?
3. What was ethnic pride?
4. What caused the growth of ethnic pride?
5. What was multiculturalism and what was its impact on US society?
6. What arguments were used by those who opposed multiculturalism?