



1958

Lerner: America as a Civilization

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Recommended Citation

Benjamin M. Ziegler, *Lerner: America as a Civilization*, 67 *Yale L.J.* (1958).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylj/vol67/iss8/11>

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v. Ferguson and to harmonize it with the substantive and literal intent of the Constitution."⁷ He errs, also, at least in the light of recent Court decisions, in overemphasizing the doctrines of judicial restraint and the avoidance of "political questions" as ameliorating counterweights to the problems judicial review raises in a democracy. Such errors and oversimplifications, however, are more annoying than crucial to the worth of the book. And they, too, may be corrected in the larger work.

LEONARD M. LEIMAN†

AMERICA AS A CIVILIZATION. By Max Lerner. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957. Pp. xiii, 1036, Index. \$10.00.

IN his introduction to De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Henry Steele Commager observes that "of all the thousands of books on America, perhaps less than two score are of lasting value."¹ "Why," Professor Commager asks, "is the average so low, why is so much of the stuff mediocre or worse? Why, especially, have men and women otherwise thoughtful, learned, and observant, failed so signally to understand and interpret the United States?"² He answers his own question by pointing out that "many, if not most, of those who wrote about America, came here with a closed mind, came not to learn but to confirm preconceived notions. They assumed . . . that the Old World was the norm and interpreted every deviation from that norm as quaint, vulgar, or eccentric. . . . Few of those who wrote so glibly on America saw the whole of it [T]hey wrote [for] . . . an audience notoriously uncritical and credulous in everything concerning America. . . . [O]nly a handful were intellectually competent to the task"³ Although Professor Commager's comments are directed at European visitors writing about the American character and experience, they are not altogether inapplicable to the vast majority of Americans whose books analyze their native United States.

Just as De Tocqueville's book is one of the very few foreign exceptions, so Max Lerner's *America as a Civilization* is an American exception which promises to take its place alongside the very few of lasting value. One can sense in these pages an emulation of de Tocqueville, for Lerner wrote neither with a closed mind nor to confirm preconceived notions. Instead, he has undertaken a comprehensive analysis which attempts boldly to portray the whole while respecting the importance of detail. In so doing, he has challenged many conventional views, such as the Turner frontier thesis which, Lerner says, "has been used subtly to bolster the argument from individualism—and therefore

7. P. 247.

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1. DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* ix (Commager ed., Reeve transl. 1947).

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Id.* at ix-x.

from *laissez-faire* capitalism—as the source of America's greatness."⁴ In sum, Lerner has written for a critical audience comprising all who are interested in America as a civilization and in its relation to the world of today.

Although Lerner refers to his undertaking as a "trial essay," one cannot read the book without concluding that the material discussed is as encompassing as America itself. The key word in the title is the simple preposition "as." The book is not a history, although the historical facts on which it is based are enormous and used with admirable skill. Nor is it a mere description of life in America today, despite chapters such as "The Culture of Science and the Machine,"⁵ the "Life Cycle of the American,"⁶ and "The Arts and Popular Culture."⁷ Indeed, the author modestly warns away potential readers "looking for the historical, the descriptive, the polemic, or the apocalyptic . . ." He says he has "tried, rather . . . to grasp—however awkwardly—the pattern and inner meaning of contemporary" America as a civilization.⁸ That he has succeeded, perhaps beyond his own hopes, cannot be doubted.

America as a Civilization is not one work but many. Each of the twelve chapters and indeed each section of every chapter can stand by itself. Do you want to know, for instance, about "Jazz as an American Idiom," its antecedents, its instruments, its personalities, the reasons it became part of the popular culture? For an account not lacking in humor, read chapter eleven. Do you want to learn how "The Struggle for Civil Liberties" has fared? See chapter six for the view that "in all the instances of faltering, the weakness that breaches the defense of the civil-liberties tradition is the lack of genuine commitment to freedom."⁹ Here, as elsewhere, Lerner lets the facts speak for themselves. He notes that "liberals claim the civil-liberties tradition as their own, yet some of the staunchest defenders of civil liberties have been conservatives, from John Adams through men like Charles E. Hughes and Henry L. Stimson. Some who have called themselves conservatives have forgotten that the civil-liberties tradition is the most precious heritage to conserve; some who have called themselves 'liberals' have been known to run from the defense of freedom as soon as the firing became hot . . ."¹⁰ It must not be assumed that all this adds up to a grab-bag of Americana. Rather, these many "books" are tied together by the thesis that the "overmastering fact about American society [is] . . . its mobility and stir."¹¹ This "mobility and stir" has created an American success story of such dimensions that, in quoting Thomas Jefferson's "every man has two countries—his own and France," Lerner could add a young African writer's amendment "his own and America."

4. P. 34.

5. C. IV.

6. C. VIII.

7. C. XI.

8. P. xi.

9. P. 463.

10. *Ibid.*

11. P. 524.

In his foreword, Lerner mentions that "the best you can do to achieve perspective is to keep a certain emotional distance from your subject."¹² This he certainly has managed, and it is because of his sense of objectivity that his concluding paragraph merits reproduction in full:

"But a nation can even surmount catastrophes and be deepened by them, provided its sources of creativeness have not dried up. The great enemy of any civilization is the enemy within. Its name is not subversion or revolution or decadence but rigidity. Just as every power group tends to limit its outlook as it hardens its position, so the temptation of a successful people is to make a cult of the artifacts of its success, rather than celebrate the daring and the large outlook that made the achievements possible. In the Russian case the original revolutionary Communism has become the hard ideological mask of a state church that aims to sustain its power elite and has forgotten that the revolutionary impulse came from a tradition of Socialist humanism. There are many who feel similarly that, whether through conformism, fanaticism or rigidity, American society will succumb to the final impersonality of the Age of the Insects. The long journey we have made through these pages should lead to a different conclusion. There is still in the American potential the plastic strength that has shaped a great civilization, and it shows itself in unexpected ways, at unpredictable moments, and in disguises that require some imaginative understanding to unveil. What Emerson said a century ago I would still hold to: 'We think our civilization is near its meridian, but we are yet only at the cockcrow and the morning star.'"¹³

One cannot leave this book without a deep sense of respect for the author's undertaking and accomplishment. There is much here for all readers to ponder, to cherish, to brood about. The labor has been prodigious.¹⁴

BENJAMIN MUNN ZIEGLER†

12. Pp. xi-xii.

13. P. 950.

14. The fifty pages of Lerner's "Notes for Further Reading," arranged to parallel each section of every chapter of the text, are themselves a storehouse of information for all who wish to pursue further any facet of the many-faceted subject of America as a civilization.

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