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Aurelian Craiutu and Jeffrey C. Isaac, *America through European Eyes: British and French Reflections on the New World from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009. viii + 288 pp. \$65.00 (U.S.) (hb). ISBN 0-27103-390-8.

Review by Harry Liebersohn, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Contemporary politics motivated the editors to bring together the essays in this volume, which were originally presentations to a conference held at Indiana University, Bloomington, from March 24 to March 26, 2005. They write in their introduction that, as at moments in the past, America in recent years has once again become “a source of symbolic and political controversy” in reaction to George W. Bush-era adventures in foreign policy; there has been a “rise of new discourses of suspicion toward the United States” even though American society itself remains little known (p. 3). The editors hoped to counter polemical clichés with essays exploring the complexities of European views of America (usually, but not always in this volume, the United States). The strongly defined contemporary starting-point has the effect of giving the volume a dated feel as the acrimony of the Bush years has given way to more measured and thoughtful discussion on both sides of the Atlantic; the debates of just a few years ago seem like documents of recent history rather than challenges requiring a response. Nonetheless there are many interesting contributions here that add historical nuance to our picture of European perceptions of the United States.

The volume’s four parts deal with the general tradition of European political commentary, and Enlightenment, French, and British views of America. Part one on the general tradition consists of a single essay by Alan Levine, “The Idea of America in the History of European Thought: 1492 to 9/11.” Levine’s sweeping thesis is that “descriptions of America have been fantastical from the beginning” (p. 37). While he makes some allowance for a more empirical liberal tradition, he sees “a fundamental but dubious continuity in the substance of European thinkers’ views about America” (p. 38). A survey as broad as this one is bound to miss some major thinkers, but Levine leaves out central figures who would complicate his thesis. For example Montaigne is mentioned but the Jesuit missionary Joseph-François Lafitau is absent, although his ethnography of the Iroquois was an important source for the philosophes. Levine cites a succession of German observers who were hostile to the United States but leaves out Max Weber, whose personal views and sociological analyses of American society were as subtle (and ambivalent) as those of Tocqueville. J. H. Elliott in *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* outlined the difficulties of intellectually grasping a radically new world, but that is not a work cited or a problem in evidence in this essay.[1]

Part two on America and the Enlightenment begins with an essay on Bishop Berkeley by Costica Bradatan. The essay does not deal with Berkeley in an Enlightenment context so much as in the longer tradition of utopianism; Berkeley’s proposal for a college for missionaries in Bermuda, published in 1725, is called a “paradigmatic case of utopian idealization” (p. 46).[2] We read that contemporaries, especially well-informed ones who knew the Americas first-hand, thought that Berkeley’s idealized descriptions of Bermuda were ridiculous (pp. 59-61), and it never got very far toward practical

realization. Bradatan believes that Berkeley's Bermuda project is somehow connected to contemporary college campuses "designed as 'islands' of peace and serenity in the middle of a relentless world" (p. 68) or even that "the self-representation of many Americans today is still markedly Berkeleyan" (p. 69) in their belief in American exceptionalism, but it is hard to see how present-day realities are related in any specific historical way to this early eighteenth-century proposal.

Guillaume Ansart's essay on the French philosophes and colonial America focuses on the *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (first edition 1770, third edition 1780), published under the name of Guillaume-Thomas Raynal but with extensive, anonymous contributions by Diderot and others.[3] The hidden role of Diderot (expertly reconstructed in a 1978 monograph by Michèle Duchet) and its radical critique of European colonialism make this work an especially intriguing product of the late Enlightenment.[4] In response to the claim, which Ansart attributes to J. G. A. Pocock, that the *Histoire des deux Indes* opposes a historically evolving Old World to a static and natural New World, Ansart argues that it oscillates between two visions of liberty in North America, an ancient republicanism represented by Pennsylvania and a modern commercialism represented by New England. Ansart should encourage re-readings of the work for both its "inner tensions" (p. 88) and its connections in his interpretation of nineteenth-century contrasts of ancient and modern liberty.

