

The Americans as Elite: An Essay in the Cultural Approach to History

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One of the most interesting activities of historians today is concerned with the exploration of as many approaches to the examination of an historical subject as ingenuity permits. What is meant by the term "approach" is fairly obvious. An approach is an avenue, a particular way of coming at something which provides its own unique access. It leads one to a vantage point from which to gain a certain insight that cannot be attained elsewhere. Of course real understanding of anything demands that all approaches be explored and all vantage points eventually be used. But, at the very least as a preliminary to the fullest understanding possible, the single, particular approach is valuable as an analytic device.

One such approach is suggested by a key concept from the behavioral science of anthropology, an approach emphasizing the culture concept. Man alone among all the creatures of this planet is distinguished by the possession of a culture, a vast agglomeration of ideas and artifacts, beliefs and institutions, knowledge and customs. Viewed at one level, culture is the "composite of the capabilities and habits learned by man as a member of society."¹ At this level it is the sum total of the raw material for the study of man: the sum total of his political, social, economic, intellectual, religious, and aesthetic value judgements; the sum total of his concrete ways of behavior; the sum total of his store of material possessions. At a higher level, culture is an inferential construct that enables us to generalize about these human phenomena. It is an abstraction like the concept in physics of a gravitational field, which no one has ever seen but which makes possible an understanding of the phenomena from which it is inferred. The immediate observable culture traits—behavioral uniformi-

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¹ Social Science Research Council, *The Social Sciences in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography*, Bulletin 64 (New York, 1954), 37.

ties such as ways of dressing, or preferences in the shapes of tools, or belief in a religion, or systems of etiquette, and so forth—can, through this inferential concept of culture, be seen to be expressions of a deeper, unconscious organization. These unconscious assumptions characteristically made by individuals in a given culture constitute the basic themes of the culture; they can be abstracted from concrete cultural traits and used to identify the force structure underneath that supports and shapes them. Thus we can speak of modern Western culture in terms of such abstractions, cultural common denominators so to speak, as the themes of Individualism, Rationalism, Libertarianism, Nationalism, and so on. Obviously in any large culture area there will be many variations on such basic themes, depending upon at what time and in what place particular examples are examined. But as the basic theme in a set of musical variations governs the limits of the variations, so the basic cultural themes govern the limits of cultural variations for any specific culture.²

Cultures may be associated spatially with geographic areas and temporally with historical periods. They may be classified into various categories, just as the forms of life are classified, by dividing and subdividing larger groups into smaller ones according to the variations on basic themes. Thus, human culture can be divided into primitive and civilized cultures; civilized cultures into those of Europe, Asia, Africa, etc.; European into Western and Eastern; Western into French, German, Anglo-American, etc.; Anglo-American into English and American; and so on. In short, culture is defined as the sum total of observable traits as well as the abstract inferences devised in order to generalize about the observable traits and their relationships.

Cultures, as remarked above, are often identified by national labels. In the case of American culture, it can be said that in one sense the term "American" is an objective label used to denote a particular subarea within the larger culture area of Western Europe. Within this subarea the basic abstract themes, or common denominators of Western European culture, are to be found in their American variations. In another and more common sense, "American" stands for a particular national group. Such a group is itself a bundle of

² For the discussion of culture in this paragraph, the author is indebted to the source cited in the preceding note.

culture traits combined to form an example of one of the most significant abstract cultural themes—nationalism—born in the Western European culture area. In this sense the term “American” connotes *that* people’s self-conscious awareness of its own unique identity, with all that this awareness implies in the way of an historical self-image.

This essay proposes to examine the extent to which the concept of the American as elite has entered American culture and to make this examination from the approach of the American people’s self-conscious view of themselves in history.

History is essentially the study of man’s past. A little reflection will soon make it clear that there are really two pasts, an actual past and an historical past. The actual past stands for what actually happened at some precise time and at some precise place. There can be only one actual past, inaccessible and irrevocable. The historical past represents later efforts to reconstruct the actual past and to understand its meaning. The job of reconstructing what actually happened is difficult enough, depending as it does on painstakingly piecing together vestiges of the actual past that have come down to us in the form of historical evidence—evidence that is incomplete and full of distortions like images reflected through a series of imperfect and broken mirrors. It is even more difficult to discover any definitive meaning in the past, for the actual past is enigmatic. To know finally what actually happened, a well-nigh impossible task in itself, is not to know automatically why it happened and what it meant. The construction of an historical past is inseparable from the attempt to interpret the past.

