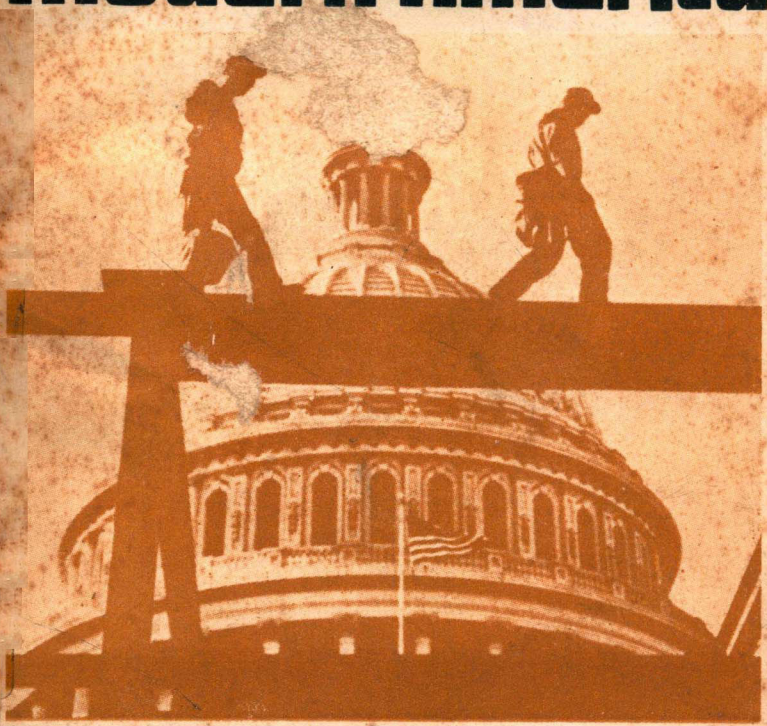
Peter Bromhead

Life in Modern America



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Peter Bromhead,
Professor of Politics, University of Bristol

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Introduction

There is one thing about which almost all modern men agree: that technological progress is good—good not just for its own sake but for the sake of the greater comfort, security, leisure and variety of experience that it makes possible, not just for a privileged few but for the great mass of people. No society has yet eliminated poverty, slums and starvation, but material progress alone can provide the conditions for such an achievement. All the world looks to North America, and particularly to the United States, as that part of the world which has been most successful in producing widespread material wealth combined with political freedom. The lead of the United States in all this is so widely recognised that most people tend to describe it as 'America', and to judge its standards by reference to a uniquely high standard.

There is not the same agreement about the values and social organisation on which this progress has been based. American achievements in material progress have led the world, but the world's admiration is mixed with envy, and with disapproval, more or less intense, of the competitive methods by which the progress has been gained. Some think that collective action is a morally better and more efficient method than a sum total of individual and self-regarding actions by great numbers of people competing with one another for pre-eminence. Some see America as harsh, selfish and materialistic, and there are critics in America too. But most Americans have no doubt about their allegiance to the individualist idea. They have been ready to modify and mellow its practical effects here and there, just as collectivist societies are now leaving more room for the individual; but Americans see their achievements and their failures (such as the proliferating violence and crime), as the product of their long-accepted values. In economic life there is not equality of possessions, but there is a good measure of equality of opportunity; in social life there is equality of consideration; in politics the people have good means of choosing those who are to

have authority, and of controlling them and limiting their power.

This book will try to present a picture of American society and life as it is in the late 1970s. It is hoped that it will be useful for students, mainly in Europe, but also in other parts of the world, who wish to acquaint themselves with the main problems that confront Americans at this time, and with the way in which they handle these problems.

Many writers have in the past attempted to portray America, and some of those who are now read were European. There still remains the great classic *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville, based on a visit to the United States in the early 1830s—still rewarding for the depth of its understanding not only of American society in its day but of the underlying trends and qualities which have continued up to the present. Few works have been produced with such prophetic elements: de Tocqueville saw the trend towards conformity in current fashions which arose both from the lack of long-established traditions and from the search for values to remedy this. He saw too the importance of allegiance to small groups within the society as a corrective against the danger of tyranny by the mass. Any book which tries to see America as it is even in the modern age must look back at this great work of 140 years ago. There were other Europeans in the nineteenth century who produced works of great insight, but it is perhaps hardly useful to give a list of these here.

