

JAMES A. MORONE

# The Devils We Know



US AND  
THEM IN  
AMERICA'S  
RAUCOUS  
POLITICAL  
CULTURE

# *The Devils We Know*

Us and Them in America's Raucous  
Political Culture

ESSAYS BY

JAMES A. MORONE



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To my coauthors, companions, fellow travelers, and friends.

Writing with you has been special.

David Blumenthal

Roger Kersh

and

Larry Jacobs

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the winter of 1940, a dean at Columbia University called the guidance counselor at Curtis High School on Staten Island and told him the university had a place for an Italian under its quota system. My dad got the interview. He enrolled at Columbia and eventually joined a fraternity reserved for Italians and Jews. The fraternity brothers referred to their fellow students as “the Americans”—in that era, Italians and Jews still lingered on the margins. But my dad and his classmates did not have much time to worry about all that. In their sophomore year, the United States plunged into World War II, and the college boys all rushed to sign up for military service. When they returned, almost four years later, there was no more talk about Italian-Jewish fraternities or “the Americans.” They were all Americans now.

My mother lived a more harrowing version of the same story. She grew up in Cracow, Poland, and was a child when the Germans and Soviets invaded in 1939. Her father, a physician, joined the Polish army and was killed by shrapnel to his face while trying to operate on the battlefield. My mother’s aunt, also a physician, administered a lethal injection to her own mother and herself as they huddled in a cattle car rolling toward a concentration camp. (It was not till I was in college that I discovered my mom’s family—my family—was Jewish.) My mother spent the war in a Siberian camp and, after a long series of near miracles, ended up in Brazil, where she met my dad, now a business executive in Rio. My mother’s route was terrifying—through bomb shelters and work camps—but it too eventually ended with her becoming an American.

My brothers and I grew up in Brazil. Brazilians being what they were, we came to expect the goodwill of strangers. They would stop us on the street and exclaim how handsome we looked. Our *baba* would laugh while we cheerfully answered the silly adult questions. It wasn’t just us. That’s how Brazilians appeared to treat all (middle-class) kids.

There was another Brazil of course. I’ll not forget the homeless boys my own age sleeping on crumpled newspapers outside the movie theater. Or the day we passed a fellow who had been shot dead by police (but why?) lying on the street surrounded by candles and a mutinous little crowd. Another time, I watched from my third-grade classroom as a man, presumably from the nearby favela, stole into the schoolyard, took a large piece of

plywood from a burn pile, and started to walk off with it. He hadn't gotten very far when a nun appeared, screamed at him, yanked the wood out of his hands, and chased him away. They were just going to burn that wood, I thought. Why not let the guy have it? And why did the big fellow listen to the little nun? My parents somehow didn't share my outrage. Something peculiar was going on at the margins of our comfortable world, but before I was old enough to puzzle it out, my dad came home with magical news: we were moving to America.

Suddenly, my brothers and I were strangers in an exciting new land. The rules and expectations were all different. Here, you could drink water directly from the tap. Everyone had televisions. They dyed their oranges in the remarkable supermarkets. But you couldn't wear shorts without being ridiculed (shorts for men would come into fashion a few years after we arrived). And no one ever stopped us on the street, told us how handsome we were, and asked silly questions. But these were little things. We soon confronted something deeper and more disquieting.

One summer day, not long after we arrived, we took a walk along the beach at Wolfe Pond Park on Staten Island. As we strolled along, my brother Joe (age seven) piped up: "Why are the black people all here? And the white people all over there?" Strange, I hadn't noticed. But we had crossed an invisible line, and the beachgoers around us were now all African Americans. But what really arrested my attention was my dad's reaction. He was frightened. I had never seen my father frightened before. But why? Why did the people around us—just families with kids—scare him?

