

FROM MODERNIZATION TO POST-MODERNISM:
A CENTURY AND A HALF OF FRENCH VIEWS OF THE UNITED STATES

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(Resumen)

Pese al tiempo transcurrido, *Democracy in America* de Alexis de Tocqueville continúa siendo una obra fundamental para entender cómo los europeos ven y entienden a los Estados Unidos. La aproximación de Tocqueville se entiende, desde nuestra visión de finales del siglo XX, como una obra eminentemente sociológica y no exclusivamente política. Será desde esta perspectiva a partir de la cual se aproximen a la realidad norteamericana autores contemporáneos como Baudrillard, Simone de Beauvoir o Micel Crozier.

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Whom the gods would destroy, they first tantalize with the illusion that a visit to the United States entitles an author to describe so vast and various a nation, so complicated and diverse a set of social arrangements, so unprecedented an experiment in self-government. Yet French intellectuals in particular have converted their curiosity about American society into compelling visions of a future that has suddenly become actualized. For them it has been a matter of time. Such authors have a special fix on a society that is not fixed at all. Alexis de Tocqueville's account of seeing more than the United States—but also the fate of France—remains the most admired and has not been superseded as a comprehensively interesting study of life in the United States. Though bereft of indebtedness to *Democracy in America*, Jean Baudrillard's far less ambitious *America* is the best-known recent attempt to make sense of this country in terms of the short-circuiting of history itself. Whether it be the modernization so cogently analyzed in 1835 and 1840 or the post-modernism that is situated in a dislocated locale on these shores, such authors are legatees of the Marquis de Condorcet, the Marquis de Lafayette, and the "ideologues," all of whom saw through an American present into the French future. What characterizes key French writers—or French-born Americans—is their flair for blending reportage and prophecy, present and future, in envisioning an accelerated destiny in the United States.¹

Travellers usually depend, like Tennessee Williams's Blanche DuBois, on the kindness of strangers; and those who summarize what they have learned from their trips may be even more dependent on the indulgence of those strangers who are historians, who must make allowances for the brevity of visits, the impediments of communication, the atypicality of encounters, misleading impressions and inevitable biases. With Tocqueville, no such

1. See Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville: 1805-1859* 101-2, and *Tocqueville: A Biography* 104; Sorman 264-65; Remond II, 514-18.

allowances or excuses are needed, however, even though, when he disembarked in New York in 1831, he was a stripling—only twenty-five years old, a minor official whom the July Monarchy had recently demoted. His English was not fully adequate, nor was his native tongue much understood by the occupants of the taverns and boarding houses where he and Gustave de Beaumont (himself a distant cousin of Lafayette) stayed. The visit was a trifle, lasting less than nine months, enough for a good initial impression. And once was enough. He never went back to the United States, a country about which at least twelve hundred of his compatriots had already written by 1835, including his own uncle Chateaubriand in his influential *Voyage d'Amérique* in 1827. Produced with the aid of two research assistants in Paris but without many authoritative sources, *Democracy in America* was written under circumstances so unpromising that lexicographers should list it to illustrate the familiar term *chutzpah*.²

Although the two visitors had ostensibly come to study the penal system for their government, Tocqueville returned home inspired to create “a new science of politics” that would make intelligible not only the United States but democracy itself. The completed study was enthusiastically reviewed in his homeland and in England (by John Stuart Mill), as well as in the host country. In fact, *Democracy in America* helped to establish a new discipline called sociology—the systematic attempt to describe society as a unit and to discern its laws of cohesion and development. Despite his later books as well as government service, Tocqueville’s reputation went into eclipse after his death in 1859; and in the United States the examination of its political culture which made him famous soon went out of print.

Resurrection came late. By the end of the 1930s, the auguries of a tyranny lurking within democracy itself, of the extinction of political liberty in mass society, showed eerie foresight, since the dictatorships of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin all claimed to be creatures of popular sovereignty and not merely the expressions of brutal power. In 1938 *Democracy in America* was rescued from neglect when Yale historian George W. Pierson retraced the steps of *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*; and seven years later Alfred A. Knopf reprinted the masterpiece itself. Hailed during his own lifetime as the heir to Montesquieu, Tocqueville should by now be favorably compared to Marx, who is far less our contemporary, more the wayward preacher of a visionary but voodoo economics whose system has been largely reduced to rubble. The major bequest of Tocqueville, who founded no school and left no disciples, is instead a blazing and undeceived astuteness.