Before the nineteenth century the interpretation of history revealed in general two fundamental assumptions about the nature of man in history. The Greco-Roman view of historical man was a humanistic one that saw man as *Man*. It used the universal human endowments as bench marks and with these measured out history and judgments on men and peoples. In contradistinction to the classical view of man in history was the Judaeo-Christian religious view that saw man as spirit and revealed divine intention working upon and through man as the real meaning of history. The Judaeo-Christian view of history supplanted the classical view upon the decline of the Greco-Roman civilization and dominated European thought through the Middle Ages and down to the

late seventeenth century, when the beginnings of the Enlightenment brought about a revival of classicism.

Beginning with the period of the French Revolution a new concept of man in history emerged, the nationalistic one. This concept saw history as a force generated by a combination of ethnic and geographical elements into the highest human group, the self-conscious nationality. This new interpretation, however, rested upon an older view of man than either the classical or the Judaeo-Christian. It rested upon what one might call the primitive view of man which saw mankind as kin, epitomizing the mystic consanguinity of special bloodlines. Expressed simply at the primitive level the nationalistic concept refers to the kind of self-centeredness that led the tribe of one mountain valley to call themselves by name with the word that in their language stood for man, and then by implacable illogic to refer to the tribe of the neighboring valley, therefore, as Not-Men, and hence suitable for killing and eating. Expressed complexly at the civilized level this concept means the kind of group glorification that can lead eventually the nationals on one side of a striped barrier-pole to call themselves *Herrenvolk* and by implacable illogic to regard those beyond as sub-men and suitable for conquest and the gas chamber.

The kind of nationalism just described is essentially a state of mind. While homogeneity of population and culture and the possession of an exclusive territory are often important in helping shape nationalism, they are not indispensable factors; nor are they as important as the will to be a nation, which often, as in the cases of Switzerland and Israel, triumphs over lack of homogeneity or territorial unity. This nationalistic state of mind represents a deep emotional commitment and depends to a very large degree upon a sense of group solidarity. This solidarity in turn rests upon what we might call the mythos of the group. A crucial part of this group mythos is the belief that all members of the group are entitled to claim as part of their heritage the historical experience of the group. The glorious past belongs to all. This belief is quite important in bridging disparities between the different components within the national group who otherwise would not have much in common or, even, in the case of economic and social classes, be potential rivals. Plymouth Rock, Valley Forge, Gettysburg belong to everyone, and when

thought of as a common heritage create a warm bond of oneness among all members of American society: hence the importance of the group's view of its past to modern nationalism.

Modern nationalistic history began in the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon and became firmly established in the post-Napoleonic period of Romantic fervor and nationalist struggle. Historians like Treitschke in Germany, Michelet in France, Palacky in Bohemia, and others elsewhere became immensely popular. The kind of history that they produced captivated the emotions of Europe; they were the searchers of the national past who presented the most irresistible interpretation of the national experience. In their works one can see the coming of age of modern nationalism—the fusing of the political institution of the state with the Romantic mystique of the *Volksblut*. Thus came about the modern nation-state, the ideal instrument for expressing a national elite's particular genius—a process consisting largely of satisfying the political ambitions of the state then justifying it on the grounds of the superiority of the "blood."

During this era of emerging nationalism the Anglo-American experience was at one and the same time a part of the European experience and yet apart from it. Both Great Britain and the United States could not escape from being affected by the nineteenth-century virus of nationalism; its course of development in England and America, however, was along distinctive lines. It is not within the scope of this paper to consider the story of British nationalism, however interesting that may be; passing to America, it becomes clear that American nationalism represents a distinct and very intriguing variation on the European theme.

