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Author(s): DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

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The Place of Thought in American Life

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

NO ONE CAN STUDY THE HISTORY OF THOUGHT in Europe without taking account, at the outset, of two basic facts. First, there is the separation of the thought of the community into two streams: the stream of "high culture"—the thought, art and vocabulary of the aristocrats, priests, and all members of the privileged and ruling classes; and the stream of "popular culture"—the thought, art, customs, lore and folkways of the great mass of the people. The gulf is so deep and the separation so wide between the two in most European countries, and has been for most of their history, that the definition of what is being talked about offers no problem to the historian of European thought. He is talking about either the "thinking class" or the "working class." It is a truism that in many periods the aristocracy of France felt a closer fellowship with the aristocrats of Germany than with the peasants of their own country. The folk culture of the English people is at least as remote from that of its aristocratic and educated classes as the culture of England is different from that of France or Italy. When, for example, Sir Leslie Stephen wrote his *History of English Thought in the Eight-*

⭘ DANIEL J. BOORSTIN, a member of the history faculty of the University of Chicago, has long been interested in the distinctive characteristics of American culture. His most recent book, *The Genius of American Politics*, describes the historical role of American political thought. This article is part of his three-volume history of American culture, the first volume of which will soon be published by Random House.

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eenth Century, it was perfectly obvious that he was writing about the ideas which filled the heads of that small fraction of the English population who were literate, educated and close to the seats of power.

Second—and this feature is closely connected with the first—the history of European thought (by which is usually meant the thought of the only "thinking" people, that is the aristocratic classes) is on the whole reducible to the history of systems and schools of thought. It is the history of "Thomism," "Rationalism," "Transcendentalism," et cetera—terms which to most of the people of those days were as foreign as another language. It is the history of the specialized architecture of philosophies, rather than of the general physiology of thinking. The grander, the more filigreed and intricate a system, supposedly the greater its claim to treatment in the history of thought. Those elegant intellectual chapels built by Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant thus have become the destinations of the historians' pilgrimage. Scholars find them a welcome refuge from the confusion of the market place.

But it is misleading to take these characteristics of European thought as the starting points for an American history. Our society, unlike most other modern nations, has not been marked by the separation into high culture and popular culture; nor has our thinking been dominated by systems and schools. On the contrary, there have been a number of other large and persistent characteristics of the place of thought in American life. There are those which concern the *form* of American intellectual life, and those which concern the *substance* of our way of thinking.

I

Beginning with the form of our intellectual life, we find two important and apparently contradictory characteristics: first, its unity or homogeneity; and second, its diffuseness.

A. *The unity of American culture*

From one point of view the history of culture in the most developed European countries in modern times has been rather uni-

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form. For the growth of their liberal institutions has not removed their basic distinction between aristocratic culture and folk culture. What has happened is either that their aristocratic culture has been watered down piecemeal to make it more accessible and more palatable to the half-educated masses, or that a few places have been made available within the aristocracy for more talented and ambitious members of the lower classes ("the career open to talent"). A typical example of the first of these was the translation of the Greek and Latin classics into the vernacular languages, which was one of the major intellectual events of the European Renaissance. An example of the second was the growth of a system of scholarships which brought to Oxford and Cambridge some young men whose wealth and ancestry had not entitled them to that advantage. But the basic fact is that the modern intellectual and cultural life of the European community is still simply a modification and adaptation of the old aristocratic (high) culture to the sporadic demands of members of the rising classes. How little progress has yet been made is illustrated by the fact that throughout Western Europe (where alone true universities remain), with insignificant exceptions, a higher education is still the prerogative of the rich and the wellborn; but the student population in American colleges and universities is currently over two million. To say the very least, the culture of modern Europe bears the birthmark of its aristocratic origin: it was made by and for the very few, though it may gradually, in some places and to some extent, have become available to a few more.

American culture is basically different from all this. In this, as in so many other ways, here is something new under the sun. With due allowance for the influence of the European doctrine and example, one must not fail to see the vast importance of the peculiar American situation. For ours is a modern culture which skipped the aristocratic phase. While having the literary and vernacular resources of the European Renaissance and the Reformation behind us, we started our culture with some semblance of wholeness and homogeneity. We have been without that deep bifurcation into high and low, which was the starting point of the national cultures of Western Europe.