That afternoon at the beach was the first time I became conscious of race. It had never occurred to me, in Brazil, to think in terms of black and white. The homeless kids sleeping on the sidewalk, the man stealing wood, and the corpse lying on the street were all poor. They were all different from us. They were somehow (I had only the vaguest sense of this) repressed. But at least to the naive eight-year-old mind, there was nothing racial about them—and nothing especially racial about us, or so I thought. (Only much later would I learn that slavery lasted three decades longer in Brazil than in the United States, that both nations had agonized racial stories, and that the privileged are always—in every society—connected to the poor.) All I knew was that race seemed so much more visible in our new country. Here was another thing to tack onto the list of things to figure out about the United States: the sharp black-white antinomy that now ran across all our beaches.

You've probably noticed the thread running through every one of these memories: they're all about how communities see themselves. Or to put it

more sharply, each memory offers a different variation of how people sort themselves into “us” and “them.” And the ways they enforce or dismantle their differences. The stories have entirely different arcs: World War II erased old ethnic divisions—at Columbia University and, more generally, across the United States. But what about all those other invisible lines I saw as a child? What happened to them? How have they evolved and changed?

Take Wolfe Pond Park. Are blacks and whites still separated by that race line? Or are they now finally mingling with one another—a half century after our summer stroll? Or perhaps—our own little touch of Brazil—that color line has gotten obscure as blacks, Latinos, whites, and Asians (many of them married to one another) all mix together in that public park? Most likely—a more ominous touch of old Brazil—the invisible dividing line today is income. No doubt the wealthy New Yorkers of every race are enjoying their Sundays at private clubs or exclusive beaches where they can stick with their own moneyed kind. Is a new generation of children thinking, as I had in Brazil, that certain Americans are different, poorer, and somehow repressed? That we are feverishly denying our connections with them?

I became a political scientist to try to figure out the questions that I encountered as a child. I wanted to understand this new home, the United States. I wanted to see what separated different people from one another. And since the boundary lines never seemed at all sensible, I wanted to figure out just what brings people together and what keeps them apart. The fifteen essays I’ve selected for this volume all, in one way or another, ask questions about American community. About American culture. About the many ways Americans construct their us-and-thems.

A lot of people help make a book, and this one is no exception. The idea came from Fred Woodward, the splendid editor who made the University Press of Kansas a powerhouse in American politics and history. Larry Jacobs saw the theme running across the essays; he suggested dropping half the essays I originally submitted and highlighting the theme described in the opening chapter. I’m grateful to Larry for a fine editorial eye that saw the book’s story line before I did. I’m also grateful to Jon Oberlander for his suggestions; in his gentle, funny way, he fingered the same essays for the cutting-room floor.

Each chapter has its own thank-yous. But special thanks to Corey Brettschneider, Jonathan Cohn, Jennet Kirkpatrick, Sharon Krause, Ira Katznelson, Bob Kuttner, Scott Maclean, Sid Milkis, Eric Patashnick, Mark Peterson, Rick Valelly, and Ashu Varshney.



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Writing is normally a solitary act, which makes coauthorship a potentially complicated business. I'll always be grateful to my first coauthor, Ted Marmor, who takes a particular relish in writing with others. I've been privileged, in recent years, to work with three special coauthors. It would take a whole chapter to describe what I have learned from them and how I appreciate each. So here, I'll just say thank you to David Blumenthal, Larry Jacobs, and Rogan Kersh. I've dedicated this collection to them for warm memories of wonderful collaborations and the anticipation of more joint projects in the years to come.

I'm especially grateful to the team at the University Press of Kansas. Thanks to Michael Kehoe, Larisa Martin, and Rebecca Murray. Karl Janssen did a beautiful job with the cover. And Joan Sherman was a terrific copy-editor.

A special thanks to Deborah Stone, my wonderful partner across the years in which I developed these essays. Deborah was always my first reader. My own writer's voice developed in anticipation of her comments, and I'll always be grateful for the intense conversations each essay elicited.

Finally, while I was working on these essays, Brown University named me to an endowed chair. I was especially delighted to have the chair named in memory of my friend John Hazen White. John, the most energetic seventy-year-old I've ever met, and I collaborated on a TV show (he had the idea, I was the host). We interviewed decision makers—governors, senators, and so forth—before a studio audience. It was always a very lively show. One day, Brown University president Vartan Gregorian ran into me on campus, put his arm around me, and gave me a piece of advice: "Great show, Jim," he said. "But more gravitas. Tone down the enthusiasm and turn up the gravitas." When I told John, he hooted at the idea of buttoning down our show. "If we're not enthusiastic, how can we get the people riled up?" I'm happy to report that I listened to John. Alas, President Gregorian, I still don't think I've got the gravitas down exactly right.

