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BOOKS AND CULTURE

Our Friendly Visitors

A new book examines foreign observations of American democracy.

Daniel J. Mahoney

August 12, 2016

What They Saw In America: Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber, G.K. Chesterton, and Sayyid Qutb, by James L. Nolan, Jr. (Cambridge University Press, 299 pp., \$29.95)

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville strikingly observed that Americans live in “perpetual adoration” of themselves and that “only foreigners or experience can make certain truths reach their ears.” These remarks, quoted at the beginning of James Nolan’s impressive work on the most reflective foreign observers of American democracy, provide the point of departure for a fascinating study. Nolan examines the “fruitful ambivalence” that highlights the travels and reflections of three visitors to these shores who admired many features of American civilization but who also didn’t hesitate to criticize important dimensions of American—and democratic—life. Tocqueville, Weber, and Chesterton, Nolan’s friendly critics, were not casual tourists. They were disciplined observers of the American experiment in democratic self-government who constantly drew comparisons to their native countries (France, Germany, and England, respectively). Their work combined penetrating sociological observation with political and philosophical reflection, often of the highest order.

Nolan points out the common themes that connect these visitors to America over a period of 100 years (Tocqueville traveled to America in 1831–32, Weber in 1904, and Chesterton in 1921 and 1930–31). But many of their themes and concerns were shared by an almost uniformly critical observer of America, the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb (who spent time in America from 1948 to 1950). The first three visitors “were simultaneously impressed with and disquieted by what they saw in America.” Qutb

saw only shadows and the dissolution of the human spirit. In his view, Americans lived for the almighty dollar, had no sense of beauty, and were fundamentally estranged from nature and religion. Moreover, the happiness they pursued constantly eluded them. He saw in America only conformity and a tendency to form an agitated “herd.” Much of this is undoubtedly overwrought. But Nolan is struck by the fact that many of the same criticisms were made in a more balanced way by the friendly critics of America and American democracy. One doesn’t have to indulge Qutb’s penchant for political extremism, his one-sided hostility to Western democracy, his hatred of Zionism and Jews (which Nolan understates), or his fanciful belief that Islam will solve all the problems of modern civilization to recognize that he, too, has something to say about the limits of modern democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville was “the first to identify the paradoxical tendencies of individualism, conformism, and voluntarism in American society.” A self-declared friend of America and democracy, Tocqueville nonetheless described Americans’ “conformist habits and acute sensitivities to the opinion of others.” Americans always wanted praise from foreigners, as if they were searching for confirmation of their own superiority. Tocqueville worried about the “tyranny of the majority” (excessively assertive majorities) as well as the passivity that could accompany democratic conformism. The later visitors to America repeated these themes and concerns, in somewhat different form. Tocqueville and Chesterton were both sensitive to the paradox that excessive individualism, and disengagement from the larger society, undermined authentic individuality—the ability to withstand public opinion and the pressures of the crowd. They feared the rise of what later came to be called “mass society.”

Tocqueville was the first to praise the American propensity to “associate” with others—to overcome pernicious individualism through voluntarism and collective efforts that didn’t entail intervention by an obtrusive central government. This “art of association,” as Tocqueville called it, went hand in hand with a vigorous system of local self-government. Tocqueville admired Americans’ capacity to take charge of their own lives in a way that avoided the twin extremes of individualism and collectivism. Chesterton, too, praised “the pro-democracy” force of voluntary associations and saw in American habits “of social organization” a “power that is the soul and success of democracy.”