In the 1950s, when the touted American Century was at its apogee, Tocqueville’s appeal to resist unmodulated popular pressures excited the liberal imagination. His concern for the sort of intellectual independence that public opinion tends to endanger appeared to have foreseen the blacklists, the loyalty oaths, and other demands for orthodoxy in the period. His astonishment at the commercial proclivities of the Americans, poised to seize upon every social occasion to close a deal, resonated in the unprecedented affluence of the

2. See Higonnet 54; Duroselle, *La France et les Etats-Unis: Des origines à nos jours* 67-68, and *France and the United States: From the Beginnings to the Present* 62.

postwar economy. The young magistrate's claim that in the United States every political issue is channeled into the courts has often been quoted in this ever more litigious society, and his discovery that attorneys serve as our aristocratic class became a staple of bar association oratory. The Cold War also confirmed his remarkable prediction that the United States and Russia would emerge as the two superpowers of the planet.

Without having conversed at length with a single black, Tocqueville was also amazingly prescient when he cautioned that the greatest threat to the internal stability of the Union came from the race question. He thus anticipated the social and moral issue that would ignite the Civil War. His sensitivities may have been heightened because his visit coincided with the execution of the rebellious Nat Turner in Virginia. Writing at a time when the institution of slavery seemed firmly in place, when the female half of the population was disenfranchised, when the very ideal of equal treatment under law was a cruel mockery to millions of others as well, Tocqueville was nevertheless audacious enough to assert that equality was the axial principle on which everything in the nation pivoted. His thesis became especially relevant once the Fourteenth Amendment was taken more seriously, after 1954.³

Indeed this single visit yielded so many perceptions and anticipated so much history that it seems churlish—but essential—to point out Tocqueville's mistakes and oversights. Yet he plainly did not understand the role technology would play in the making of the modern economy, falsely surmising that it would be mercantile rather than industrial; the United States did not become a nation of shopkeepers. In the clearing of the wilderness and the conquest of the West, he did not foresee the growth of cities. Coming from a country with a reputation for a lousy government but excellent administration, Tocqueville was fascinated by federalism; but in the shadow of the intense conflict between legitimists and Jacobins in France, he failed to grasp the importance of the two-party system in the United States. Nor did he appreciate the specifically English heritage of its political institutions. In the Age of Jackson, Tocqueville barely mentioned the President of the United States (who underwhelmed the French pair callin on him in the White House). This neglect is only fair, because *The Age of Jackson* (1945) refers only glancingly to Tocqueville, whose classic was still out of print when Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s Pulitzer Prize-winning study was written. The arc of Schlesinger's own scholarship has highlighted the historical significance of the office that Tocqueville minimized.⁴

Because fish and vegetables were served to diners before the meat, and oysters for dessert even in New York, Tocqueville was moved to denounce such "complete barbarism." Institutions of learning in the United States were also largely ignored. He did not visit a single college and wrote almost nothing about schools, which so many nineteenth century citizens valued and which, in the twentieth century, have often become test sites for issues of race, equality and federalism. Had Tocqueville done nothing else other than introduce the term "individualism" into the American vocabulary (though he did not coin the term), he

3. Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville* 155-56, and *Tocqueville* 161.

4. Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville* 112-13, and *Tocqueville* 115-16; Pierson 420.

could have taken the rest of the afternoon off. But he failed to see how individualism checked the nation's egalitarian impulses, how the imperatives of self-interest and self-advancement have frustrated the search for community, how industrialization promoted stratification. Certainly little remains apt in the 1831 letter that he sent home from "the United States, [where] people have neither wars, nor plagues, nor literature, nor eloquence, nor fine arts, few great crimes, nothing of what rouses Europe's attention; here people enjoy the most pallid happiness that one can imagine."⁵