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The student body of Harvard College in the seventeenth century was probably already more representative of the community at large than the universities of many European countries today. As Samuel Eliot Morison points out, in the earliest years of the College almost every Harvard student was the child of parents who actually farmed the soil, in addition to whatever else they did, and "it does seem that the College was fairly successful, after 1654, in recruiting boys of scholarly ambition from the plain people of New England." Part of the explanation of this phenomenon is found, for Massachusetts Bay at least, in the extraordinarily high proportion of university graduates to the whole population in those earliest years. But this was only one factor which happened to be important in that part of America. The more universal and characteristically American phenomenon was a homogeneity of thought and culture quite alien to the European experience. This was what Governor Thomas Hutchinson described, in the late eighteenth century, as the fact of "the generality of the colony being very near upon a level."

In Europe the progress of liberal and democratic movements has been measured by the extent to which they have broken down the barriers of the old aristocratic culture; anything which made the language and thought of the aristocracy available to more people was considered progressive. But in America the starting point has been the opposite: the unity of our society has been taken for granted. It is, rather, any failure to make culture available to all the people that has required justification.

While European liberals have tried to put the luxury of a classical education within the reach of members of the underprivileged classes, American democrats have attacked the very idea of a classical education because of its aristocratic overtones. Before the end of the eighteenth century, Benjamin Rush opposed the inclusion of Latin and Greek within the standard curriculum of a liberal education for the simple reason that these languages might be difficult for women to learn; and, he urged, nothing should be part of an American education which was not within the reach of all citizens. From the time of Rush and Jefferson to that of John Dewey, our educators have been primarily interested in what Rush called "the

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mode of education proper in a Republic." Thus, foreign travel and study in a foreign university, basic to the European aristocratic ideal of culture and congenial to the cosmopolitan and international allegiances of their educated classes, were urged by the arbiters of European culture, at least from the seventeenth century. But in 1798, Benjamin Rush asked (in words with which Jefferson would have agreed) that Americans be educated at home rather than in a foreign country. Only in the New World could the unique republican principles of American life be properly reinforced in the young, and only so could the equality of men and the unity of American culture be encouraged. "I conceive the education of our youth in this country to be particularly necessary in Pennsylvania," he wrote, "while our citizens are composed of the natives of so many different kingdoms in Europe. Our schools of learning, by producing one general, and uniform system of education, will render the mass of the people more homogeneous, and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government." This desire for uniformity and homogeneity has had, of course, a profound effect on our conception of higher education, particularly in supporting movements to water it down and flatten its flavor to suit everybody's palate. Thus, a profound truth about our culture lurks in Bliss Perry's facetious suggestion that the ideal of American education could most easily be attained by awarding every American citizen the degree of bachelor of arts at birth. There is no denying that we started with the assumption that a society should have a single culture whose highest thoughts should be accessible to most men.

Even our geographic vastness and variety have contributed to this. Because differences of region and climate are so overwhelming, the differences of social classes in the several parts of the country have actually seemed less important. The American who goes to England, France or Italy cannot but note linguistic versatility as a mark of social caste; the upper classes not only speak their national language with an aristocratic accent, they actually speak several languages. In contrast to this, in the United States, of course, accent is a sign not of class but of regional origin. Even the regional dialects have been much less marked here than in other countries of comparable size. English travelers and American lexicographers noted

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this in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. "It is agreed," John Pickering observed in 1816, "that there is greater uniformity of dialect throughout the United States (in consequence of the frequent removals of people from one part of our country to another) than is to be found throughout England." On the whole, it is the members of our lower classes who tend to know another language—such as German or Italian or Yiddish—in addition to English. It is partly by losing their cosmopolitan character, by forgetting all languages other than English that people become homogenized into American culture. In the United States we all try to speak the same language, and only a few know more than one.

Our ideal of equality has carried with it the fact of universal literacy, and in this and other ways has contributed to the ideal of cultural unity. The Protestant tradition, our lack of ancient institutions and the absence of a professional class of articulators—a "learned" or "cultured" class—all these have played their part. Unprecedented technological development, taken together with natural wealth, a high standard of living and a domestic mass-market for all kinds of products, has produced a uniformity of standards of consumption and a homogeneity in the particular articles consumed. In America, brand names (with all they imply of universal familiarity with a single product, of homogeneity of product, and of potentially universal consumption of the same product) are symbols of the unity of our culture. A Ford car and a Bendix washer are owned by the chairman of the board of directors as well as by the night watchman. Finally, our yen for orthodoxy has encouraged people both to wish for and to believe in a unity in our ways of thinking and acting.