In the United States there occurred no deification of the state and no exaltation of the national authority. Nor was there any significant attraction to the cult of the blood—except for upper classes in the ante bellum South, who became hopelessly intoxicated with the romanticism of Sir Walter Scott, and a few pockets of snobbish Anglo-Saxonism among landed and moneyed would-be aristocrats in the East. To be sure, there would be occasional outbreaks of xenophobia in America in various forms, but even this represented more a kind of provincialism and insularity than the *Herrenvolk's*

savage contempt for the lesser breed. Racial and religious bigotry there would be in plenty, lynch mobs and slave quarters—but no pogroms, no ghettos, none of the formal apparatus of the state used so often in Europe to suppress the out-group.

Cosmopolitanized by unrestricted immigration into a nation of nations, conditioned by their own past into believers in the proposition that all governments are created evil, Americans proved at one and the same time to be receptive to the idea of nationalism but hostile to its European expressions. As substitutes for the ideas of *Volkstat* and *Volksblut*, Americans preferred two others. These were drawn from the brief, yet deeply revered past of the Republic and had absolute hold upon the minds and hearts of the people—the ideas of freedom and enterprise. (One might suspect that the extent to which the average American wholeheartedly subscribes to the slogan “free enterprise” has little to do with his views on economics or business and everything to do with his instinctive reaction to the two “holiest” words in his ideology.) As the American people saw it and would continue to see it, the genius of America, amply demonstrated by history, had brought about the establishment in this land of the most free and enterprising people of all times the creation of an American elite. As one of the most popular of mid-nineteenth-century American history textbooks put it:

“Westward the Course of Freedom Takes its Way. . . . Here, for the first time in human history, man will be truly *man*, developed in all his powers, and enabled to realize the prophetic dream of his infancy, and the growing hopes of his youth. Here shall be realized the long prophesied, long expected *Golden Age*, which shall perfectly reconcile Order with Liberty, Individual Interests with the General Good. . . .”³

The ideal of freedom is most generally associated in the American popular mind with the Constitution. To the people the Constitution is America’s talisman. In its tangible substance, framed impressively in glass and steel, is the embodiment of America’s superiority. Its very existence is irrefutable proof of the American political genius. To quote Hans Kohn:

It does not solemnly proclaim the sovereignty of the nation nor invoke high moral or religious principles. It draws its lasting strength not from what it says but what it is: the embodiment of the idea by which

³ Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretative Essay* (New York, 1957), 64, quoting Jesse Olney, *A History of the United States for the Use of Schools and Academies* (New Haven, Conn., 1852).

the United States was constituted—a nation without even a name to which emotions could cling, like England, France, Italia or Hellas, and yet from its beginning appealing to the imagination of men as the first nation to identify itself and to have been identified by others with an idea. To become an American has always meant to identify oneself with the idea.⁴

To most Americans the Constitution is the supreme embodiment of democracy—an example of a group's will to its own interpretation of history, which is an idea that transcends the actual facts of the Constitution's antidemocratic origins. Likewise, to most Americans the Constitution is the embodiment of union, the sacred manifestation of democratic solidarity for freedom and against slavery, the Union that was tested and *not* found wanting in the bloodiest war the country has ever fought and sanctified by the martyrdom of America's greatest folk hero. Union and democracy—democracy and union: no other words are better calculated to swell the American's breast with national pride. On these words and on the historical visions they call up, the American rests his case for freedom as the ultimate human value, for America as the land most dedicated to it, and for the American as freedom's elite.

But to what end this American freedom? The answer for most Americans lies bright in the pages of their history books. To the end of enterprise—the undertaking of bold, hard, dangerous, noble endeavors; the readiness to take risks and try things yet untried, to put energy and initiative to the service of progress measured in terms of self-improvement and justified in the name of general improvement. Freedom dedicated to enterprise—here is the American formula for a process of infinite perfectibility.

To the American people regarding their history, the idea of enterprise has been from the beginning dominated by a sense of Manifest Destiny. Here is a key phrase in the language of the American as elite. It goes straight back to the heritage of Puritanism and its Calvinist convictions of a chosen people. Who could doubt the evidence of his senses that this people, waxing powerful and prosperous in a land fabulously endowed by nature with every conceivable form of wealth, was divinely favored? To the American people

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

nothing in their history seemed clearer, more encouraging, more inspiring than their obvious "rendezvous with destiny."