As for political economy, Tocqueville, Weber, and Chesterton all admired the energy and industriousness of the American people. At the same time, they criticized the excesses of what Tocqueville called the “mercantile spirit.” Long before Weber

articulated his famous thesis on “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” Tocqueville noted the multiple ways Americans brought together Puritanism and the mercantile spirit. Americans, he noted, affirmed the value of religion, even as they redefined virtue in utilitarian terms (virtue was increasingly tied to self-interest and worldly success). All three visited Niagara Falls, commenting on its stunning beauty but foreseeing (Tocqueville) and lamenting (Weber, Chesterton) the degradation of the natural environment that surrounded it. Americans weren’t given to disinterested respect for natural beauty (a point Qutb, who lived in suburban Greeley, Colorado, reaffirmed). For his part, Chesterton was a fierce critic of industrial capitalism, though in his view, socialism was no solution to the problems that afflicted industrial civilization.

Chesterton was a precursor of the “small is beautiful” movement. He admired small-town America and the “small agrarian town,” “characterized by personal relationships of cooperation and service.” He favored local craftsmen and local economies and advocated the widespread distribution of private property (he called his sociopolitical vision “distributism”). His support for localism and a system “under which all property would be distributed and controlled by everyone” was informed by and helped inform twentieth-century Catholic social thought. He might fairly be accused of romanticism when it comes to issues of political economy and economic scale. But his criticisms of the excesses of capitalism and the threat to human liberty and dignity posed by statist socialism still reward reflection.

All four of Nolan’s visitors lamented the presence of racism and discrimination in the United States. Tocqueville witnessed firsthand the “trail of tears,” the cruel dislocation of American Indians during a visit to Memphis, Tennessee, in the fall of 1831. He admired Native Americans’ quiet grandeur and lamented what “high civilization” had done to the Indian race. He was a passionate and articulate critic of slavery. In 1856, he wrote a particularly eloquent plea for abolition in the antislavery journal *The Liberty Bell*. Even when criticizing America, though, he spoke as its “sincere and interested friend.” He knew slavery was incompatible with the American genius and with Christianity’s great insight that all men are “brothers and equals.” For this reason, he vehemently objected to his friend Arthur de Gobineau’s scientific racism, which reduced individuals and peoples to the status of animals, determined exclusively by their biology. Any identification of Christianity with indulgence toward racism infuriated him, as it did Max Weber. Weber admired the great African-American scholar and activist W.E.B. Dubois (whom he met in St. Louis in 1904) and also befriended the Indian politician Robert Latham Owen. Qutb criticized American racism but also freely drew on

disturbing stereotypes about American blacks. One senses that the “friendly critics” of America would welcome the remarkable progress America has made in providing opportunity to blacks and other minorities, while acknowledging that much work remains to be done.

Nolan treats the religious question with intelligence and nuance. He recognizes that Tocqueville is a theist and a friend of Catholic Christianity who at the same time had trouble affirming all the doctrines of the Christian Church. Tocqueville favored the formal separation of Church and state, though he argued, too, that the “spirit of religion” must inform the exercise of human liberty. He worried that Protestantism would dissolve Christianity of content and would give way first to Unitarianism and then to “natural religion.” He believed that religious faith was written in the hearts of men and did not regard its eclipse as inevitable. He would be appalled by the open contempt in which some contemporary partisans of democracy hold Christianity and the moral law. He would in no way support the more radical versions of secularism.

Chesterton, too, thought there could be “no meaning in democracy” unless there was an affirmation of a transcendental source of human meaning. Both Tocqueville and Chesterton appreciated that democracy was haunted by nihilism; they thought that biblical religion was a great friend of democracy, rightly understood. Weber, by contrast, embraced what the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch called a “heroic skepticism” marked by the “disenchantment of the world.” Nolan might have done more to highlight Weber’s qualified embrace of Nietzsche and his adamant denial that reason could find any “meaning” in the world. For Weber, “facts” and “values” belong to two absolutely incompatible realms. Contemporary democracy remains haunted by nihilism, but the route of traditional religion is perhaps overstated. Secularization goes hand in hand with the robust affirmation of religious faith. But Tocqueville and Chesterton are undoubtedly right: skepticism in a democratic age is rarely heroic and commonly gives way to despair and self-indulgence. It’s hard to imagine a healthy version of American and Western democracy that has wholly repudiated the religious traditions of the West (and the intellectual class in the West increasingly stands for such a repudiation).