Yet it is impossible to agree with Patrice Higonnet that "on balance . . . *Democracy in America* is not really a very good guide to the social and political structure of the United States in the early nineteenth century, or indeed in the nineteenth century generally." Tocqueville's "deficiency as a social scientist" meant that "he did not really understand the structure of American society," though Professor Higonnet oddly concedes that "both foreigners and Americans themselves have had reason to interpret the new nation more through the prism of his work than through that of any other writer." From the glimpse of a district attorney shaking hands with a prisoner, this "notable" caught the implications of democracy's triumph and revealed how travel broadens. The United States, he told Mill, was only the frame of his study; its true subject was the levelling of ranks and distinctions as a new principle of social order. (That "de" in his surname was so adhesive that he just couldn't leave home without it.) Too fearful of the democratic prospect to be enchanted with the United States, he was wise enough to know that equality could not be stopped. It could only be regulated and restrained. Too sober to see the young nation as having reopened the gates of paradise, he avoided the delusions of utopians like Etienne Cabet ("Allons en Icarie!") and other contemporaries who fantasized about the site where a new stage of humanity would be launched. Conceived in a spectacular burst of intelligence, *Democracy in America* elucidated the meaning of modernization, and offered a theory in political sociology based on one test case: a large republic.⁶

Almost exactly a century later, the term "modernization" had joined its cognate "modernism" as an entree into contemporary experience (and as an indispensable password into the republic of letters). Among the most formidable gatekeepers has been Jacques Barzun, who was born in Paris in 1907 and came to the United States at the age of thirteen, festooned "in ridiculous short pants and ignorant of baseball." A third of a century later, that land was "to all appearances as remote and irrecoverable as the America that Dickens (or Columbus) discovered." A lifetime here nevertheless spurred Barzun to pose the sort of question that echoes the theme of *Democracy in America*: "Is it possible that modern

5. Quoted in Higonnet 55; Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* II, 125-27 or *Democracy in America* II, 104-6; Schleifer 244; Alexis de Tocqueville to Madame la Comtesse de Grancey (10 October 1831), quoted in Schleifer 43; Drescher 53-54, 256, 273.

6. Higonnet 61; Meyers 33-56; Bradley; Remond 58-63.

civilization is something new, incommensurable with the old, just like the character of the American adventure itself?"

And the answers were reverberant as well. *God's Country and Mine* insists upon a certain classlessness, or rather a melting of virtually everyone into a vague middle class, in a nation that the author regarded with the possessiveness he was willing to share with the Almighty: "What happened here on this enormous expanse of itact wildness is that mankind got out from under and spread out. From under what? From under the lid—everybody, from under all the lids—kings, churches, aristocracies, landlords, the military caste, the burgher class, the lawyers, the lesser nobility, the petty bourgeoisie—the piles of subclasses on top of subclasses that formed the structure of old Europe. They left an old world to stretch their limbs and spread out flat, with only the sky above them. When the Eastern end thickened into layers for a new social pyramid, the under-layers slid out again to the West," since "this country was peopled by underdogs, refugees, nobodies, and . . . it keeps on being run by them." Perhaps only a naturalized citizen would see such levelling as anything but natural (Barzun 8-9, 25, 26).

Though Barzun is, like Tocqueville, only partly an Americanist, his work intriguingly links the modernization decoded in *Democracy in America* and the post-modernism that has become fashionable in the academy. Even the contrast that Tocqueville formulated between aristocratic literature and democratic literature roughly corresponds to the distinctions between classicism and romanticism which Barzun made central to his work in cultural history; and both writers felt obliged to champion the virtues of the latter. The 1961 revision of *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* (1943) also observes that "'Modernism' is just beginning to acquire the tone of the past. The name itself grows empty for us, though it is full of recognized and cherishable associations." By mid-century such sensibility and such art seemed exhausted. Especially among modern(ist) poets runs "the paralyzing thought that everything has been done," the burden of too much history. Thus "debunking [is] used to destroy admiration. No doubt, to admire what is false may corrupt judgment, but to admire nothing at all, for fear of being duped, is a progressive disease of the spirit." Barzun ever scorned the comic: "The damaged will accounts for the peculiar and obligatory sense of humor of our time, the defensive laugh coupled with every action, to forestall derision by someone else or one's later self." Yet notice how easily Tocqueville's mordant account of majoritarian tyranny slides into Barzun's anatomy of "the modern ego" itself, how Tocqueville's typical citizen had become typecast into the dramaturgy of advanced art: "The modern ego is more concerned with the way it appears in others' eyes than with learning fully about itself and admitting its troubles fearlessly."⁷

In more recent accounts, however, the influence of *Democracy in America* has become less emphatic and more problematic. It scarcely registers in Simone de Beauvoir's *L'Amérique au Jour le Jour*, a journal based on a four months' visit in 1947. Despite the

7. Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville* 256-57, and *Tocqueville* 258-59; Barzun, *Classic, Romantic and Modern* 115n, 117, 121, 122, 123, 131.

onset of the Red Scare and the conformism that suppressed a sense of autonomy, de Beauvoir managed to discover freedom of thought, "a tradition of self-criticism in America, such as we once had in France." Though she later changed her mind under the impact of the Cold War and denounced political conformity, her journal barely acknowledged any threat from the tyranny of the majority. She was impressed instead by those intellectuals whose assaults on "a certain standard of morality, politics and the economy . . . are symbols of their love for their country." Modernization has effectuated the death of the past, which Americans may respect—"but only insofar as it is a thing embalmed; the idea of the living past, integrated with the present, is foreign to them." Unlike Tocqueville, she encountered serious writers and artists; and de Beauvoir had another advantage over him in the minority perspective that she adopted. Her cicerones included the novelist Richard Wright, to whom—along with his wife—the book is dedicated; and the condition of ordinary American women was a revelation that helped to inspire *The Second Sex*, published in France in 1949. The dynamism and vigor of this society compelled de Beauvoir to conclude, almost as a *non sequitur*, that how it operates matters, and not just for France or for Europe. "America is a pivotal point in the world where the future of man is at stake," she asserted. "To like America or not to like her: these words have no sense." Her host country was therefore not just a locale; it was a symptom.⁸

This postwar ambivalence was not shared by the social scientist Michel Crozier, who recalled falling "in love with America at an early age," primarily "because I was struck by the sharp contrast between the freedom that has reigned there from the beginning and the stifling French bureaucracy to which I have devoted a large part of my research." His first visit occurred in 1946, a year before de Beauvoir's, when the self-described "pro-American leftist" was exactly Tocqueville's age. But written in the aftermath of a teaching stint at Harvard in 1980, *The Trouble with America* confronted the wounded civilization that the United States had become in the period from the Kennedy assassination through the Teheran hostage crisis. Crozier's volume is saturated with a gloominess foreign to Tocqueville, who earns only three brief references. Indeed "the rage for equality that worried Tocqueville a hundred and fifty years ago has progressively weakened the social fabric," Crozier observed, "to the point where the marvelous American capacity for association, which he once found so admirable, has been drained of its vitalizing power. The United States today is no longer the America Tocqueville described. Its voluntary associations have ceased to be a mainstay of a democracy constantly on the move but are now simply a means of self-defense for various interests . . . This breakdown of community structures is what has made America a country full of anxiety."

Crozier pinned much of the blame for the malaise on attorneys, as though the quondam quasi-aristocracy had run amuck, because the United States is "undoubtedly the

8. Beauvoir, *L'Amérique au jour le jour* 264, 369-70, 372, 376, or *America Day by Day* 209, 291, 293, 295-96; *idem.*, *La Force des choses* 137-39, or *Force of Circumstance* 123-24; Granjon 148-49, 152, 162; Bair 339-40.

country where that passion for law has been pressed . . . to the edge of madness." (70% of the world's attorneys practice in the United States.) In another sense Crozier vindicated his predecessor's faith that the American experience was extremely relevant as a prefiguration of the European fate of drift and confusion, a faith that also animated Georges Duhamel's hostile best-seller about the United States, based on a six weeks' visit in 1928. Using the phrase *le mal américain*, Duhamel's *Scènes de la vie future* denounced a materialist "ant-heap" of a civilization that had already subjugated much of the "dazzled" European soul. Crozier himself concluded that "two contradictory statements are equally valid and central for understanding the American crisis. *America's plight is not hers alone*, it is the common plight of all post-industrial Western societies . . . *America nevertheless is still a very special case* because its rigidities are of a different nature, because its commitment to the dominant mode of rationality remains deeper and stronger than that of other post-industrial countries, and, finally, because its sheer size and power impose specific constraints [that] it cannot discard."⁹