But what precisely was the destined Great American Enterprise? Making allowances for the fact that people seldom think consistently and logically when it comes to ideologies, remembering also that at any time in a people's history there will be much intermingling, overlapping, borrowing, exchanging, and confusing of ideological thought within the group, we can state that in general Americans have been influenced by two traditional conceptions of the Great American Enterprise. Of these two ideas about the basis for American greatness, one represents the tradition of agrarian America and the American farmer, the other the tradition of entrepreneurial America and the American businessman.

The American farmer tradition has been geographically isolationist, politically Jeffersonian-Jacksonian, economically agrarian, socially rural, culturally nativist; the American business tradition has been geographically global, politically Hamiltonian, economically capitalist, socially urban, culturally cosmopolitan. These two traditions represent the main currents of American history. In their interrelations they establish the polarities that create the tensions of American history.

The tradition which enjoyed the position of dominance in America before the turn of the twentieth century was, of course, that of agrarianism. The Great American Enterprise was the conquest and utilization of the land, the conversion of the wilderness into fruitful farms. The pioneer farmer represented the American folk hero, the older of the two conceptions of the American as elite. On practically every state seal was a depiction in heroic dimensions of the farmer and his tools—plowboys and their ox teams, shocks of wheat, scythes, reapers, and so on. These symbolized America's pride in her yeomen, the salt of the earth. Regarded in the public mind as the most free and enterprising farmer on the globe, the American husbandman was always depicted standing proud and independent upon his land, subject to no other man's bidding, a fitting stalwart to accomplish America's destiny. Land was his great desire, farming his sacred dedication, the political tradition of Andrew Jackson his guarantee of freedom, and an unshakeable conviction in the superiority of the American farmer his credo.

From this agrarian tradition came one of the most powerfully influential interpretations of American history that ever captured the minds of the American people—Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Turner saw in the American farmer's experience, which was repeated every generation upon a gradually receding frontier of cheap land, a great force which made America unique in character and accomplishments among the nations of the world. Out of the struggle to subdue the wilderness, a struggle of almost three hundred years, developed American democracy, ingenuity, practicality, individualism, optimism—in short, all the attributes of the inimitable American character, fashioned in freedom on an agrarian frontier.

Ironically, the turn of the century that saw the publication of Turner's interpretation of American history also saw the surrender of the once dominant agrarian tradition to its old rival, the entrepreneurial tradition. This business tradition had always existed side by side with the agrarian tradition, but always as representative of a minority in the nation as a whole. It saw the Great American Enterprise not as the taming of agricultural frontiers—this was only incidental—but as the creation of a new commercial and industrial world power. Its hero was the businessman; capital was his great desire, trade his sacred dedication, the political tradition of Alexander Hamilton and Henry Clay his guarantee of freedom, and an unshakable conviction in the superiority of American business his comfort.

The great catastrophe which set American agrarians at each other's throats also destroyed the dominance of their tradition. The American Civil War, which, as Lewis Mumford puts it, drew a white-hot gash across American history, signalized the end of an era. The rise of the New Industrialism in the period of Reconstruction meant the emergence of a new America, the emergence of modern America, as Allan Nevins phrases it. The younger generations flocked to the city, which, in the cases of the great exploding metropolises, became the glamorous new frontiers. The farmer grew less and less important as his numbers in the general population grew proportionally smaller and his relative share in the national wealth rapidly dwindled. The sturdy plowboys still remained on the state seals, their brawny arms filled with the shocks of ripe harvests, but people no

longer thought of them as symbolic of America's greatness. The captain of industry, surrounded by the newfangled instruments of commercial activity, the telephone, the typewriter, the dictaphone, the stock ticker, captivated the imagination of the American people and convinced them that here was the new American genius. As Sherwood Anderson bitterly commented:

"In the days before the coming of industry, before the time of the mad awakening, the towns of the Middle West were sleepy places devoted to the practice of the old trades, to agriculture and merchandising. In the morning the men of the towns went forth to work in the fields or to the practice of the trade of carpentry, horse-shoeing, wagon-making, harness repairing, and the making of shoes and clothing. They read books and believed in a God born in the brains of men who came out of a civilization much like their own. On the farms and in the houses in the towns the men and women worked together toward the same ends in life. They lived in small frame houses set on the plains like boxes, but very substantially built. . . . After one of the poor little houses had been lived in for a long time, after the children had been born and men had died, after men and women had suffered and had moments of joy together in the tiny rooms under the low roofs, a subtle change took place. The houses became almost beautiful in their old humanness. Each of the houses began vaguely to shadow forth the personality of the people who lived within its walls. . . . A sense of quiet growth awoke in sleeping minds. It was the time for art and beauty to awake in the land.

