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CHAPTER 20

From Business Culture to Great Depression: The Twenties, 1920–1932

128. André Siegfried on the "New Society," from the *Atlantic Monthly* (1928)

Source: André Siegfried, "The Gulf Between,"* Atlantic Monthly, *Vol. 141 (March 1928), pp. 289–95.

André Siegfried, a Frenchman who had visited the United States five times since the beginning of the century, commented in 1928 that American life had changed radically during the previous thirty years. A "new society," he wrote, came into being, in which Americans considered their "standard of living" a "sacred acquisition, which they will defend at any price." In this new "mass civilization," widespread acceptance of going into debt to purchase consumer goods had replaced the values of thrift and self-denial, central to nineteenth-century notions of upstanding character. Work, once seen as a source of pride in craft skill or collective empowerment via trade unions, now came to be valued as a path to individual fulfilment through consumption and entertainment. Siegfried considered the economy "sound" (a judgment soon to be disproven by the advent of the Great Depression), but

worried that Americans seemed willing to sacrifice certain "personal" and "political liberties" in the name of economic efficiency and mass production.

NEVER HAS EUROPE more eagerly observed, studied, discussed America; and never has America followed more carefully, discussed more closely, the discussions of Europe about the United States. At the same time, it is hardly excessive to state that never have the two continents been wider apart in their inspirations and ideals.

It is a widespread belief that the war is mainly responsible for that estrangement, especially, the aftermath of the war. I should be tempted to think that the deep reason is another one: Europe, after all, is not very different from what it was a generation ago; but there has been born since then a new America.

Such is the point I should like to discuss in the following pages, not *ex professo* and by summoning figures and statistics, but by plainly giving the impressions of a European who first knew the United States in 1898, and has since visited them again every four or five years. An American, thus looking at Europe, would of course have witnessed extraordinary changes, especially on account of the catastrophe of the war, but he would have to admit that the basis of the European civilization remains essentially the same. On the contrary, when I recall my impressions of the United States thirty years ago, I cannot avoid the thought that the very basis of the American civilization is no longer the same: a new society, whose foundation rests upon entirely different principles and methods, has come to life; the geographical, the moral centre of gravity of the country is no longer situated at the same place. It is not enough to say that a new period has grown out of the old; something entirely new has been created. Such a change did not clearly appear to me in 1901 or 1904; it was noticeable in 1914, and patent in 1919 and 1925.

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Two principal facts seem to have brought a change the importance of which cannot be exaggerated. First, the conquest of the continent has been completed, and—all recent American historians have noted

the significance of the event—the western frontier has disappeared: the pioneer is no longer needed, and, with him, the mystic dream of the West (the French would say the *mystique* of the West) has faded away. Thus came the beginning of the era of organization: the new problem was not to conquer adventurously but to produce methodically. The great man of the new generation was no longer a pioneer like Lincoln, nor a railroad magnate of the Hill type, but that genial *primaire* Henry Ford. From this time on, America has been no more an unlimited prairie with pure and infinite horizons, in which free men may sport like wild horses, but a huge factory of prodigious efficiency.

Thus was born—and this thanks solely to the American genius—a new conception of production, and, with the success of it, that wonderful progress in the standard of living of the American people. In this creation the United States was indebted for nothing essential to Europe. The rope was cut that had so long made of the new continent a persistent colony of the old. There appears to lie the main cause of the immense change which has made of the United States, in the twentieth century, a really new civilization, in which the legendary types of nineteenth-century America are in vain looked for by the traveler of to-day. Where is the hectic and semiwild millionaire of Abel Hermant in his *Transatlantiques?* Where is the gentleman cowboy of Bourget? Where is the old *gentilhomme* of the South, so long preserved in ice for our pleasure and delight? Above all, where is the liberty of the past—swallowed in one gulp by the ogre of efficiency?

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This brings me to one definite conclusion: in the last twenty-five or thirty years America has produced a new civilization, whose centre is mid-continental, and for this reason, as well as because it owes little to us, is further away from Europe than before—it is American and autonomous. This may perhaps explain the growing estrangement between the old and the new world.

Just before leaving the United States in the last days of 1925, after a six months' visit, I tried to sum up for myself, in a very short note which was not destined to be printed, my leading impressions of the present American civilization. It may be interesting to reproduce

that note, not as giving any original view, but as representing, on the contrary, the spontaneous reaction of an average Frenchman—that is, of an average Western European.

'From an *economic point of view*, the country is sound, because its prosperity is based, first on a boundless supply of natural produce, and second on an elaborate organization of industrial production, the perfection of which is nowhere approached in Europe.

'From the *point of view of civilization*, it is perhaps to be feared that standardization may, in the long run, tend to lessen the intellectual and artistic value of the American society—the part of the workingman in the factories where mass production is realized is not likely to increase his own value, as an individual; and in order to secure material comfort for the bulk of the American population it seems necessary to produce a common level of manufactured articles, which perhaps does not mark progress in comparison with the civilization of Europe.

'From a *moral point of view*, it is obvious that Americans have come to consider their standard of living as a somewhat sacred acquisition, which they will defend at any price. This means that they would be ready to make many an intellectual or even moral concession in order to maintain that standard.

'From a *political point of view*, it seems that the notion of efficiency in production is on the way to taking precedency of the very notion of liberty. In the name of efficiency one can obtain, from the American, all sorts of sacrifices in relation to his personal and even to certain of his political liberties.'

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Mass production and mass civilization, its natural consequence, are the true characteristics of the new American society.

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Lincoln, with his Bible and classical tradition, was easier for Europe to understand than Ford, with his total absence of tradition and his proud creation of new methods and new standards, especially conceived for a world entirely different from our own.