Nick Nesbitt's study of abolitionist thinking in early nineteenth-century France also brings a fresh perspective to a well-known subject. It has been misplaced in the book's section on the Enlightenment, when in fact it is a comparison of two thinkers and political actors from the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville and his now-forgotten contemporary Victor Schoelcher, and their views on the abolition of slavery in the French colonies. Tocqueville emerges as a cautious pragmatist, reluctant to sacrifice either slave-owners' interest in their human property or the colonies' political stability. Schoelcher by contrast was a radical abolitionist who defended the Haitian Revolution (which Tocqueville viewed with skepticism). As the head of a commission appointed by the democratic, revolutionary government, to which Tocqueville was also appointed, Schoelcher promulgated the emancipation of French colonial slaves in late April 1848. Within the context of this volume, Nesbitt's article is a reminder not to read *Democracy in America* in isolation, but to interpret it within the broader scope of Tocqueville's political interests and the history of imperialism. A bitter critic of the indignity of slavery on Anglo-American soil, Tocqueville balanced human rights with national interest when France's glory was at stake.

The contributions to part three on "French Views of America" also add to our knowledge of the cast of characters surrounding Tocqueville. Aurelian Craiutu writes on Victor Jacquemont, "a precursor of Tocqueville" who arrived in the United States in December 1826 and spent half a year there, recording his impressions in his correspondence. Jacquemont in Craiutu's description was a thoughtful liberal observer whose letters anticipated the gloomy side of Tocqueville's reaction to Americans and their "money-centered utilitarianism" (p. 139). He cut short his stay in order to return to France and prepare for a naturalist voyage to India, departing in August 1828 and remaining in India until his death in December 1832. His life story takes in a tantalizing conjunction of new and very old cultures: one would like to know more about how his experiences in India formed the context for the more positive remarks about America that Jacquemont included in the posthumously published account of this final voyage. Christine Dunn Henderson writes on Tocqueville's travel companion Gustave de Beaumont and his novel, *Marie*. [5] She argues that while Beaumont's perspective was close to Tocqueville's, the novel is distinctive for its focus not on slavery but on race relations; by setting the story in the northern city of Baltimore Beaumont could focus on the social construction of race and its pernicious effects on a free society. Jeremy Jennings's essay on French visitors to the United States "from Tocqueville to the Civil War" sketches the reactions of several highly educated visitors: Tocqueville, writes Jennings, remained "a point of reference" for many of them, with some, like the engineer Guillaume Tell Poussin, responding as optimistic boosters of the young democracy and others, like Jean-Jacques Ampère, a member of the Académie Française, sharing Tocqueville's worries about the danger of a tyranny of the

majority. Jennings's account of these travelers is a reminder that Tocqueville was part of a steady stream of well-informed French commentators whose views on the United States circulated around overlapping themes but were quite diverse.

The essays in part three on British travelers suggest that the preoccupation with America's democratic values and institutions was not uniquely French, but was shared by visitors from other European countries who anxiously or happily made comparisons with the more hierarchical society they knew from home. Richard Boyd makes good use of contemporary political theory (especially the work of Judith Shklar) to analyze *Domestic Manners of the Americans* by Mrs. Frances Trollope, a book widely read after its publication in 1832 and resented in the United States for its portrait of boorish American behavior.[6] Mrs. Trollope clung to what Boyd calls an ideal of "aristocratic *politesse*," which he contrasts to the "democratic civility" that she encountered and disliked in the United States. Americans' quick familiarity with strangers, lack of deference toward titled visitors and readiness to ask invasive personal questions were offensive to Mrs. Trollope, but according to Boyd were habits that carried over into robustly democratic political behavior. At the end of his essay Boyd makes an unpersuasive leap to contemporary European leftist criticisms of the United States, whose history and context are not spelled out, but this should not diminish the importance of his analysis of everyday behavior and its political implications.

