Daniel Boorstin. The Genius of American Politics. 1953

"*Pompey then penetrated into the Sanctuary, in order to satisfy his curiosity as to the nature of the Judaean worship, about which the most contradictory reports prevailed. The Roman general was not a little astonished at finding within the sacred recesses of the Holy of Holies, neither an ass's head nor, indeed, images of any sort.*"

GRAETZ, *History of the Jews*, II, 66.

"*When the temple was occupied by successive conquerors, Pompey the Great and . . . Titus Caesar, they found there nothing of the kind, but the purest type of religion, the secrets of which we may not reveal to aliens.*"

JOSEPHUS *Against Apion* ii. 82.

INTRODUCTION

THE genius of American democracy comes not from any special virtue of the American people but from the unprecedented opportunities of this continent and from a peculiar and unrepeatable combination of historical circumstances. These circumstances have given our institutions their character and their virtues. The very same facts which explain these virtues, explain also our inability to make a "philosophy" of them. They explain our lack of interest in political theory, and why we are doomed to failure in any attempt to sum up our way of life in slogans and dogmas. They explain, therefore, why we have nothing in the line of a theory that can be exported to other peoples of the world.

The thesis of this book is that nothing could be more un-American than to urge other countries to imitate America. We should not ask them to adopt our "philosophy" because we have no philosophy which can be exported. My argument is simple. It is based on forgotten commonplaces of American history—facts so obvious that we no longer see them. I argue, in a word, that American democracy is unique. It possesses a "genius" all its own. By this I mean what the Romans might have described as the tutelary spirit assigned to our nation at its birth and presiding over its destiny. Or what we more prosaically might call a characteristic disposition of our culture.

In one sense, of course, everybody has a political the-

ory, even if it is expressed only in hostility to theories. But this is a barren paradox, concealing more than it discovers. In our political life we have been like Molière's M. Jourdain, who was astonished to discover that all his life he had been speaking prose. We have not been much interested in the grammar of politics. We have been more interested in the way it works than in the theory behind it. Our unique history has thus offered us those benefits which come (in Edmund Burke's words) "from considering our liberties in the light of an inheritance" and has led us away from "extravagant and presumptuous speculations."

The great political theorists—men like Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau—even when not guilty of "extravagant and presumptuous speculations," have been primarily interested in discovering and systematizing general truths about society, regardless of time and place. However much they may have differed in other matters, they have all had in common an attempt to *abstract*, to separate the universal principles of all societies and governments from the peculiar circumstances of their own society and government. Much of what we understand comes from the light which they have thrown, from their different vantage points, on the problem of government. The United States has never produced a political philosopher of their stature or a systematic theoretical work to rank with theirs.

But I mean something more when in this book I speak of our antipathy to political theory. Especially in our own age (and at least since the French Revolution of

1789), more and more of the world has sought in social theory no mere rationale for institutions but a blueprint for remaking society. Rousseau and Marx, for example, have been put to this use. Recent European politics shows us men of all complexions seeking an explicit orthodoxy for society. Burke was one of the first to note this tendency and its dangers, when he observed, "The bulk of mankind on their part are not excessively curious concerning any theories, whilst they are really happy; and one sure symptom of an ill-conducted state is the propensity of the people to resort to them." A pretty good rule-of-thumb for us in the United States is that our national well-being is in inverse proportion to the sharpness and extent of the theoretical differences between our political parties.

The tendency to abstract the principles of political life may sharpen issues for the political philosopher. It becomes idolatry when it provides statesmen or a people with a blueprint for their society. The characteristic tyrranies of our age—naziism, fascism, and communism—have expressed precisely this idolatry. They justify their outrages because their "philosophies" require them.

One of the many good fortunes of American civilization has been the happy coincidence of circumstances which has led us away from such idolatry. It is my belief that the circumstances which have stunted our interest in political philosophy have also nourished our refusal to make our society into the graven image of any man's political philosophy. In other ages this refusal might have

seemed less significant; in ours it is a hallmark of a decent, free, and God-fearing society.

If what I say is true, it has profound consequences both for our understanding of ourselves and for our relation to Europe. It speaks to those who say that what we need in this country is a clearer "philosophy" of democracy. It speaks to those who think we should try to compete with the Russians in a war of philosophies. This book adds up to a warning that, if we rely on the "philosophy of American democracy" as a weapon in the world-wide struggle, we are relying on a weapon which may prove a dud. It may prove so because, as I shall try to show in this book, the peculiar strengths of American life have saved us from the European preoccupation with political dogmas and have left us inept and uninterested in political theory.