As for Qutb, he blamed Christianity for its own obsolescence: by distinguishing between the things of Caesar and the things of God, by affirming a religion that looked to happiness beyond this world, it had paved the way for modern rationalism, skepticism, and nihilism. Nolan is not necessarily convinced by this argument, but he does note that distinguished thinkers such as Pope emeritus Benedict XVI’s fear that the Western

“separation” of religion and politics—and of morality and politics—has gone too far. At a minimum, Qutb’s critique of the West is thought-provoking. His positive agenda, which gave support to jihad of the sword—not the highest meaning of jihad for Qutb—is another matter altogether.

Nolan also pays some attention to two more recent visitors to America: Jacques Maritain, the profoundly influential French Catholic philosopher and theologian, who lived here from the early 1930s until the late 1950s; and the great anti-Communist Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who spent 18 years of his Western exile in Vermont. Maritain was a critic of atomistic individualism, but he, too, admired the generous sentiments and associative capacities of the American people. In his 1958 book, *Reflections on America*, he attempted to “theorize” the practical achievements of American civilization. At the same time, he pointed out many of the problems noted by his great predecessors. He would doubtless be disturbed by the tendency of most intellectuals today to identify liberty with “liberation” from tradition, moral constraints, and perennial truths. If America—and democracy—is an open-ended project, it is one that increasingly erodes its essential moral and religious preconditions.

Nolan gets Solzhenitsyn just right. Solzhenitsyn is sometimes falsely perceived as a one-sided critic of America and Western liberty. But at Harvard in 1978, he insisted that he spoke as a “friend” of the United States who was expressing difficult and disconcerting truths. As Nolan notes, even while being “unabashedly critical of American commercialism, materialism, and conformist tendencies,” Solzhenitsyn admired the “generosity, strength, and magnanimity” of the American people. He was particularly impressed by the small-scale democratic self-governing practices that he witnessed in Switzerland and New England during his Western exile. In his February 1994 farewell to the people of Cavendish, Vermont, he commended “the sensible and sure process of grassroots democracy” that he had witnessed in New England, “in which the local population solves most of its problems of its own, not waiting for the decisions of higher authorities.” He would reiterate these themes on many occasions in the years before his death in August 2008. Nolan, however, understates Solzhenitsyn’s recognition that totalitarianism was a unique evil, the nadir of human and collective life. Solzhenitsyn never succumbed to “moral equivalence” between East and West, though he foresaw what would happen to Western liberty when it was divorced from “the great reserves of mercy and sacrifice” inherent in the West’s religious and philosophical traditions (and in Russian Orthodoxy, too).

Nolan allows his readers to be challenged in constructive ways by the aforementioned “friendly critics” of American democracy. He makes us see that even a militant ideologue like Sayyid Qutb was not without some genuine insights. But perhaps Nolan should have done more to underscore the point that intellectual or spiritual ambivalence about the democratic project needs to be accompanied by civic spirit and thoughtful patriotism. Tocqueville, after all, was a proud French patriot, Weber something of a nationalist, Chesterton an anti-imperialist English patriot (and no fan of “cosmopolitanism”). Solzhenitsyn was an impassioned Russian patriot but an eloquent critic of Soviet-style imperialism (he wanted post-Communist Russia to turn toward “inward development” while at the same time supporting a voluntary “Slavic partnership” between Russia and the Ukraine).

None of our friendly critics would recommend the kind of national and civilizational self-loathing advocated by many leftist intellectuals and academics today. Following the culture critic Martha Bayles, Nolan thoughtfully suggests that we need to do a better job conveying “the bright threads of our affability” rather than the “dark strands” of the loneliness and anomie that are by no means the whole of the American experience. We have much to learn from America’s—and democracy’s—friendly critics. And the world has much to learn from the achievements of our ongoing experiment in democratic self-government, and not merely from our flaws.

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