JAM

June 14, 2014

Lempster, NH

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## *Introduction: Who Are We?*

Selectman Hank Frank sat, poring over the *Federal Register* in the dilapidated town offices of Lempster, New Hampshire (population 850). He spotted a grant program that might help some of the townspeople. Federal funds were available to dig wells for residences with no running water. He applied, secured the grant, and never imagined the trouble he was about to stir up.

On a beautiful spring morning, Hank drove up Lempster Mountain to inform the Locke family that they'd been chosen for the first well.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Locke came down out of his trailer and stood in the littered front yard, frowning. After a while, he interrupted the selectman. "No sir, no thank you. I don't take welfare." Hank tried to explain that this was a federal grant. "I don't take welfare," repeated Mr. Locke. "And we don't want your government money." Hank moved on to a different part of town and ran into more resistance. Rumor had it that one guy said he'd be waiting with his firearms if Hank came back.

It took a few tries before a family accepted the offer. Keith Fulton came in with his heavy equipment, drilled a well, and the Lempster water program was finally up and running. Three families got wells, and by then, the town was buzzing.

A petition circulated, a special meeting was called, and on a Wednesday in June the citizens spoke their minds. "Word gets out about this program of yours," said one young man, "and we'll have every lazy SOB in the county hauling their trailers up here for the free wells." Another speaker followed up with the math: "These people come here and we'll be paying more for the school. Half their kids will need special ed., probably, which will cost us even

more. And, let's be honest, we'll have to hire a second cop." The townspeople voted clear instruction to the selectmen: send those funds right back where they came from. That was the end of the government water.

### **American Culture?**

When I was in graduate school, one of my mentors was obsessed with a scholar named Louis Hartz. The Lempster water story perfectly summed up the Hartzian theory (which I later learned Hartz lifted from Alexis de Tocqueville): the United States is a nation of Horatio Algers—individualists restlessly pushing ahead, skeptical of government, scornful of redistribution, and unabashed votaries of Mammon.

Hartz seemed, when I first read him, to nail American culture—past, present, and (as it turned out) to come. Examples spring up everywhere: from the original tea party to the contemporary one, from the Supreme Court's declaration that corporations enjoy citizen rights (in 1886) to the endless (and endlessly doomed) struggle for national health insurance to the federally funded wells of Lempster. American government is weak because Americans fear and loathe it. Self-respecting citizens turn down government water—and scorn the moochers who accept it.

But a closer look complicates the picture. Those rock-ribbed individualists in Lempster are not individualists all the time: Mr. Locke may have spurned the water, but he won't think twice when he cashes his Social Security check or flashes his Medicare card. And the comment about beefing up the local police is worth a second notice. Spend enough time in poor neighborhoods, rural or urban, and you get used to seeing cops cuff people. Our ostensibly weak government has managed to incarcerate 2.3 million Americans—far more than any other nation on earth—and has pressed one out of every thirty-three adults into the criminal justice system (in prison, on probation, or under parole). Mr. Locke's children face harsh treatment if they smoke pot (750,000 arrests a year) or write bad checks. Meanwhile, Lempster is proud of its sons and daughters in the military, working with more than 2.2 million uniformed personnel stationed in every cranny of the globe. A weak and despised government? Not even close.

Where does that leave American political culture? By now, we have piled up 300 years' worth of descriptions. Start with the original Hartzian idea—individualism, fear of government—and keep going. It's a culture of liberty, rights, opportunity, the American dream, democracy, the rule of law, and Christianity. The list gyres out from there to more extravagant notions: a nation of smuggling, shopping, personal reinvention, fast food, and evol-

ing notions of fun. And one final possibility: there simply is no bedrock political culture at all.