Among more recent surveys on America two books are worth citing. Gabriel Almond wrote *The American People and Foreign Policy* in 1950, and here the author moves on from de Tocqueville and his other predecessors to some useful summaries of the nature of American society and its values. Ten years later another political scientist, S. M. Lipset, wrote *The First New Nation*. Here too we find insights of great value for an understanding of American society. Lipset's book is more directed to political scientists and uses some of the rather complex concepts and definitions of modern sociologists and political scientists.

One difficulty for a student of American society today is that he is confronted by a mass of literature so vast that it cannot be comprehended. Never has any society been engaged in so much inquiry about itself. The mass of information about attitudes, beliefs, values, the economic situation and feelings towards money is so immense that almost any question about the people can be answered by reference to the results of some survey or report. The government itself produces a marvellous stream of statistical information. Where

de Tocqueville relied on insight the modern writer's task is to try to make a fair selection from the mass of facts which have been discovered, analysed and presented. One difficulty arising from this mass of literature is that it is beoming more and more technical, and less and less easily understood by the ordinary untrained reader. The approach to the subject in this book is based on an assumption that readers are unfamiliar with the technical language which has been developed by sociologists as they talk to one another, and it may suffer somewhat in precise accuracy because of this.

The approach is first to look at the background of the country and at the people—where they came from, how they went to America and what they have done since they went there. Much attention is paid to immigration and to movement within the United States, to the form of government and to the shape of political life. From this we move to an attempt to understand the current social and economic problems, with special attention to the difficulties that arise from relations between the different races.

In the picture of modern America education is an element of which the importance should not be underestimated. In Chapter 8 the study of education concentrates in particular on the advanced stages at universities and similar institutions, which are now influencing the whole economic and social structure to an extent never seen before. Religion too is a subject which is peculiar in its American setting; in Europe scientific progress and economic advance have in general been accompanied by a decline in the influence of religion, but in America there is little sign of any such development. Religion is only one aspect of private life, and other aspects are dealt with too. In such a big country communications need special attention. Finally a chapter about America in its relation to the world sums up the whole of the political and social system as it sees itself, as it is seen by others, and as it looks outwards on the world outside.

This book is based partly on experience of living in America, partly on continuing contacts with Americans in England, partly on the reading of the current American literature about the society. The subject is so vast that no author can claim with any assurance to have selected wisely from all that could be offered. The attempt here is to select those features which seem of particular significance and which reveal the obvious differences between America and Europe, showing how this great new culture has developed in directions different from those of the cultures out of which it originally grew.

Introduction

I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the works of S. M. Lipset and G. A. Almond in particular among living writers; to the numerous publications of the United States Government and of the United States Information Service; to many people with whom I have discussed the work, or who have read all or part of it, notably Professor Robert Zimmer of the University of Minnesota and Dean Hopkins of the University of Massachusetts; to Stephen Cooksey for his most valuable help in gathering information; and to Christina Shell and Valerie Hayward for typing and retyping the manuscript. Meanwhile, I am myself responsible for all the errors of fact and emphasis that may be observed.

In the time since the first edition of this book was published the Americans have had many experiences to make them pessimistic. In 1972 they re-elected Richard Nixon as their President, by an almost unprecedented majority; then for more than a year they watched the unfolding of the story of the misdeeds of his administration and of his own deceptions. In 1973 they saw Vice President Agnew resign because of his own private scandals, then in 1974 they saw the final humiliation of Nixon himself.

In the midst of growing doubts about the values of their society, and even of the long term availability of resources to sustain their comfortable way of life, they saw their economic prosperity seriously interrupted. At one time in 1974 nearly one-tenth of all Americans were unemployed, and even in the economic improvement which followed, one in fifteen were still out of work in the spring of 1976. Much social and economic progress had not brought more happiness or improvement in people's relations with one another.

The worst horrors of the Vietnam war were followed by American withdrawal, then the Communist take-over throughout Indo-China. America's power, reputation and self-confidence—even its righteousness—were all weakened and tarnished. In 1976 a survey showed that only a third of all Americans were confident in their country's government, as compared with half four years before and three-quarters in 1964.

This new edition takes account of all these changes, including some good ones and some that are neither good nor bad, with many revisions throughout the book; and the final chapter tries to summarise the overall effects.

