

has generated some creative research activities. Although not abandoning the traditional theory, as the more extreme dissidents call for, the increased self-reflexivity of the discipline will most certainly result in interesting theoretical growth in the future. However, there is still only a small space for continental philosophy in the American car of international relations.

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A Rather Astute Understanding

– An American View on a European View on American Political History

Göran Rosenberg has written a fascinating and eminently readable account of the American political tradition, its myths and realities, and

how the ideas of the past have shaped the context of the present¹. The book spans a wide range of topics – from New England puritanism to the Americanization of Asian immigrants in Orange County, California.

It is one of the best books on American political history written by a European author in recent times. Göran Rosenberg, who is editor-in-chief of *Moderna Tider*, has spent several years in the

United States as a journalist. He has obviously read deeply and widely about the United States. He clearly understands his subject. He is neither unapologetic critic, nor uncritical apologist. What the reader gets is a full view – part scholarship, part journalism – of American virtues and shortcomings, with no attempt to inflate the former or excuse the latter. All in all, it reflects a rather astute understanding of the contradictions, incongruities, dilemmas, ironies, and paradoxes with which the American landscape is so abundantly littered.

Although American culture originated in Europe, there were considerable differences that arose between parent and child from the very beginning in the New World. The absence of a feudal heritage, the challenges that confronted small settlements in a harsh wilderness, the remoteness of the mother country. All of these factors created an American very different from his European progenitors – geographically and socially mobile – and unleashing the dynamism of a country that would perpetually be re-defining itself.

Americans were not unfamiliar with European ideas. In fact, the 18th century statesmen and politicians who created the American political system were extraordinarily well-read in political philosophy, both classical and modern. But almost from the beginning, Americans developed very different ideas from continental Europeans on major political concepts such as the individual, the state, society, social class, liberty, and equality. Even if the American penchant for restless change was apparent early on, the core ideas that marked these differences were in place by the beginning of the 19th century. Americans saw themselves not simply as different from Europeans but as exceptional – a chosen people in a promised land. Rosenberg traces in some detail this American Exceptionalism, from the Puritan City on the Hill to the spurious Jeffersonianism of the Reagan presidency.

This book is not simply a history. It weaves a connecting web between the American past and present, between ideas and realities. It consistently compares America and Europe (Swedes might find especially interesting the

treatment of Gustav III, pp. 139 ff); spread throughout its pages are the observation of European travellers to America, some of them (e.g., Tocqueville) better informed and more incisive than others (e.g., Mr. Dickens and Mrs. Trollope).

There is a particularly good discussion of how the basic American political culture grew both roots and branches. This American credo, built on colonial experience and on the sometimes contradictory impulses of the Declaration and the Constitution, went West with the covered wagons, and socialized wave after wave of immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Rosenberg is sure-footed in his examination of the formation of the American political tradition in the early years of the Republic. The cast of characters would have been impressive in any age or any country – Washington, the Model President; Adams, the principled conservative; Benjamin Franklin, the self-made man; Jefferson, America's resident polymath and radical Republican; Alexander Hamilton, the archtypical proponent of strong national government. In the end, it was perhaps Madison who made the most enduring contribution in his realization that a flawed human nature required a Constitution built on the principle of checks and balances. The resulting regime has been the despair of reformers – gridlock is endemic to the system – but it has preserved a continuity of free, republican government longer than any where else in the world during the past two hundred years. We see, however, all too clearly how Jefferson's hope for an educated, active, rural/small town citizenry was swallowed up by the Industrial Revolution even while Jefferson himself was iconized. (p. 198 ff.)

A number of the major influences on American development are examined, frequently with an eye to their impact on contemporary American politics. Among these are such quintessentially American phenomena as the importance of small towns, which provided the political space within which American political belief operated (see p. 285 ff.). Another is the importance even today of local rather

than national regulation. As the author himself remarks, during his time in the USA,

Under en arbetsdag kunde jag passera tre olika varuskattezoner, ett antal olika inkomstskattesystem, ett hundratal olika trafik-, utskänkings- och körkortsbestämmelser, olika skolsystem och terminslängder. Jag pendlade mellan dödsstraff och livstids fängelse, mellan olika regler för inköp av handeldvapen och fyrverkerier, olika guvernörer, delstatssenatorer och lokala brandkårer. I centrala Washington cirklade poliser med minst fem olika uniformer, huvudmän och ansvarsområden. Längs floden gick dessutom fronten i inbördeskriget, så på ena sidan mindes man söderns storhet och på den andra slaveriets förbannelse. (p. 291)

There is a very good discussion of the role of religion in American political life which I would recommend to any person who found puzzling some of the discussions at the Republican National Convention in 1993 on such matters as family, religion, abortion, etc.

American idealism has often seemed naive to some outsiders. To others, it has seemed but a cloak for more cynical calculations of material advantage. Or, as the author says:

En stor del av den europeiska antiamerikanismen bottnar förmodligen just i irritation över klyftan mellan moralisk självgodhet och praktiskt handlande. (p. 224)

The detailed discussion of slavery and its attendant problems is a related piece of the American puzzle provided by Rosenberg. Slavery has been a central contradiction in the American scheme of values, dominated as it is by the concept of liberty from the earliest beginnings of the American experiment. (Ch. 10, among others.) How this bitter legacy became an even more intractable social problem as a result of the great 20th century migration of African Americans from the rural south to the urban north is one of the most important themes in the book (p. 256 ff.).

There is a lot more that one could say about the details of topics that Rosenberg has chosen to elucidate. Suffice it to say that this is one of those products of an outsider who often sees with greater clarity and detachment what the native American takes so much for granted that it eludes him. It is the product of an independent, non-sectarian, socially responsible observer with liberal leanings. He has an impressive knowledge of American history, and – while this is not in the strict sense an "academic study," it is precisely that kind of book that should be read by European social scientists who propose to study American politics and society

It leaves out a number of topics that some students of Americana might argue for inclusion. Among these, my own preference would include the great normative and political role of the Supreme Court, the decisive contribution to American political thought-in-action made by John Marshall, the crucial role of law and lawyers (for good or ill), the centrality of Abraham Lincoln (both man and myth) and a more extended examination of the Civil War and its place in American history.

But these are minor quibbles. The virtue of this study is that it avoids the temptations of oversimplification, it combines a foreign perspective on America without falling into the trap of ethnocentrism, and it shows a real feel for the subject without sinking into excessive adulation.

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1. Göran Rosenberg: *Friare kan ingen vara. Den amerikanska idén från revolution till Reagan*. Stockholm 1991: Norstedts.

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