

# *Three Words on America*

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PERHAPS IT IS AN impertinence to set down even three words about the United States after a first visit so short and partial as mine was recently. But the three words which seem to summarize my impression of those weeks are surprising to myself, and would be still more surprising to a great many other Europeans. They are freedom, simplicity, and diversity.

The common idea of America and Americans (outside the United States) is about precisely opposite to this one. It is realised, of course, that there must be some differ-

ence between New York and Omaha, Chicago and New Orleans, if it is only a difference of climate. But Europeans are apt to think of the United States as a country of rather oppressive uniformity—uniform ideas, fashions, habits, politics, even uniform food and drink. America is also, to them, a land of colossal wealth and luxury, of millionaires, sky-scraping pent-houses, and prodigious automobiles, but even its millionaireishness is thought of as somehow uniform and almost universal. As for liberty, Europe hears so many accounts of the extravagance of politics, of witch-hunts, lynchings, and travellers held up at Immigration, that a phrase like “the Land of the Free,” which for generations expressed the hope and belief of millions of emigrants, and the families they left behind them, would now have an ironic ring in the ears of most people east of the Atlantic.

Yet by comparison with that of England, the most influential of the European countries, the freedom of American life and its lack of pattern imposed from above are quite startling. Diversity, as I am thinking of it, is perhaps a quality or fruit of freedom: to anyone from Britain what is notable about the United States is not so much their actual variousness as the willingness (and power) of the people of any state (or city, or county) to consider every sort of change and development, every plan for a college or an airfield, or an entire new system of schools, that happens to please them.

The opposite of diversity in this sense is concentration; and concentration has been one of the keynotes of English history almost from its beginning. Political power was concentrated in the English monarchy when in other Western countries princes, dukes, and counts ruled over provinces that were almost independent. When the Church was as powerful as the State, England had a mere handful of bishoprics, but those exceptionally well endowed, so that an English prelate could look down on a French or Italian one, just as, a few centuries later, an English squire who had absorbed nearly all the wealth of his countryside, could

scorn at the poverty of French marquises and German princes. England had only two universities when my own country, Scotland, with only about an eighth of its population, had five; but Oxford and Cambridge were the richest seats of learning in Europe. For centuries England has had one city larger and wealthier than all her other towns put together: the concentration of wealth in London gave its merchants, even when they were comparatively few, a decisive advantage in competition with those of larger countries—still more, of course, over other parts of Britain.

The coming of industrialism, which, to begin with, was strongest outside London and the English South, upset this system of concentration for a time: a century ago, life in Northern England must have been more like that of parts of the contemporary United States than it has ever been before or since. It was full of local ambition and expansiveness. But this breach with tradition was soon mended. Industry, too, has concentrated itself; and in England there is no real parallel to the American struggle against the growth of monopolies. “Trust-busting” is apt to be a joke to English intellectuals: the idea that one great firm, or an alliance of firms, should rule a whole aspect of industry seems just as natural to them as the idea that one great trade union should control labour in a particular group of trades. Concentration, they feel, means strength, security, convenience of operation: the idea that it may be fatal to freedom no longer troubles them seriously.

This, of course, helps to explain why England has now accepted so easily a way of life that is at least half-socialist. It is a further stage of the process of concentration: almost the final one. The Government is bigger and stronger even than an industrial monopoly, and, in one way or another, the British Government has a hand in almost every form of activity within this island. To most British people it seems entirely natural that something so new as radio should be a monopoly, ultimately under Government control, though with

safeguards against merely political management. The idea of competitive television shocked millions so severely that the plans made for it have had to be altered so as to provide merely for two Government-controlled corporations instead of one.

I have had to sketch this contrasting way of life in order to explain to American readers what it is in the United States which strikes a European as most characteristically different from the conditions he knows best. Not all European societies are on the English pattern, but the countries where freedom from the official controls that go with concentration are most marked are chiefly small ones, like Switzerland. It is not democracy that makes the difference. The English (and the French) now consider themselves to be more democratic than the Americans: they certainly vote more solidly at national elections and their Parliaments have wider, more inclusive powers than the legislature at Washington. But, in Britain at any rate, real power in the Parliament is again concentrated in two small groups—the managers of the main parties, who can, in effect, decide who is going to stand a chance of being elected to the House of Commons in most parts of the United Kingdom. To most of us, the American system, under which candidates who are going to run for Congress are really chosen by a local, popular vote, and a Senator or Congressman can be practically independent of his party leaders, is now so strange as to be completely puzzling. As for the existence of state legislatures and state governors completely uncontrolled by either the national government or centralised party organisations in Washington, that is something so far outside most European experience that many find it difficult to believe that it is a serious fact at all.