Perhaps the most vigorous and engaging rebuttal, however, came indirectly from Sanche de Gramont, who decided to go native so fully that he rearranged his surname as Ted Morgan. His 1978 memoir and miscellany harkens back not only to Tocqueville but to J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, though Morgan is certainly no Mister Heartbreak (as John Berryman translated the name in *Dream Songs* #5). Indeed *On Becoming American* might have been entitled *Letters of an American Affirmer*, in which immigration is itself the best validation for the national experiment: "This country is a success, in the same way that a Broadway show is a success. People are lined up at the box office for tickets of admission." Having studied at the Sorbonne in the 1950s, Morgan realized that "Americans are the true existentialists. An American is the sum of his undertakings. . . . He makes himself and is responsible for himself. He can't blame bloodlines or bad breaks. Americans are given enough elbow room to succeed or go bust. They are left on their own, to triumph or cultivate their self-disgust. Our casualties are not due to regimentation," he added. "They are the casualties of freedom, the people who have O. D.'d on choices. Anybody can try anything—after all, it's his funeral. Every American is given by birthright enough rope to hang himself." Here the stress is on a rambunctious but rather punitive freedom of opportunity, not the benign equality of conditions that *Democracy in America* had underscored almost a century and a half earlier.

Consider the contrast with France, "an old country with a long history. It had lived through epic periods. It knew its final shape," he acknowledged. But the United States "was a young country, still taking risks, still bubbling. I wanted to live in a country that was still having growing pains. . . . I wanted a creed based on the promise of growth rather than the measuring of limits. . . . I wanted a society still able to believe, in spite of the countless

9. Crozier, *Le mal américain* 7-8, 207, 238, 288-89, or *The Trouble with America* x, 85, 106, 142; "Do We Have Too Many Lawyers?" 54; Duhamel, *Scènes de la vie future* 110, 244-46, or *America the Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future* 214-15; Ory 65-66.

times that belief has been vitiated, that if you worked hard and did the right thing you would attain your goals. . . ." Morgan asserted that "in old societies, people knew who they were, they were given cards of identity at birth, and they were expected to remain in their allotted compartments. In a new society, people asked themselves who they were and what they might become. It was a matter of finding one's natural place rather than an assigned place" (Morgan 4, 66, 72, 101).

On Becoming American records the author's ancestry, stemming from distant Gascon roots in the eleventh century. But to become an American meant erasing that "de"; and in applying for naturalization in 1973, Morgan was asked to renounce his title of count. "Gladly." "Tell me, what does it get you?" the official asked. "A corner table at the Grenouille," was the reply. Apart from answering some other questions, he had little else to do other than pay a \$25 fee—"the bargain of the century." So canny and amusing are his observations that his adopted country got a pretty good deal too. "In Europe," Morgan asserted, "you can be rude to . . . [the lower classes] because you can be sure they will never extricate themselves from the mire. They will remain what they are, the objects of your snub. In America there are so many surprising reversals that it makes sense to be nice to people. . . . The office boy may someday be board chairman. . . . Whoever you kick on the ladder on your way up is going to kick you back when he reaches your rung. In Europe there isn't even a ladder," an overstatement that ignores comparable rates of upward mobility in advanced industrial nations.

The citizenship that Morgan achieved in 1977 nevertheless closes the circle of identity that Crèvecoeur first traced. Both were French army veterans who married Americans and wrote in English; neither suffered from the handicap of having known America only as a traveller or a tourist; and it is fitting that, while the eighteenth century farmer lived primarily in New York state, the twentieth century journalist moved with his family westward to California. Crèvecoeur's resonant Letter III describes the American as a hybrid composed of many ethnic and racial strains (though not African); acculturation in a new environment is central to his thesis. Morgan likewise celebrated the mixed makeup of the population rather than its Anglo-Saxon core. Tabulating the 41% of American Nobel laureates who were born abroad, he speculated that "our mongrelization keeps us ahead."¹⁰

Unlike Crozier, Morgan was impressed by the eagerness with which the local inhabitants still join voluntary associations. "Whenever two or more Americans have a common problem, they form a Committee of Concerned Citizens," leading him to "wonder if there is a single American who does not belong to some association . . . I once thought I had found one, a hermit who lived in an abandoned silver mine in the wilderness area of Idaho's Salmon River. But he told me he belonged to the National Association of Hermits." Unlike Tocqueville, whose depth charges detected a centrifugal stability amid all the buzzing energy, *On Becoming American* has recorded "pure process; it is an open-ended system . . . We are a people in transit, propelled by the hi-test fuel of innovation." Whereas