B. *The diffuseness of American intellectual life*

A feature complementary to the aristocratic starting point of European culture is the sharpness with which it is focused on one or a few centers. In modern Europe, the intellectual capital is almost as universal a phenomenon as the aristocracy. Almost every country has had its Paris, its mecca of culture, where one could sit and be at the center of things. One of Europe's main appeals to the American intellectual who has had even a taste of it is the ease with which

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the focus of intellectual influence and power can be discovered. The young American who goes to Oxford or Cambridge has the comfortable feeling of knowing—or being in a position to get to know—everybody who is anybody in English culture. The other day I talked with a young American student who had just returned from a couple of years in one of the English universities. Having been only another student in America, required to show what he could do in order to acquire a status, he had found himself suddenly offered a position of status and privilege simply because he was a student at Cambridge, England. "It's awfully comfortable," he said, "to be one of the ruling class." After such an experience, the young American cannot but feel a loss of privilege as well as a loss of bearings when, on return to the United States, he discovers that there is no such center.

Looking at our history as a whole, one sees a diffuseness and a shifting of intellectual life quite alien to the modes of culture in the great nations of Europe. True, different cities have had their days of glory: Boston, Philadelphia, Williamsburg, New York, Chicago and others. But none has had much more than a day. Our cultural center has been nowhere because it has been everywhere. We are almost alone among nations in having found it necessary and possible to create, *ad hoc*, a special city to serve as the national political capital; that city has never been our cultural capital. From time to time we have had something like an elite, a group which took to itself the privileges—and claimed the immunities—of the intellectual ruling classes of Europe. The most recent and most striking (and the most difficult for our intellectuals to forget) was the New Deal, when American intellectuals had a taste of that sense of power and of sitting at the center which has been familiar to those of Europe. But as Bernard De Voto has described under the useful title of "The Literary Fallacy," American history and American culture, even more than those of other countries, are imperfectly and partially estimated if literature is confused with life, if our society is judged by its literary product. For many reasons, then, American intellectual history can be neither the history of our intellectuals nor the story of our philosophies.

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II

Turning from the form of American intellectual life to the substance of our way of thinking, we find a number of equally striking characteristics. They describe the peculiar vitality and formlessness of our culture. The more rigid and dead the thought of a people, the more easily it is described and reduced to the systems which delight and comfort the academic mind. The more alive a culture and its ways of thought, the more elusive it is and the harder to capture it in systems and categories. The following characteristics are actually ways of describing the elusiveness of American culture.

A. *Interest in institutions rather than ideologies, in process rather than product*

Our most important and most representative thinkers have been more interested in institutions than in ideologies. For an ideology is something fixed and rigid: it is a posture of the truth which some men see in one age and which they seek to get other men to accept as the whole truth. But institutions live and grow and change. They have a life of their own as a philosophy cannot; and our major accomplishments have been in the realm of institutions rather than of thought.

At least since the eighteenth century, observers of our society have noted equality as a characteristic of American life. But it is the *fact* rather than the *theory* of equality which has flourished here. If European countries have been strong in theories of equality, as in other political theories, they have been feeble in developing equalitarian institutions. In the United States, on the contrary, where we have had unprecedented success in developing the institution of social equality, we have never been able to produce a pretty or an important theory about it. This is but an example, if one of the more spectacular, of how our talent for improving life has excelled our capacity for perfecting thought.

We have shown very little interest in producing things which would endure: monuments have not been in our line. We have been more concerned with whether an idea or a thing actually serves its purpose than whether it will continue to serve that pur-

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pose for a day or a century. We have been anxious not to freeze the categories of thought, for we are ready to believe that old purposes and old needs will be supplanted by new. In exhibiting his plant, an Italian businessman will show with pride the original workshop where his great-great-grandfather started and which is still in use; an American businessman points out with pride that not a brick of his original plant remains, that the old has been thoroughly replaced by superior modern materials.

Our lack of interest in systems of thought, in ideologies and philosophies, is but a particular illustration of our general lack of interest in perfecting the *product*. This goes with our special interest in improving the *process*. We have been more interested in how and whether things work than in how beautiful they can be in themselves. Our architecture has been concerned less with houses than with housing; our engineers, less with producing sturdy automobiles than with developing satisfactory transportation. We have been interested less in good food than in satisfactory diet. We have been worried less over the content of an education, the meaning of truth, knowledge and culture, than over understanding and improving the learning process. Our dramatic artists have been less anxious to produce rounded and enduring works of dramatic art than to provide moments and experiences of entertainment and amusement. The "movies"—from this point of view appropriately and significantly named—is the most characteristic of American art forms. It is an artistic object which from its very nature can never be grasped as a whole; the form is elusiveness itself. It cannot be held in the hand and examined for its perfection, like a play of Shakespeare or an oil painting. It can *only* be experienced; and its "meaning" is the accumulated sensation of many separate moments.

