

# THE EUROPEAN LOOKS AT AMERICA

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THE largest movement of peoples in history occurred in the settling of America. This settlement is the greatest single factor in the story of civilization. The migration reached its peak shortly before the Great War, and had included five to ten millions from Africa.

Here they occupied one-sixth of the land area of the earth and found a variety of all conditions, natural resources, and crops in a single political unit. They found that nature had favoured them with resources—coal and oil, iron, copper, and water—tremendous energy and power resources unparalleled in the world. It was a privileged area, too, in being free from the tensions of neighbours, such as afflicted Europe. This very isolation gave rise to a feeling of solidarity and to mutual helpfulness. The community was more than the sum of its parts. The individual was not then detached from the community through personal religion.

Although some authorities claim that people migrate only because they cannot make the adjustments to succeed at home, for the most part only the energetic and enterprising moved to America, to a new way of life that—according to Dr. A. N. J. den Hollander, of the University of Utrecht—is gazed upon by the European with surprise, hope, admiration, envy and fear.

The American repudiated much of Europe and became a *new* sub-species of man, not an extension of the European, diverging widely from the Continent's tradition, and thereby permitting reform and achieving equality of citizenship before the law. The changes must be emphasised in order that the Old World may try to understand the New, for enough of the Spanish imperialism that had once plagued much of Europe lingered on so that the natives could have been reduced to the peasantry of Europe, as indeed they were in Latin America.

This influx was an escape from the almost insoluble problems of Europe, its class system and the privation of a limited supply of land. In Europe there was no opportunity for individual advancement, individual freedom, social equality, or self-assurance. In America there was no accepted hierarchy, no

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concept that evil was an inherent element in human beings. The European doctrine of original sin, and the corollary that life was therefore a tragedy did not last long in America. The devil was not popular. Life might not be an ideal order, but it was a struggle between the *human* will and environment, not the divine. The American therefore became an optimist who felt that nothing was beyond his power; that failure was only weakness or the wrong technique. With all his great energy he was a simple extrovert, not subtle like the complex European. To him there was no idea of the natural depravity of the human being; he believed that society could be based on the nature of man, that it did not need to be coerced into good behaviour; he had confidence in man's wise use of freedom. The European considered this idea naive; he never could understand President Wilson; he regarded him as a Utopian.

Americans thus lack the European sense of frustration; they are more versatile and adaptable; and while they despise the discipline of war, to which the Europeans have long been reconciled, they can display an inventiveness superior to those who have made a profession of war.

On the other hand, the American does value material progress above abstract thought and the intellect. His practice is bolder than his theory. For a long time, therefore, his intellectual and artistic achievements were merely derivative, unoriginal. The intellectual tradition was not carried across the sea. In Europe there is a devotion to Science for its own sake; but in America today the university is considered only for its social significance instead of for strictly scientific investigation. Utility has become the criterion of the American university, not the pursuit and the theory of knowledge for its own sake. In contrast, any pure speculation today must be an ivory tower; this was never true of Europe.

The discovery of America and the Theses of Luther marked the end of the Middle Ages and their outlook, and the beginning of the reign of the Rationalists. Hence feudalism with its social principle of the manor, its agrarian society not based on cities, the economic self-sufficiency of the village community of peasants never took a strong hold in America in spite of attempts to establish such a system in the South, where the time-consuming labour was performed by slaves. That is why the unaristocratic American North forged ahead in technique.

The post-feudal rise of the European town, not based on authority but on association, had in it the germ of democracy

that was to flourish in America, where the town was not originally dominated by a wealthy patriciate. When the new teachings of Luther and Calvin were interpreted by some people to mean that their heavenly salvation depended upon their economic success in this world, that they need not worry about death so long as they but succeeded in life, the religious refugees who formed some of the early American colonies were free to adopt as the spirit of capitalism that they should gain wherever and whatever they could. With their teachings that salvation depended on faith alone, without any mediation, the clergy were no longer a privileged caste; and if these men of God were not to be subject to class distinction, then who in America, was to be so treated? The theory upon which rests the American concept of democracy, that all men are created equal and any boy can become President, was thus well launched in the New World.

With the advance in Europe of the Age of Reason, tradition, authority, and privilege were attacked. The middle classes demanded a share in government, in opinion, in liberty of trade; they demanded a written constitution instead of divine right.

After the interlude of the Romantic Revolt against Reason, physical science began to triumph again over the social; and English mechanisation and capitalism conquered the world. America took up the task of emancipating man from nature and his fear of her. The theory was that nature was America's slave: therefore religious faith slipped, becoming merely Christian ethics. Government existed only to restrain the few. All that mattered was the right of the individual to the pursuit of happiness, for this would lead to the happiness of all.