Anyone who has recently been abroad and heard the sort of thing we are telling the world can say that it does not sound very good. The portraits of American life are sometimes admirable—of the public library, the general store, and the volunteer fire department. But the statements of what America believes (and therefore what Europe would be better by believing) make the American abroad uncomfortable, if not downright embarrassed. They say something which is not American at all, even if they are sometimes expressed with the engaging brashness of a Fourth of July oration. What is the matter with these general statements is not any weakness in our institutions or any special stupidity in our publicity writers. Actually, they are bad because of the peculiarities—and

even the advantages—of our geography, our history, and our way of life.

To understand the uniqueness of American history is to begin to understand why no adequate theory of our political life can be written. It will also help us to see why our institutions cannot be transplanted to other parts of the world. In the present world struggle, therefore, we should not hope to convert peoples to an American theory of government or expect to save western Europe from communism by transplanting American institutions. I want to develop this thesis not by discussing the rest of the world but by underlining a few facts of American history.

Although I shall set out from some of the most familiar facts of our past, in the course of this argument I shall lead you to some unfamiliar—and even paradoxical—conclusions about our political life. To understand these conclusions, you will need to reject some of the most widely accepted clichés about us. These clichés have been manufactured by our European friends and enemies. They go back to propaganda about us several centuries old, the labels made by the age of George III and earlier, which have stuck with amazing effectiveness.

From the earliest days, romantic Europeans have touted America as the country of novelty, of the unexpected and the untried, of grand visions and aspirations, where man could try out his latest inventions and test all those vagaries which were impossible in a conservative Europe. At the same time, conservative Europeans have attacked us for these very same dispositions, which to them, of course, have seemed vices. For many decades we were

the Utopia of radicals and the Babel of conservatives. We have been given a reputation for being a country without tradition, without wholesome continuity in institutions, where *anything* might happen. This is what Europeans have agreed on, and their unanimity has forced our not always grudging assent. Now it is my thesis that, whatever may have been our weaknesses, this is not one of them.

I shall try to show how American history has nourished in a very special way and to an extraordinary degree our feeling for that principle of social science which I shall later call the "seamlessness" of culture. It is enough for the present to say that all this denies the stock European picture of us. Our geography and history have led us to an unspoken assumption, an axiom, so basic to our thinking that we have hardly been aware of it at all. This is the axiom that institutions are not and should not be the grand creations of men toward large ends and outspoken values; rather they are organisms which grow out of the soil in which they are rooted and out of the tradition from which they have sprung. Our history has fitted us, even against our will, to understand the meaning of conservatism. We have become the exemplars of the continuity of history and of the fruits which come from cultivating institutions suited to a time and place, in continuity with the past.

This point, if it is true, has special importance today. For the first time in modern history, and to an extent not true even in the age of the French Revolution, Europe has become the noisy champion of man's power to make over his culture at will. Communism is, in one sense, the

extravagances of the French Revolution rewritten on the Gargantuan scale and acting with the terrifying efficiency of the twentieth century. People all over Europe have been accustomed, since the eighteenth century, to the notion that man can better his condition by trying to remake his institutions in some colossal image. Fascism and naziism proposed this; and so does communism. Europe has not yet realized that the remedy it seeks is itself a disease.

In this book I shall be describing some of those peculiarities of our history which in the past have helped save us from the romantic illusion. We cannot properly understand them without defining clearly our own picture of our political character. In my first chapter I will describe some of the most general characteristics of American political thought. Chapters ii, iii, and iv will deal, in turn, with three great crises: the Puritan struggle against the wilderness, the American Revolution, and the Civil War. In each case I shall try to discover the effect of the event on our traditional attitude toward political theory, at the same time seeing how each crisis illustrates characteristics which run through all our history. Then, in chapter v, I shall turn to the special relation between religion and political thought in the United States and the peculiar significance of our talkativeness about our ideals. In my last chapter I shall try to draw together the threads, to see what, if anything, can be generalized about our political theory. Is there perhaps a theory behind our theory, or behind our lack of a theory, which might itself have some validity as a conscious principle of political thought?