

Max Weber, America as a Civilization, 1957

Foreword

AMERICANS are beginning to turn a searchlight on themselves and their civilization, and interpret both to the world. The present study is intended as a trial essay in this direction.

I start with what the book is not—neither a history of American civilization nor a description of life today in the American regions, states, and cities. Both have been done well by a number of scholars and journalists. Nor have I written here an indictment or apologia, either a celebration of “the American way” or a lament about it. Finally, this is not a “whither, whither” book embodying the prophecy of disaster. In short, those who are looking for the historical, the descriptive, the polemic, or the apocalyptic must look elsewhere.

What I have tried, rather, is to grasp—however awkwardly—the pattern and inner meaning of contemporary American civilization and its relation to the world of today.

A personal word may not be out of place. You write a book not for the elaborate reasons you spell out but mainly because you can't help it. Whatever I have written, thought, felt in the past has converged on the grand theme of the nature and meaning of the American experience. Whenever I have tried to chip off a fragment—on American government, on liberalism, on foreign policy, on morals—I found that it lost some of its meaning when torn from the rest. Yet to attempt the subject as a whole seemed a formidable, even arrogant, task. In 1945 I finally overrode my hesitation and started the book on its present scale. It has been more than a decade in the writing.

No American, perhaps no one alive today, can pretend to view American civilization with an anthropological detachment. The “anthropological attitude” (Kroeber) and the “sense of cultural shock” (Benedict) come from seeing values in a culture almost wholly disparate from your own. No American can achieve detachment in studying America, and I doubt whether even a European or Asian can. Paraphrasing Lord Acton, one might say that the only detached student of American civilization would be a dead one, since he would no longer care. The best you can do to achieve perspective is to keep a certain emotional distance from your subject. When the subject is your own people and civilization it is hard to keep the distance. Your hopes and fears for America manage to break through and color the analysis.

Obviously any book about America published at a time of international discord and seething world revolution is bound to be interpreted within this frame of planetary turmoil, and the question will inevitably be asked whether this book is “for” or “against” America, whether it is a rosy and euphoric picture seen in a haze of promise or an unsparing indictment.

I have tried to avoid both these sins—for an American the sin of complacency and the sin of self-hatred. I love my country and my culture, but it is no service to them, nor to the creed of democracy, to gloss over the rough facts of American life. Similarly, much have I traveled in the realms of Europe and Asia—and even in the realms of Marx and Veblen—and if there is a single count in the anti-American indictment I have not at some point confronted, it has not been through lack of diligence or realism. But it would be no service to the most committed critics of America to give them a distorted picture of American civilization only in order to nourish their distaste. Let the great world debate about America go on as it will and must: the task I set for myself is intended to have no strategic relation to it.

America is by any standard a towering technology and culture, with economic, military, and political power, the only rival power-mass being Russia. Wherever you find so much vitality packed tightly in a segment of human society, it is evidence of a striking convergence of history, environment, biological stock, psychological traits, institutional patterns, collective will and drive. When such a combination catches fire in the world's imagination and polarizes the emotional energies of men—whether for love or hate—you have a memorable civilization.

In dealing with something so provocative it is easy to be waylaid by the transient and miss the enduring. I have tried to remember that political struggles and economic programs wither and grow stale, the controversies which fill the pages of today's press become jangled images tomorrow, and party leaders end up as dimly remembered steel-plate engravings in the history books. America is not only changes and chances. It is also permanence.

That is why the questions I ask about Americans are those one would have to ask about the people of any great civilization. What are their traditions, biological stock, environments? How do they make a living,

govern themselves, handle the inevitable problems of power and freedom? How are they divided into ethnic and class groupings? What are they like in their deep and enduring strains? What is their life history like, in its characteristic phases from birth to death? How do they court, marry, bring up and educate children? How do they work, play, and express their creativeness in art and literature? What are the connective and organizing principles that hold their civilization together? What gods do they worship, what beliefs hold them in thrall or give them strength, what attitudes do they own up to, what convictions animate them, what culture patterns do they move in, what dreams are they moved by, what myths run through their being, what incentives propel them, what fears restrain them, what forms of power invest their striving, what tensions and divisions tear them apart, what sense of society cements them?

What, in short, is it that makes America not “a congeries of possessors and pursuers,” of individual wills and greeds and collective power, but a civilization?