Contents

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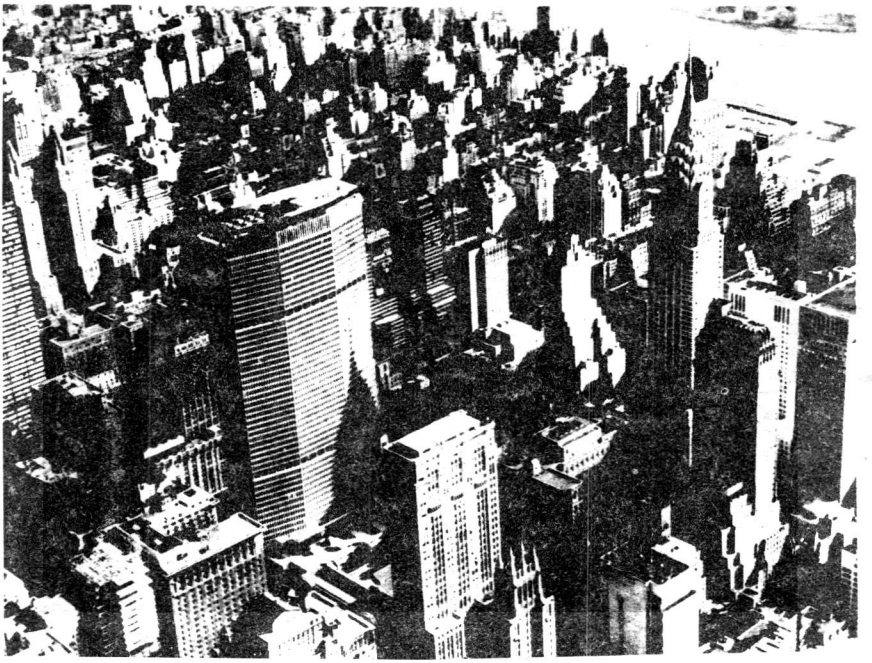

1

Atlantic to Pacific

1 A Single Culture

In its vast area the United States comprehends most of the physical conditions known to men; heat and cold, forest and desert, tropical swamp and Arctic waste, mountains and endless plains, empty spaces and megalopolis, and the world's largest river system. Yet the most remarkable contrast of all is the contrast between the variety inevitable in so great an area and the similarity of the people and of the things that they have made in all these diverse parts.

The United States is bigger in area than the whole of Europe, and includes a spread as great as from Paris to Karachi in Pakistan. Evidently life in the hot southern sub-tropical forests is very different from life in the north, where the winters are colder than anywhere in western Europe.

It would not be easy to talk in general terms about western Europe as a unit, with its differences of climate and culture, its mountains, plains and coasts. One would have to describe the various parts one by one, and it would take a long time to do so. In the far bigger area of the United States, with far greater diversity of climate, there are also contrasts: there are too many characteristics to be described in a single generalisation. And the diversity of the people themselves is immense. It is not only that some came originally from Britain, others from Italy, Germany, Ireland or Poland; first-generation immigrants are still close to their diverse origins, while most long-established Americans are wholly assimilated; first-generation Italians differ not only from long-established Dutch, but from fourth-generation Italians—and even they differ according to the degree of intermarriage. Yet there is at the same time a lack of cultural difference among the regions, because all these varied peoples

Above: Desert land in New Mexico
Below: New York skyline

are scattered everywhere, with only minor local ethnic concentrations.

The great Republic of the United States is not the same country, even in area, as it was at the time of its foundation in the 1780s. The original Union consisted of thirteen states along the eastern seaboard. The thirty-five continental states which have been added since independence occupy an area eight times as great as the original thirteen, and more than two-thirds of all Americans now live in these thirty-five states, in an area which 180 years ago was mainly unexplored, except for some Spanish and French coastal settlements here and there. But the founders of the Constitution foresaw that, as settlement spread westwards and new areas were developed by stable populations capable of self-government, so new states would be allowed to join the Union. The process began almost at once. Kentucky and Tennessee, southwards and across the mountains from Virginia, were added in 1792 and 1796, and further north the admission of states west of Pennsylvania began with Ohio in 1803.

The story of the addition of new states in the nineteenth century is also the story of the conquest of the west, with the wagons and then the railroads, the cowboys and the sheriffs and that piece of human experience which the Western movie constantly revives. The last block of north-western states was not incorporated until after 1890. With Arizona in 1912 the list of forty-eight continental states was at last complete, and recently, in 1959, the first separate territories were granted statehood—Hawaii in the Pacific Ocean and the great northern pioneers' land of Alaska, bigger than France, Germany, Italy and Austria together—and still with only a quarter of a million people.