10. Morgan 183, 185, 191, 228-29; Slotkin 259-67; Grabo 159-72.

Democracy in America uses the single key of egalitarianism to unlock the national mysteries, Morgan has appreciated the contradictions, the paradoxes, the absurdities, with no single force at work—not even the historical destiny that France itself might eventually share. He pushed to the limits the doctrine of American exceptionalism, classifying his new country as “an accumulation of peculiarities,” because “rarely does a day go by without my seeing or hearing something that strikes me as peculiar to these shores, and I shake my head and say ‘Only in America.’ Americans fail to realize that to the rest of the world they are as strange as creatures from another planet” (Morgan 226, 291-92, 310-11, 319).

Which brings us to Baudrillard, whose account of *l'Amérique sidérale*, or “astral America,” was spun from a lecture tour, a set of postcards from the cutting-edge of post-modernism. In 1986 the University of Nanterre sociologist arrived to contemplate the land that contained Disneyland, which “is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which is Disneyland.” That amusement park “is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real.” But it isn’t; “Los Angeles and the America surrounding it is no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.” According to Baudrillard, it is a land of signs within signs and without referents, of media but scarcely of politics, of a network of “simulacra” but not of the sinews of power, of a present without a past and of a future that entices the rest of the Western world too. It is a nation surfeited with advertisements and sensations yet barren of meaning. Tocqueville had toured the United States by stagecoach and steamboat. The best way to pin America to the mat, Barzun had proposed, is from an early morning train. Baudrillard swears by the automobile. Drive, he said, because “that way you learn more about this society than all academia could ever tell you. . . . Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.”¹¹

Whatever the state of Baudrillard's radiator, it must be noted that his theories hold little water, in part because of finding himself “here in my imagination,” he admits, “long before I actually came here.” Tocqueville had approached the United States deductively, to illustrate a hypothesis; but Baudrillard's *America* is abstract, bizarre, superficial and exasperating. The problem cannot simply be ascribed to jet-lag; it is due to method. Tocqueville had fathomed the polity of a foreign land by interviewing Old Hickory, John Quincy Adams, Sam Houston and Daniel Webster, plus Cabinet officers. But in *l'Amérique sidérale* only a handful of names are sprinkled, like star-dust: painter Jim Dine, the late Walt Disney, the late F. Scott Fitzgerald, the late Jimi Hendrix, Michael Jackson, Charles Manson, Ronald Reagan, astronomer Carl Sagan and Andy Warhol, none of whom the touring sociologist got out of the car to meet. Encounters with actual Americans were apparently uninteresting, perhaps because such citizens “will confirm your analysis by facts, statistics or lived experience, thereby divesting it of all conceptual value.”

11. Baudrillard, *Amérique* 16, 55, 109 or *America* 5, 27, 54-55; *idem.*, *Simulacres et simulation* 25-26, or *Simulations* 25; Barzun, *God's Country and Mine* 3.

So irresponsible are the author's overstatements that his book invites the suspicion that he is trying to pull the reader's leg. No one *ever* smiles at anyone else in New York City, where the number of single diners ("the saddest sight in the world") amazes him, as though no one ever ate alone in Paris. Anyone who carries cash in the United States is considered mad. Los Angeles lacks elevators. The stench of death pervades Santa Barbara (which is arguably the most charming of American communities). Baudrillard implies that the West was settled by the Puritans; and, staring out from a Twin Cities hotel room, he muses on what has happened to "the utopian dream of a hellenistic city on the edge of the Rockies? Minneapolis, Minneapolis!"—oblivious to the fact that the city is located a thousand miles east of "the edge of the Rockies." Indeed the cartography of Baudrillard's America is about as distorted as the provincial Manhattanite's (according to Saul Steinberg's famous cover for the *New Yorker*): no South or Northwest, almost no New England or Midwest. It is a very small republic. Mormons are the only religious group mentioned; the ethnic groups very briefly cited are Hispanics, blacks and native Americans. "Right lane must exit," a highway sign announces, leading the author to reflect: "This 'must exit' has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have got to go, to . . . leave this providential highway which leads nowhere," except maybe to other freeways, the Safeways, the deserts and Disneyland—for "these are America, not the galleries, churches, and culture." Either/or. No wonder then that to Baudrillard the American "genius" is expressed not only in the "irrepressible development of equality" but in "banality and indifference" as well.¹²