About a century ago, Sir Henry Maine made his famous suggestion that "the movement of the progressive societies has hitherto been a movement from Status to Contract." There is a great deal of truth in his observation, even when applied to American as contrasted with European society. But a more general principle, of which Maine's maxim is in this case but a corollary, is that the transit of civilization from Europe to America has been a movement from product to process, from art to institutions, from an interest

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in things to an interest in ways. The great wealth of America has actually had much to do with this. The abundance of our material resources has encouraged a wholesome unconcern for material things in themselves. We have been able to afford to experiment with the ways of doing a job without worrying about preserving any of the particular physical devices perfected for the purpose. If they no longer do, we throw them away and try others. Thus, our domestic architecture, unlike that of Europe, is not the production of inheritable estates, but the perfection of housing; our automobiles are not heirlooms (as they have become in England or in Italy), but transportation; our dress manufacturers, instead of producing garments which are beautiful and durable, aim to offer the wearer the sensation of being modish for a season.

Never has a people been more wasteful of the things of the earth, and never has that waste expressed greater contempt for the things of this world. America and Asia, as W. H. Auden observes, have in common the fact that they are built on waste: Asia on the waste of human life, America on the waste of material wealth. While scarcity has tempted people in Europe to treat physical means as if they were ends, to give them the reverence and the loving care which the objects of this world may not deserve, the people of the United States have tended to treat all means as expendable and have become preoccupied with getting the job done. In the secondhand-automobile market in Turin, Italy, when I went to sell a car which I had used for a year, the dealers felt its pulse, listened to its cough, and pityingly, almost tenderly, remarked that it was *stanca*—"tired." When in Chicago I took my used car to such a market, the dealer looked hastily at his handbook, rather than the car, told me what a machine of that vintage was worth, and turned quickly to persuade me of the superior operating advantages of a new model. The printed word, in the form in which it reaches most people here, aims less to be a rounded literary product than a means of entertainment, of topical and relevant instruction, of information on the qualities and prices of all the other available means of living.

In this sense—contrary to current clichés about us—our willingness to waste things has expressed our unconcern for the things of life and our greater interest in the ways of life. Our distinctive in-

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terest in process has been expressed in myriad aspects of American culture which have enabled us to see through the object to the objective; to view art not as the perfection of artistic objects, but as a kind of experience; to see religiosity expressed not in the construction of religious monuments and churches, but in a "religious experience" for which the church building is only a more or less effective instrument.

In the realm of material things, all this has been encouraged basically by our great material wealth with all it has meant in the way of an indefinitely expandable market and a continuing demand for better ways of doing all sorts of things. The distinction here is crucial. We must not consider the growing demand for air conditioners in middle-class homes as just a simple expression of materialism and greed for more things of this world. It is more precise to recognize this as but another illustration of our passionate preference for the experience of being cool in summer and for being comfortable in many other ways.

In the realm of ideas, this frame of mind has carried a distinctive lack of interest in the form of thought, a cavalier indifference to whether our thought is consistent and systematic. We are immensely interested in ideas when they wear work clothes, when they are embodied in institutions. Even then we are less interested in how they look than in how they work. We are less interested in how they sound in the salon or from the lecture platform than in how they function in the market place.

B. *The success criterion*

The intellectual landscape of contemporary Europe is haunted by the ghosts of lost causes. There is hardly a movement in the checkered history of a European nation which does not have its active partisans today. A catalogue of living philosophies in Italy now is an index to Italian history. In those more metaphysically minded countries, which have possessed dominant intellectual classes, political parties are ideological. Philosophers classify themselves as disciples of dead centuries. And all intellectual life becomes a museum of past ideologies. Where ways of thought are judged by their intellectual consistency and by their aesthetic ap-

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peal, by their appeal to a distinctively intellectual ruling class rather than by their ability to become embodied in institutions, the intellectual life of the community becomes one with the speculations of its visionaries and the vagaries of its metaphysicians. And this is true in most of the countries of Europe.