The essays that follow offer my own answer. American political culture is a perpetual work in progress. There is no one deep creedal value, no obdurate set of foundational ideas. Instead, Americans engage in a long, loud, and constant clash about the meaning of their nation. Americans hate government (no national health insurance) and call for more of it (lock 'em up). They celebrate democracy and scramble to constrict it (the Electoral College in the twenty-first century?). They embrace liberty and then fight over whether they mean the negative variety (no new taxes!) or the positive kind (Franklin Roosevelt's freedom from want). Chapter 1 develops my view and sums it up this way: Is there an American culture? Certainly. Americans are fighting over it now. They have fought over it since the first Puritan stepped ashore.

Why does the culture look this way? Because Americans are a protean people. The United States was constructed and reconstructed by an extraordinary number of tribes all pushing and pulling. Immigrants arrive, causing a backlash among the already settled. Excluded groups keep rising up and demanding their place in the political charivari. Each generation injects new ethnicities, races, religions, ideas, foods, entertainments, sins, and physical types into the national mix. Each upsets the cultural status quo. The long line of challengers—the devils we know—keep inventing new answers to the most fundamental question about the nation: who are we?

## **The Creative American Clash**

Each essay that follows takes up a different aspect of the creative conflicts that shape America. I stress one issue that political writers have long pondered: how does culture interact with other forces—most notably, the rules and organizations that channel collective choices—to produce political action?

However, the central theme is my interpretation of America's political culture. The battle to define that culture spills into every area of American life. But three are especially important: democracy, economics, and morals. Let's take a quick peek.

### **THE AMBIGUOUS DEMOCRACY**

Democracy—and the right to vote—is often cast as the grand American epic. Ragtag colonists defeated the mighty British Empire (ten of the twenty-seven grievances listed in their Declaration of Independence are

about proper representation). A century later, women marched, picketed, suffered arrest, and chained themselves to the White House fence for the right to vote. A half century after that, black Americans braved dogs, fire hoses, and gunshots. This is an unusual national saga. Different groups rise up over two centuries and, facing down violence from their fellow citizens, insist on the right to vote. Slowly, surely, and heroically, the democracy expands.

But that grand narrative is just one side of the story. Government by the people also provokes anxiety. Take the first days of the Constitutional Convention, for example. “The evils we are experiencing flow from an excess of democracy,” argued cranky Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts. Roger Sherman, a shrewd Yankee from Connecticut, summed up what many of the others were saying: “The people should have as little to do with the new government as may be. They want information and are constantly liable to be misled.” The delegates’ first declarations at the start of the convention fretted over too much popular rule.<sup>2</sup>

The nation never quite shook the worry. Over time, the United States would become home to political machines that enthusiastically stole votes, an elaborate system of checks and balances that blunts the popular will, and an electoral college designed to refine (read distort) the people’s vote. Four presidents, or almost one in eleven, claimed the White House after losing the popular vote. Generation after generation of American leaders have placed their faith in the rule of a few—elite Founders or expert administrators or presidential “czars.” All aim to protect government from the tumult of the masses.

What is up for grabs is not simply who votes or how much power goes to the people. There is also a more subtle battle over the nation’s electoral rules. Who will print the electoral ballots, and shall they be cast publicly? Those simple questions helped resolve the long fight between entrenched party machines and clean government reformers.

Today, the clash over democratic rules rages on a half dozen fronts. The Constitution mandates a census every decade in order to calibrate shifting populations and congressional seats. That promptly led to a signal American innovation—the gerrymander (named after the same Elbridge Gerry who had been huffing about the people). Today, when parties take over a state, they often plunge recklessly into the dark art of redistricting. In North Carolina, Democrats won 51 percent of the congressional vote in 2012 but managed just four of thirteen seats. Nine other states, from Florida to Michigan, showed similar skews; the Democrats won 1.4 million more votes in congressional races, but, thanks to the redistricting that fol-

lowed the great red tide of 2010 (a census year), the Republicans came away with a 234-to-201 House majority.<sup>3</sup>

Or consider the rules about campaign spending. Congress reluctantly passed bipartisan legislation to limit it; the Supreme Court struck down the limits (by a 5-to-4 decision); President Barack Obama denounced the ruling (in front of the visibly offended court members) and then plunged right into a reelection campaign in which both parties blasted through the billion-dollar mark. The combination of cash and creative gerrymander yields a democratic paradox: the public savages Congress (average monthly approval level reported by Gallup in 2013 was 13 percent) and then reelects 95 percent of the members.

