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James L. Nolan, Jr., "What They Saw in America. Tocqueville, Weber, Chesterton, Sayyid Qutb". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 299 pp.

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Book review

James L. Nolan, Jr., “What They Saw in America. Tocqueville, Weber, Chesterton, Sayyid Qutb”. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 299 pp.

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The first striking feature of this book is its concern to make American people more aware of the opinion the outside world harbors about them. An educational goal is thus implied in an editorial enterprise which assembles the opinions of four different scholars/visitors of the United States. To make Americans conscious of how people regard them looks a salutary goal since they live in “perpetual adoration of themselves” and only foreigners can make certain truths reach their ears. The educational vein colors even the most dispassionate of the authors, Max Weber, who is presented as a subtle mentor of the severe self-analysis induced by the *Protestant Ethic*.

The value of *What They Saw in America* lies in the ambivalent sentiments the four authors utter towards their object as well as in their individual profiles. There is a consensual praise of American acquisitiveness, technology, entrepreneurial spirit, together with the recognition of the strong role religion still holds in the country. At the same time the overwhelming capitalist approach is found faulty – when it ruins nature, predates agriculture and besieges all things with its industrial arrogance. The four authors find common ground around some themes: the vitality of associational life, the plurality of local traditions, the voluntary habits at local levels. All trends which mitigate American individualistic tendencies and sustain democracy.

Still, each scholar offers a personal view. Tocqueville, who together with Beaumont in 1831 had the public mission of investigating the American penal system – i.e. its prisons – is struck at his arrival by the Fourth of July folklore and celebration. He writes: “Pride and patriotism are the defining characteristics of American people.” National pride leads Americans to display all the attractions of institutions, monuments and natural sights which flatter their sense of superiority. In other words Tocqueville and Beaumont had to swallow their fair measure of American “exceptionalism.”

Tocqueville saw equality and freedom in a constant tension, so much as to fear that the passion for equality could overcome the love of freedom. His persuasion that religion is necessary in a democracy did not make him worried with the growing process of secularization: unlike Weber, Tocqueville did not see secularization as an inevitable consequence of modernization.

The “tyranny of the majority” is the well-known notion Tocqueville illustrates in *Democracy in America*. Remarkably, he hints to it in different circumstances, and one of them is the voting habits of free blacks in Pennsylvania: he wonders why in a free state, where blacks are permitted to vote, they choose not to because of fear of being mistreated at the polling places. Evidently the law lacks force when the majority does not support it. Especially penetrating are two more insights: egalitarianism – the absence of class consciousness in a nation which seems dominated only by the middle class – and its marked bent for mobility. Americans show a pronounced inclination to change: they perpetually relocate in a restless way and are proud of their mobility.

In the end, tyranny of the majority and conformism are the most important features *Democracy in America* portrays. The two French visitors were also impressed by the high levels of conformity among Americans – either pioneers of the western frontier or east coast city dwellers. There is a sort of despotic potential of the sovereign majority, they remark: even in monarchical systems one can notice more freedom of expression than in America's democracy.

Max and Marianne Weber departed to visit the United States more than seventy years after the two French magistrates, in 1904. For Weber it was a welcomed journey. He had suffered a severe nervous breakdown in the previous years, but, being invited at the Congress for Art and Sciences at the St. Louis World's Fair, he had accepted most willingly. His most famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was written and published immediately before and after the American trip: it owes a lot to his direct observation of the puritanical habits and ways of life in America.

Weber's first impressions of the new world were positive, enthusiastic; he rejected everything which sounded like criticism, conquered by the vitality and liveliness of the big cities, especially New York. Still, the contrast between New York and Chicago – the slaughtering city – impressed both Max and Marianne.

During the trip Weber was able to investigate about his favorite subject – the connection between American protestant sects and the spirit of capitalism – from various angles. The scene of agricultural transformation under the principles of modern industrialism persuaded him that farming too was soon going to be understood as business. In the United States there no longer existed what might be called a rural society. In different encounters he could realize how deeply rooted is the Calvinist ethic in the common lay person. He gives the example of a German physician, recently settled in Cincinnati, who asked his first patient to explain the nature of his illness and who received the surprising answer "I am from the Second Baptist Church on X Street." The statement was meant to assure the specialist about his fee being paid: "Don't worry about the fee." Church community guaranteed the social reputation of an individual and also his reputation in business.

There is sometime like a lament in Weber's comments about the fast pace of change. About the small town of Muskogee he writes to his mother: "Too bad, in a year this place will look like Oklahoma." His mind is divided: he likes the fabulous bustle with its tremendous fascination and he feels a sense of loss with the expectation that capitalism would ultimately create a place of disenchanting uniformity. More unexpected are Weber's remarks on topics such as "the color line" (Native Americans and Negroes) and the violence of a passion for weapons freely available - "the right to bear arms" amendment.

There is also an interesting prediction about the future of religion: Weber saw European immigration as one cause of secularization.

Unlike Weber and Tocqueville, G.K. Chesterton as a visitor was a more famous personality and was received in North America with his wife with curiosity by the media. He was known as a debater, a journalist, a satirist. From the beginning Chesterton did not like the uniformity of American life and criticized the lack of coziness of the hotels he visited. But Americans do not live in hotels, he admitted, rather in "little wooden houses with a porch in front." The main target of his opposition about the country was the

Prohibition law. Prohibition was in force during his two journeys, and Chesterton commented ironically the symbol of the Statue of Liberty, “which should be given back to the French.” According to him Prohibitionism was a product of Puritanism. While admiring the eagerness of enterprising Americans, he shared Weber’s views about the link between Protestantism and capitalism (though he had not read Weber). “I think America’s religion of industrialism, building, building, building, is an outgrowth of Puritanism.” His sympathies were directed rather towards “distributism” – small-scale production, widely distributed ownership of private property, a decentralized agrarian-based economic system. At the end it must be underscored that Chesterton praised the lack of class distinction in America “a blast of fresh air,” whereas in England class consciousness is “morbidly acute.”

The unexpected contribution by Qutb, the Egyptian future member of the Muslim Brotherhood, looks extraordinarily out of the mainstream, therefore curious and appealing. He deprecates the hustle and herd of American life but at the same time acknowledges the benefit of the pure scientific scholarship and admires it. Not unlike his French colleagues he had been given a public mission by the Egyptian government: to investigate the American system of education. While he appreciated the brilliant planning and management of educational institutions, he thought that these economic qualities came at a great cost: human values did not balance the material prowess, America “adds nothing or next to nothing in the account of morals that distinguishes man from object.” In his opinion all moral values are an object of ridicule for Americans.

Qutb’s life incurred in the most dramatic development when he went back to Egypt. He, the most influential inspirer of Islamism, joined the Muslim Brotherhood, but fell in disgrace with the regime of Nasser and was arrested. After a short release he was arrested again and then executed by hanging in 1966.

The assembled experiences and viewpoints of these scholars compose an attractive description of the New World, provided with words of admiration and hints of irony – on the whole an enjoyable piece of reading, a very good book. It can be appreciated by students with an interest in American studies, a good preparation and a marked inclination for history.

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