European life looks more various than it is: the United States are far more various than they look to a European. No doubt most of the ancient cities of Europe are built on a common pattern. Each of them has its great church dominating a central

market place, as the county hall rises above the central square in most American cities. Somewhere the European town probably shows the remains of its castle or its walls. It has an old High Street around which it grew. But local stone or brick, local fashions in building, the accidents of many centuries, have given each city a character that seems wholly its own—you cannot mistake one for another. Yet all this individuality may be no more than a historic shell: the life of the town, its local government, most of its industries and business, certainly its banks and transportation, and probably its schools, will be controlled from a distant centre.

By contrast, an American city, which looks rather like scores of others built during the same century and a half, will manage its own affairs at its own cost. Even the state capital will scarcely dare to try to supervise its elected officers very closely. Washington will offer it neither money nor control. Most of its business will probably be in the hands of local people. It will have its own radio, perhaps its own TV, its own airport. In spirit its leading people will be not too unlike those medieval burghal communities which stamped their individuality on the European town.

Among its citizens, the European will find simplicity, which is the third of the qualities that seemed most notable to me in the States. It will be a community of homes and neighbours. To be sure, no part of the world is without neighbourliness and the family group. But in the older countries these things have always been limited by a strong sense of class differences and privileges: nowadays they are further weakened by industrialisation and by the operation of welfare schemes, planned and largely operated by distant officials. The man who earns his living through some vast industrial organisation becomes an atom or a number to those who employ him: the man who, in sickness, unemployment, accident or old age, depends on some centralised bureau for support has been no more than a number in a ledger since the

system began. The atomisation that goes with industrial employment must affect Americans as it does Europeans, but, partly because the proportion of people who work for themselves or as members of small groups of employees on the land or in business where the owner can know those he pays is much greater in the United States than in a country like England; partly, perhaps, because industrialism and the life of modern America have grown up together; one gets the impression that Americans are more at home in their surroundings than many Europeans are apt to be. They have fewer very great cities—this is a point which the visitor who dashes from New York to Los Angeles via Chicago is apt to miss completely. The family unit, from which nearly all children go to the same kind of school; the church, which is again an organisation locally controlled; social life which belongs to a community generally remote from larger ones, nurture a sort of life that is comfortably and healthily provincial. Though modern America is far richer, and, in a sense, more luxurious than Western Europe was before the wars began in 1914, the middle-aged visitor is continually and pleasantly reminded of a sort of society he used to know but will scarcely find vigorously alive at home.

Thinking Americans are worried about many of the things that disturb us too—about the future of a civilisation which seems, increasingly, to base its life and hopes on inessential gadgets, about the complications of industrialisation and technology, and the hideous threat to life itself that these things have developed, about the weakening, or absence, of traditional leadership and generally accepted standards of culture. The very form that these worries take, however, is striking and even hopeful to a European. You still feel, as we once did, that the individual should be able

to do something effective about the things that trouble him, whereas most of us have come to think that what is wrong with our world is beyond our control—that our best hope is to escape disaster for ourselves, not to prevent it for the people and places we know. We feel ourselves to be already half-defeated, whereas your world still seems a manageable one, though it may be difficult enough to handle.

And, for all your problems, you have many hopeful things on your side. You have the great, living tradition of local independence—in states, regions, cities—which came from the European Middle Ages, but is almost dead in Europe. The modern totalitarianism of centralisation has scarcely begun to touch you seriously, though the signs of its growth alarm you. You have a system of education whose weaknesses may be serious but which, because it is lively, various, and in active growth, seems capable of flowering quite suddenly into something as splendid as the Renaissance. Because you are more at home in the industrial, technological world than we are, and can still struggle against its over-organisation, you may be capable of transforming it into a way of life which need not crush individuality out of the people who follow it.

Of course, it would take great intelligence, tremendous moral courage, an immense reservoir of faith in things more than human, to make this sort of transformation successfully. A few weeks' travel cannot show a stranger whether you have, or are likely to have, these things. But it can end, for him, with the thought that you, and perhaps you alone, may find the qualities to recast the life we know, without running yourselves and the world into an absolute catastrophe on whose ruins an entirely new civilisation would have to be built up gradually through many centuries.