By 1900 Marx had become a reality, and the general acceptance of Darwin's thesis of the survival of the fittest was being interpreted as a struggle for life nationally. This led to a general hysteria for more colonies and persuaded even America to embark on a wave of imperialistic expansion that the chancelleries of Europe have not yet forgotten. In the resultant Great War the question arose, Is violence thus shown to be the only useful means? Despair and deception ruled, threatening even democracy. A tentative answer was then found in the idea that everyone had to be educated to take his share in culture. This attempt at a solution is the most fascinating characteristic of modern civilisation and is typically American. Can the masses be led through erudition rather than spirituality, to self-com-

mand and thus make the will of the majority a salutary power, not a dangerous evil?

The process of American creation, while not an easy transformation and adjustment, has been reasonably completed in our own time. There is no further point in the exhortation, "Go West, young man." America was created by European tools. It is a land that had to be *made* before it could be lived in by other than starving aborigines. The European culture pattern had to crack and crumble before the reality of the equality of the white man brought on by these pioneer conditions.

Inventiveness varies according to the needs and available resources. In America there was a scarcity of labour and an excess of space; therefore America concentrated on inventions to save labour and to conquer space—the bull-dozer, the aeroplane, and the mass production of the motor car. Europe, on the other hand, concentrated on material-saving devices, synthetics.

Moreover, like Rome in comparison with Greece, America had greater agrarian wealth, and she, too, could afford to be more generous with her citizenship. It must be remembered that Europe was settled slowly and before the Industrial Revolution, whereas the tempo of American settlement was rapid, and mass migration took place after industrialisation had made its impact on Europe. That continent's attitudes developed, therefore, in relative detachment, there were marked differences between even towns. Europe was never the melting-pot that America proudly became. Even the great wars of this century have not forged one, though all enlightened Europeans see that the only hope for the salvation of their civilization lies in the creation of such a union. That, however, is another article. Suffice it now to say that the Dutch are prepared even to surrender eventually their beloved royal family and sovereignty for the sake of a political union of Benelux and the Council of Europe, though they admit the day for that is yet remote.

We see, then, that Europeans are a *time*-people, judging everything in the light of the Past; its voice is ever the back-seat driver. The Americans, however, are a *place*-people, with homogeneity in customs and outlook.

A slow development such as Europe's makes little wealth available at any one time for any one individual; Europe's capital accumulation was slow. But while at first much poorer than Europe and economically dependent on her, America pre-

sented suddenly out of its great spaces, a larger share for each consequent rapid accumulation. Perhaps this leads to short-sighted wastefulness, as in the depletion of American forests.

Besides this feeling of perpetual abundance the American is also under the delusion that he lives in a temperate climate; but he has not conquered his summer, though he did adapt his food to the climate. Actually the Scandinavian log cabin and Franklin stove of the pioneer are still, in the eyes of European visitors, the best solution to America's climate problem. But the fact remains that a new world has been created, one on which the fate of Europe largely depends, for the post-war world has placed Europe on the cross-roads, one leading to domination by the Soviet Union, and the other to domination by a *possible* "North Atlantic" civilisation. But the European fears Americanisation, for his idea of America is that the country is ruled by the motif of *production*. It is not true that he regards the American as a mere dollar-chaser, but he does fear that men will be subordinated to the powers of production, to the idea of mere quantity, not quality. If a man can no longer keep pace with his machine, he must make way for a younger one who can. What worries the French intellectuals is that the American appears to live just from weekend to weekend. In Europe, as we have seen, material prosperity was not necessary for high culture, nor was the one confused with the other. The pioneers who created European civilisation were stricken with poverty. Comfort was not mistaken for civilisation: you are not a man because you wear velvet and have a refrigerator: the order of values was not reversed. Politics, too, were then studied by the individual rather than interpreted for the masses by newspapers and radio commentators.

All this is a part of what the European admits to be his intellectual snobbery, and stems from his general lack of acquaintance with American areas, but makes him keenly resent America's equally snobbish claim to moral superiority. He is, however, prepared to accept the fact that there can be different, though not opposed, meanings to democracy and to culture. The European has considered that his way of life is natural and that any other is peculiar. He will now admit this is not always true. It is also agreeable to him neither to condemn nor condone. But mere toleration and understanding are not enough. From both sides of the Atlantic must be applied goodwill and graciousness. This is how the European sees America and her future role if Western Civilisation is to survive.