Our study of the growth of the Union reminds us that within the United States there is a difference between old and new. To Europeans America may look a new country, but it is not all new in the same way. Even in Europe, apart from churches and castles, there is not so very much left from more than 200 years ago. Houses, shops, factories, stores, means of transport—almost all the buildings and the things people use are less old than the United States. From four million at the time of independence the population there has grown to 215 million, but this does not mean that all parts have grown at the same rate. The State of Virginia now has six times as many people as in 1787, but modern England has five times as many as it had then. If we exclude the part of Virginia which consists of suburbs of Washington, we find a rate of increase about the same as

in England itself over this period. In most aspects of everyday life, Virginia is not really newer than the mother country. But with the western states things are quite different. There, hardly anything man-made goes back 100 years, and few adult inhabitants have roots going back more than one generation. So there is a contrast within the United States between old and new, less obvious than many other contrasts but significant and interesting all the same.

Although the country is so big and its people have so many different ethnic backgrounds, it is in some ways less varied than Europe. The national origins of the people are by now fairly well mixed all over the country, though there are exceptions on small and large scales. The English language is virtually universal in its American form. The American way of speaking has developed independently of England and is on the whole closer to what can be heard in Ireland than to the speech of any other part of the British Isles. Regional variations of accent are slight, and to a German or an Italian the difference between the accent of the deep south and that of the 'Yankee' is less evident than the difference between two Englishmen from places two hours' journey apart. Some Americans speak rather indistinctly, not pronouncing consonants properly, others show by their speech that English is not their mother tongue, and Irish or Negro accents can often be recognised; but the lack of real regional or class variety in speech or usage is one of the characteristics that tend to make the whole country very obviously one.

Another instance of uniformity is in habits and ways of living. From Boston to Los Angeles is as far as from France to Central Asia, and from east to west there are five time zones; but everywhere people get up and go to bed at about the same time, eat the same kind of food, bought in the same kind of shops, work and rest at the same times of the day and have the same pattern of holidays. In general they share the same ideas, ideals and objectives. In most of the things that matter there is less difference between rich people and ordinary people, or between town and country, than in any single European nation. It is fairly easy to imagine a typical American; most individuals deviate from this 'type' in some ways, but are fairly near to it in others. It is not that this personal uniformity is boring. It is after all superimposed on original diversity, and where the single pattern involves much friendly informality in personal relations there is little cause to feel oppressed.

Although the United States covers so much land and the land produces far more food than the present population needs, its people

are by now almost entirely an urban society. Less than a tenth of the people are engaged in agriculture and forestry, and most of the rest live in or around towns, small and large. Here the traditional picture is changing; every small town may still be very like other small towns, and the typical small town may embody a widely accepted view of the country, but most Americans do not live in small towns any more. Half the population now live in some thirty metropolitan areas (large cities with their suburbs) of more than a million people each—a larger proportion than in Germany or England, let alone France—and if we add another 200 or so quite large towns with their suburbs we see that the small town has been superseded by the large town as the typical environment—or, to be more exact, by the suburban section of a large town. The statistics of urban and rural population should be treated with caution, because so many people who live in areas classified as rural travel by car to work in a nearby town each day. As the rush to live out of town continues rural areas within reach of towns are gradually filled with houses, so that it is hard to say at what moment a piece of country becomes a suburb. But more and more the typical American lives in a metropolitan rather than a small town environment—with no single metropolis to dominate the rest, no magnet to compare with Paris or London, Moscow or Tokyo; every great city shares in a single metropolitan quality.

The fact that the United States has always been a single economic unit, with no tariffs to restrict trade, has contributed to uniformity. Modern industry favours large organisations, and it is no accident that the world's biggest commercial firms are American. Mass-markets are efficient; the constituent pieces are interchangeable. The people are interchangeable too. They can choose between the products of competing manufacturers, but the products are all much alike. The air-conditioners and the machines for washing clothes and dishes, the smooth-running automatic comfortable car, the one-storey house in its pleasant piece of land, with its plate-glass windows and its swimming pool—all these things are good, but each has many others like it, just as there are too many car-parks and garages and signs about things for sale. The different parts and communities of the United States are like one another in the same way as big airports all over the world are like one another—and after all mass air travel developed in America before it did anywhere else. Except, up to a point, in the south, there is not much really distinctive regional architecture or cookery, music or literature. This is why Americans are so impressed by a Mediterranean fishing port or hilltop town.

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