But in the United States, almost from the beginning, our ideas have been tested by their ability to become embodied in institutions. Puritanism was to prove itself in Zion; Quakerism in a City of Brotherly Love. Where success is a test of truth, men lose interest in lost causes. They cannot be excited by ideas or philosophic systems (however symmetrical or well constructed or well argued) which do not still give promise of being put into practice. The feasibility of a philosophy becomes one with its validity. The intellectual vision of the community becomes confined by the limits of the practical. This may bound the speculative life, but it has its advantages.

Defeat and oblivion become a single fate. Somehow, systems of thought seem to lose their immortality; if only once proved unworkable, they die. Thus, intellectual life in the United States at any moment is both more and less cumulative than elsewhere. For our history is a process of elimination which has disposed of irrelevant ideas; and the living ideas at any particular time are all those remaining ideas with some reasonable prospect of adoption. If our intellectual life is a less rich museum for philosophers, it may be a richer tool house for cultivating our garden.

C. *The importance of context: the implicitness of ideas*

Never before was a culture so much nourished on the belief that values grow from the context, that the appropriate way of thinking grows out of the particular style of living. "We ever held it certain," declared Cabeza de Vaca in 1535, "that going toward the sunset we would find what we desired." The Puritans, too, believed that Westward the course of the Gospel would have its way: following Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24:27, they were confident that, as the light of the Gospel had formerly shone out of the East, so now it would shine out of the West. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—from Crèvecoeur's notion that America had produced a

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new man, through Jefferson's belief in the wealth, promise and magnificence of the continent, and Turner's faith in a frontier-born culture and frontier-nourished institutions—runs the refrain that American values spring from the circumstances of the New World, that these are the secret of the "American Way of Life." This has been both an example of our special way of dealing with ideas and an encouragement to it. For lack of a better word, we may call this a leaning toward *implicitness,* a tendency to leave ideas embodied in experience and a belief that the truth somehow arises out of the experience.

This carries with it a preference for the relevance of ideas as against their form and a surprising unconcern for the separability of ideas. We have seldom believed that the validity of an idea was tested by its capacity for being expressed in words. The beliefs that values come out of the context and that truth is part of the matrix of experience (and hardly separable from it) become themselves part of the way of American thinking—hence, the formlessness of American thought, its lack of treatises, schools and systems.

D. *The nirvana of success: self-annihilation through mastery and adaptation*

All this has produced a quaint inversion of the Buddhist approach to life, or rather something like an American notion of Nirvana. For the Buddhist, bliss is attained by the loss of personal identity, by being absorbed into the universal oneness and nothingness. His self-annihilation is arrived at by transcending the physical environment, by rising above wind and rain, hunger, life and death. The characteristic notion of bliss developed on the American continent involves a comparable process of absorption and loss of identity. But here that oneness is attained by a complete adaptation to the environment which involves seizing the opportunities which it offers, by "fitting in." The objective is an almost mystic and naïvely sensed accord with everything about one. The oblivion of Nirvana and the oblivion of success have much in common. In both, the individual transcends his own personality to become part of what surrounds him. The desire to master the forces of nature, to wrest from the environment all the wealth it holds, to find all possible

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uses of every material—this has carried with it a willingness to adapt to the social situation, to make the social norm not the fulfillment of some preconceived, philosophy-sharpened ideal, but the fulfillment of the possibilities in the situation, the attainment of compromise. So, for the American, it is not Nirvana, but Rotariana.

E. *Continuity and conservatism of ways of thought*

Perhaps never before has there been a society with such remarkable continuity in its ways of thought even from the time of its first settlement. The success criterion, the implicitness, the concern for institutions—all these have prevented abrupt breaks in the direction of our thought. For the chain of circumstances is not casually broken as the chain of ideas can be. A philosopher in his study can think up a new and sometimes attractive frame of ideas; he can propose an anarchy, a revolution or a new beginning; he is free as the air. But circumstances hold within them certain limits; every event somehow grows out of its predecessors. And American empiricism has tied our thinking to the slow, organic growth of institutions. By rejecting ideologies, we reject the sharp angles, the sudden turns, the steep up-and-down grades, which mark political life in many parts of the world, in favor of the slow curves, the imperceptible slopes of institutional life. If ever the circumstances of a culture have suited a people to think "institutionally," American history has done so. For us, fortunately, it is impossible to distinguish the history of our thought from the history of our institutions.

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