"Instead the giant, Industry, awoke. Boys, who in the schools had read of Lincoln, walking for miles through the forest to borrow his first book . . . began to read in the newspapers and magazines of men who by developing their faculty for getting and keeping money had become suddenly and overwhelmingly rich. Hired writers called these men great, and there was no maturity of mind in the people with which to combat the force of the statement, often repeated. . . .

"Out through the coal and iron regions of Pennsylvania into Ohio and Indiana, and on westward into the States bordering on the Mississippi River, industry crept. . . .

"A vast energy seemed to come out of the breast of the earth. . . . [and] a whole people, full of the native energy and strength of lives lived in a new land, rushed pell-mell into a new age."⁵

The farmer—no longer the salt of the earth—became the butt of jokes; his image was now that of the hick, the hayseed, the ridiculous creature in the straw hat and the billy-goat whiskers, stupidly and pathetically clutching his pitchfork

⁵ Sherwood Anderson, *Poor White* (New York, 1920), 131 ff., quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (4th ed. rev., 2 vols., New York, 1950), II, 140-141.

in abject helplessness while the city slicker stole both the fruits of his livelihood and the virtue of his daughter from under his very nose.

As America changed, so did its conception of the American ideal type change. The farmer fought back. Hamlin Garland and other writers saw the starkness and desperation of this effort in the Populist Revolt. As William Allen White described it,

It was a fanaticism like the crusades. Indeed the delusion that was working on the people took the form of religious frenzy. Sacred hymns were torn from their pious tunes to give place to words which deified the cause and made gold—and all its symbols, capital, wealth, plutocracy—diabolical. At night, from 10,000 little white school-house windows, lights twinkled back vain hope to the stars. . . . They sang their barbaric songs in unrhythmic jargon, with something of the same mad faith that inspired the martyrs going to the stake. Far into the night the voices rose, women's voices, children's voices, the voices of old men, of youths and of maidens rose on the ebbing prairie breezes as the crusaders of the revolution rode home, praising the people's will as though it were God's will and cursing wealth for its iniquity.⁶

One last great battle, and Bryan and the farmer as the folk ideals of America went down before Mark Hanna and the proponents of American business. The Great American Enterprise of the frontier and the land was over.

By the 1920's the cult of business was firmly entrenched. Americans began to invest the businessman with all the attributes of a new national elite; a few, like Bruce Barton in his best-selling biography of Christ, even tried to recast traditional Christianity in the new mold, calling Jesus the Great Salesman and the Golden Rule the best advertising copy ever written. Most Americans, however, were satisfied simply to see the Rotarian replace the Granger as the American self-image.

The agrarian tradition of older America did not vanish completely, of course; its attitudes and outlooks still remain important parts of the American scene. The Turner thesis, though criticized vociferously in the last twenty years, remains in its essentials the single most widely accepted interpretation of American history. Isolationism and nativism are still to be encountered in their traditional guises, and the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian political tradition is still the one

⁶ William Allen White, *Stratagems and Spoils: Stories of Love and Politics* (New York, 1901), 207-208.

most appealing to the American masses. Nevertheless, the American regards the successful businessman as the epitome of American national superiority. His ideas, his attitudes and values, his likes and dislikes, his evaluation of himself are well-nigh universally accepted in America today. The businessman image—whether it is represented by a successful general in the White House, a master of great productive forces in industry, or an eager Jaycee selling peanuts for polio on the street corner—is the image that Americans of today uncritically exalt over all others. Despite thirty years of satire and caricature, despite the disillusionment and despair of the Great Depression, the popular view of the American as elite, the champion of freedom and enterprise, is the man in the gray flannel suit.