Meanwhile, Republicans pass new rules that limit voting times, toughen identification requirements, and purge the rolls of names. Democrats call it voter suppression and use the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to challenge the effort. The Supreme Court strikes down a key feature of the act (another 5-to-4 ruling), making it more difficult to challenge the new voting rules. Restrictions on felon voting, even after the jail time has been served, put such sharp limits on black male voters that observers have begun to call it “the new Jim Crow.”

Classic accounts usually point to democracy as a fundamental American value. It is that. But who votes remains disputed. And like every value in America, the rules guiding this one are bitterly contested—and never more so than today.

In the chapters that follow, I portray democracy as one of the great battlegrounds in the endless American politics of national identity. Who is in? Who is a full member of the polity? And who is out? An evolving “us” always faces off against a suspect or undeserving “them.” Beneath the question of membership, democracy in America yields a long, loud debate about the democracy itself: Should it be more open? Or less? Back and forth it goes as the United States grapples with its fundamental existential question—who are we?

#### THE AMBIGUOUS ECONOMY

The contest to rewrite the rules—shaped by cultural images of us and them—is even more intense when we turn to the economy. There, a long dialectic between money, power, and populism drives the United States from gilded ages to egalitarian eras and then back again.

The United States began as a country of plentiful land and extraordinary opportunity—at least for white males. The American Revolution unleashed a “wonder,” writes historian Gordon Wood, a society belonging to “com-



mon people with their common interests in making money and getting ahead.” In Massachusetts, Revolutionary War veterans, angry over economic exploitation, put the populist manifesto as baldly as it has been put: “The property of the United States has been protected from confiscation of Britain by the joint exertion of all, and ought to be the *common property* of all.” That kind of talk sent national leaders dashing to Philadelphia to rewrite the rules. However, the new nation remained remarkably egalitarian. “No opulent man and no poor,” wrote President George Washington after touring New England. “No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly,” added Tocqueville in the very first line of *Democracy in America*, “than the equality of condition.” Notice: not the equality of opportunity that Americans tout today but an equality of outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

On the other side, the state generally—though not always—tilted the scale against collectivist ideas. Troops, private and public, broke the unions. The courts struck down most labor legislation (regulating hours and wages or working conditions) as a violation of the free right to contract. When the Supreme Court struck down a New York law limiting bakery workers to ten-hour days (in *Lochner v. New York*, 1905), Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes dissented: “The Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer’s Social Statistics”—the survival of the fittest comes to political economy. Justice Holmes would have to wait more than three decades before his criticism won the court’s endorsement.<sup>5</sup>

The political clash over economic rules produces dramatic results. In the gilded 1920s, the United States was home to thirty-two billionaires (in today’s dollars). The New Deal dispensation changed all that. For thirty years, Democrats introduced taxes, raised social welfare policies, constructed a regulatory regime, and appointed left-leaning justices. By 1955, the number of billionaires had fallen by half—despite a population that was roughly 40 percent larger. Fifteen years after that, at the close of this egalitarian era, the United States had slipped to a spot between Japan and France on the international equality indexes, clustered with the social democracies such as Germany and Sweden (although at the lower end of the pack).

In the 1980s, the economic rules changed again with tax cuts, welfare rollbacks, deregulation, and conservative judges. A new gilded era began to stir and then to roar. The number of billionaires shot up from 16 in 1955 to 160 by 2012. The United States fell right out of the European equality tables. It is now more in league with Mexico and Brazil than Japan or France. In fact, by 2010, the United States was closer to Lesotho, the least egalitarian nation on record, than it was to Sweden, the most equal. And despite the mythology (as we’ll see in chapter 7), globalization did not lead