Russell L. Hanson's essay on James Bryce and his famous study of *The American Commonwealth* (1888) brings us back to Tocquevillian themes.[7] Bryce was an aristocrat, a member of parliament, and later, British ambassador to the United States. In Hanson's description of his views and public role one can see the outlines of a special relationship between Britain and the United States. Unlike Mrs. Trollope, Bryce stressed the similarity between the folk character of the English and Anglo-Americans. Indeed in his analysis the English "race," as he called it, including its American offshoot, naturally and irrepressibly understood how to form a free democratic society; Bryce dismissed Tocqueville's dark fears of bureaucratic despotism or a nation of mediocrities dedicated to personal comfort (despite some concern about whether minorities would voluntarily acquiesce to majority opinion). Hanson reminds his readers how uncomfortable a thinker Tocqueville is by comparison, his mixture of criticism and admiration harder to stomach than Bryce's easy praise, his genuinely sociological analysis more demanding than Bryce's stereotypes. A more ambivalent perspective on the United States came from the conservative observer G. K. Chesterton, whose book *What I saw in America*, written after his 1922 visit, is the subject of an essay by Patrick J. Deneen.[8] Chesterton criticized intellectuals like George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells for their abstract universalism while praising the organization of society around face-to-face relationships. He discerned an expansive universalism in Americans' loyalty to the general principles of the Declaration of Independence, but thought this was balanced by a more locally rooted nationalism. A genuine European conservative, one faithful to the principles regulating European societies before 1789 and disenchanted with the liberal ideals that emerged thereafter, would have to be troubled by a polity founded on Enlightenment principles, and so it was with Chesterton in America. While one wishes the essay contained more on Chesterton's voyage to America and less on his pre-1914 partiality to small-scale English neighborhoods not pulled into the global economy, this essay is valuable as a window on a conservative tradition that was ambivalent at best toward modernity.

The conclusion to the volume by Jeffrey C. Isaac is a nuanced account of European responses to America today. Isaac wisely distinguishes hostility toward the Bush administration from the broad spectrum of European responses to the emergence of a new democracy across the Atlantic. He gives a sympathetic account of the call by Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, in response to the Bush Administration's decision to invade Iraq, for a distinctive European foreign policy, one not unfriendly to the United States but representing Europe's different historical experiences and interests. As he notes, these two intellectuals had shown a longstanding sympathy toward American intellectual life, and one should take their manifesto in the spirit in which it was given, as a statement of how to stand apart from but not hostile to Europe's sister civilization.

This is in many respects an illuminating collection that goes far toward fulfilling the editors' aim of rejecting simplistic views of an Atlantic divide and replacing them with a more nuanced, historically informed conception of European views of America. Yet the large existing scholarly literature on the subject since the end of World War II has already provided a contextualized understanding of Europeans' perceptions of America; the literature on Tocqueville is particularly rich. The volume's contribution would have been clearer if the editors had situated it in the large literature on the subject. Authors like Durand Echeverria, Michèle Duchet, George W. Pierson, and André Jardin are cited in the footnotes of different essays, but one would like to know in a more comprehensive fashion how the editors believe that the volume as a whole has modified existing scholarship.<sup>[9]</sup> One of the deficiencies of the existing literature is that it is so heavily concentrated on France and Britain, the countries that are also the focus here; in the age of the European Union it would have been a real advance to consider a wider range of countries, especially Eastern Europe and Russia, but we are left with an almost entirely Northwestern European perspective. Nonetheless, readers with an interest in French and British views of America will find much that is instructive.

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## NOTES

- [1] J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
- [2] George Berkeley, *A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations, and for Converting the Savage Americans to Christianity, by a college to be erected in the Summer Islands, otherwise called the Isles of Bermuda* (London: H. Woodfall, 1725).
- [3] Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Amsterdam: no publisher, 1770); (Geneva: Jean-Leonard Pellet, 1780).
- [4] Michèle Duchet, *Diderot et l'Histoire des Deux Indes ; ou l'écriture fragmentaire* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1978).
- [5] Gustave de Beaumont, *Marie, ou L'esclavage aux États-Unis: tableau de moeurs américaines* (Paris: C. Gosselin, 1835).
- [6] Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984); Frances M. Trollope, *Domestic manners of the Americans* (London and New York: Whittaker, Treacher, & Co., 1832).
- [7] James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (London: Macmillan, 1888).
- [8] G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1922)
- [9] Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815*, fwd. by Gilbert Chinard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Michèle Duchet *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières. Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot* (Paris: Maspero, 1971); George W. Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938).

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