This *America* is not completely wacky, however. As one critic acknowledged after reading the work of Baudrillard's older brother, Marshall McLuhan, "it is impure nonsense, i. e., nonsense adulterated by sense." Tocqueville's Americans were born equal; Morgan's are born free; Baudrillard's are born modern—a condition that will forever elude the French, who are bewitched by "the nineteenth century bourgeois dream." His countrymen must understand that "America is the original version of modernity. We are the dubbed or subtitled version." He adds that "all the myths of modernity are American," without crediting *Democracy in America* itself for crystallizing those myths; and the French and other Europeans "will therefore never be modern in the proper sense of the term." Baudrillard is quite right to distinguish the late twentieth century from earlier eras by the influence of mass media, by how dominant images from television and movies have become, by the adoption of a show-business sensibility in public life, by the promises of leisure and consumption far beyond earlier features of "the pursuit of happiness." In the United States such trends have been pushed further than elsewhere, because Americans "are themselves simulation in its most developed state . . . They are the ideal material for an analysis of all the possible variants of the modern world." But these changes hardly obliterate the quotidian struggles of work and family and friendship, nor erase the regional, class, ethnic and religious differences that are so noticeable and perhaps ineradicable. In his addiction to the

12. Baudrillard, *Amérique* 22, 32, 33, 34-35, 61, 106-7, 122, 143, 174, 178, 208-9, 233, 244, or *America* 7-8, 13, 14, 15, 30, 38, 53, 61, 72, 87, 89, 104, 121, 125; Hughes 382.

"conceptual value" of the post-modernist project, Baudrillard clumsily treats the subtleties and recalcitrant empirical evidence that social analysis must address. Tocqueville got religion wrong by speculating that Americans would tend to become either Roman Catholics or pantheists; but through his windshield Baudrillard managed to see only silhouettes who "bowed and prayed / (t)o the neon God they made."¹³

Such perspectives ignore much of the American experience, such as the wrenching and unjust consequences of industrialism that appalled British visitors like Rudyard Kipling in Chicago ("I urgently desire never to see it again") and Herbert Spencer in Pittsburgh ("Six months residence here would justify suicide"). The violence that has punctuated so much of the nation's past has also been largely neglected. What French visitors and the French-born have nevertheless noticed over the course of a century and a half can suggest some continuities of American life; the omissions in such writings may also indirectly reveal as much about their own society as what they observed in the United States itself. One society can become a sort of anagram for another. Meditations on France arrive packaged as reports from the United States; "American" texts can be pretexts for discussing France. The flux of one social system seems to magnify the sense of rigidity in the other; the openness of one heightens the sense of constraint in the other; and the heterogeneity of the United States diverges from a nation slow to accept a *droit à la différence* or pluralism (qtd. in Heale 29, and in Livesay 126).

Such contrasts suggest the longing to fulfill elsewhere what is missing at home, which may explain why, since the mid-twentieth century, French public opinion polls have consistently ranked the United States as the most admired foreign nation (insofar as the French can summon admiration for any foreigners at all). In 1984, for example, pollsters discovered that the French were more pro-American than the British or the West Germans. Though the Grand Larousse has listed as many as thirty-two French terms prefixed by "anti," none of these objects of hostility includes *américanisme*, which shows up by itself as early as 1866, defined as a "manner of existence which imitates that of . . . the inhabitants of the United States." No wonder it is easy to detect anxieties about its current hegemony in the popular arts, typified by one embittered denunciation of Euro Disneyland in the spring of 1992 as a "cultural Chernobyl." Such animus reflects a national vulnerability and curiosity that deserve historical analysis. Tracing the influence of images of democracy in America enables scholars and other readers to get two for the price of one, which is the bonus of the comparative method.¹⁴

13. Macdonald 219; Baudrillard, *Amérique* 57-58, 146, 151-52, 162, or *America* 28-29, 73, 76, 81; Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* II, 48-51, or *Democracy in America* II, 30-33; Paul Simon, "The Sound of Silence," qtd. in Goldstein 140.

14. Duroselle, *La France et les Etats-Unis* 265, or *France and the United States* 251-52; Costigliola 190-98; Kaspi 291; Rezé 171-76; Lacorne and Rupnik 37-38; Arianne Mnouchkine qtd. in Zuber 69.

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