Some Thoughts on

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Lecture Notes

by H. W. Valerian

»SAMISDAT«

© H. W. Valerian 2001, 2006
»SAMISDAT«

Contents

Preface
Page 5

Introduction
Page 12

1 Room to Move
Page 18

2 The Protestant Heritage
Page 28

3 Democracy in America
Page 37

4 The Frontier Experience
Page 47

5 Rags to Riches
Page 56

Perspectives
Page 67

POSTSCRIPT

When the Gun Is Mightier Than God
Page 75

Literature used
Page 95

Preface

These lecture notes originated in June, 2001 in a meeting of English lecturers at the *Fachhochschule* (Technical College) for Process Engineering and Environmental Technology in Innsbruck.[1] We had come together to discuss our future work. The college was still in its infancy at that time, having only been founded two years before. I had joined the English team even later, the previous winter term, as I had been drafted in to work with the more senior students from their fifth semester onwards. In June, 2001 the first take of students was about to complete their sixth term which meant that we had only just done this part of the English course for the first time. It was all rather new, rather raw, and rather improvised; far from perfect, as one can imagine, and equally far from satisfactory.

The question was, of course, how to proceed. We were trying to put together a course that would run from Term 5 through to Term 7. It should cover at least some of the language the students might need in their later careers, and it should make sense to them as much as to our superiors at the college. Among these topics, we agreed, ought to be a short course on cultural aspects of selected countries, preferably from

[1] Our *Fachhochschule* likes to call itself a 'University of Applied Science'. Whether this is wholly appropriate should be judged by others with more experience in these matters. I prefer to use the British term for equivalent institutions.

the English speaking world. This seemed to be particularly important as we had realised, to our astonishment, how narrow-minded and at the same time arrogant quite a few of our students appeared to be, even though they were all out there pursuing a career – the courses were run as evening classes –, and thus at an age at which one would have expected at least a certain amount of experience and insight. At a college, we thought, even if it specialises in engineering, the English course should offer more than just the strictly necessary as anticipated by future work requirements or career prospects.

Having got so far, we had to answer yet another question – how to go about it. One of us, the most 'senior' (not in age but in terms of experience) suggested that we draw up a manual which would satisfy the following requirements:

- It would contain sections from relevant texts in order to introduce students to English as spoken or, rather, written in 'real life', as opposed to course books.
- At the same time, it would use the material in such a way that it did not impinge on any copyright laws and could thus be photocopied for use at our college.
- All the same, it would be more than just a collection of texts from one book or another, but provide additional information of its own.

After a little hesitation I volunteered to do the work during our summer holidays. One reason was that amongst the three of us, I seemed to be best suited for the task, being accustomed to the job of writing. What is more, I had done American studies at university (although that was a long time ago), and the USA was, of course, the first choice of countries to be covered. The moment I started work in earnest, however, I discovered that there were more problems involved than I had anticipated. To begin with I found that I could hardly free myself from the feeling of being constantly watched by colleagues –

not necessarily the two I was actually working with, but by other English lecturers at college level. After all, my chapters might be passed around and thus be read by all sorts of people. For this reason, I suddenly felt impelled to comply with scholarly conventions, footnotes and all. Unfortunately, this proved rather difficult as I had neither the time nor the resources to go about the task systematically. The books that happened to be in my personal library had to suffice, with the addition of a few more hastily ordered via the Internet. In the end, the manual was indeed adorned with a respectable amount of footnotes, although close scrutiny will instantly reveal the limited number and the haphazard selection of my sources.

What bothered me even more was the fact that the purpose of the whole enterprise had not been thought through carefully enough. What was I supposed to be writing – a textbook on American thought? A reader? Material to involve the students in classroom activities in order to train their communication skills? In our discussion, all these aims had been considered. The underlying reason for the muddle was that we were not totally clear about our aims, for the simple reason that we lacked experience in teaching the age group in question, at this particular type of teaching establishment. It should be mentioned, perhaps, that teaching adult students in evening classes, and engineering students at that, requires considerable skills; in my experience, even more so than teaching younger pupils at a regular technical school during the day. But this was something we all had to find out in time. The only solution I could think of there and then was to attempt some kind of compromise that would be viable not just with regard to the requirements of the classroom, but that would also take into account the limited resources I had at my command. After all, it should be remembered that I have never been a full-time lecturer at the college but have only been teaching one or two groups of students each term (i.e. between 2 and 4 weekly lessons).

Not surprisingly, the result was far from satisfactory. Luckily, however, there were a few rewarding side-effects as well. After a short warming-up period I discovered that my ability to write in English, although not seriously tested for decades, had hardly suffered at all, if it had not actually improved. To my surprise I found that words and phrases popped up in my mind that I seemed to have long forgotten; a striking example, surely, for the power of memory, especially if triggered by association. The same could be said of the subject I was dealing with. In this respect I quickly began to realise my indebtedness to my lecturers at university way back when. A good education, it may be said, lays foundations that are still firm after thirty years, no matter how much change may have occurred above the ground; conversely, with foundations like that one will not fail to notice such changes, even if one does not follow events closely; and what is more, one will even be able to understand and to explain them, at any rate up to a certain point. There seems to be a widespread notion, not least among academic lecturers, that we live in an age of such rapid progress that whatever is being taught now, will be hopelessly out of date in a comparably short time. I remember a senior professor at the law school in Innsbruck once telling his students during a graduation ceremony that the 'half-life' of their knowledge would be no more than seven years. I have to confess that I was slightly scandalised. After all, if half of the things taught at university are obsolete after seven years' time, surely there must be something wrong with the teaching? And should not a well-paid professor who admittedly cannot offer anything more substantial better face the music and resign?

In any case I can testify to the fact that the 'half-life' of what I had taken away from my time at university certainly exceeded the seven-year period by far. Anyone who has ever been teaching will be able to gauge the achievement this represents. That is why I want to take the opportunity to thank my then professor of American Studies at Inns-

bruck University, Dr. Brigitte Scheer-Schätzler. Above all, however, I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Sonja Bahn MA, who has impressed generations of students with her ability to make us really *understand* literature, not to mention her inexhaustible kindness and generosity. I do not know, of course, what either of them would make of these chapters; but if anything valuable can be found in them, it certainly goes back to their instruction. Needless to say that any mistakes or misrepresentations are entirely of my own making.

As it turned out, the product of my labours met with a rather mixed reception. For one thing I soon discovered that the language I had used was far too difficult for our students, although I had tried not to make understanding any harder than the subject required, and although I had, in a way, written 'off the cuff'. Worse still, I had to realise that I had acted on an assumption that turned out to be only partially correct; namely, that our students would be keen to catch at least a glimpse of the ideological background to the United States' stance in today's world, to some of its actions, and to some of the reactions displayed by Americans. Unfortunately, most of the students hardly showed any interest at all. I formed the impression that 'learning' for them only meant acquiring those dry facts that would help them get their diplomas, or that would subsequently materialise in greater sums on the credit side of their bank accounts. If this seems to be at odds with their studying at an establishment that prides itself on being a 'university' (even if only of 'applied science'), the contradiction may be obvious to a lecturer like myself, but certainly not to them. I even began to suspect them of not valuing these chapters too highly, for the simple reason that they had been drawn up by the very person standing in front of them; and if *he* could do such a thing, certainly it could not be worth much, could it?

Not a flattering picture of our students, I have to admit; but then it is only partially true as all such generalisations are, and it seems that

things have improved over the years – at that time, it should be remembered, it was still early days. In later courses, there were a number of students who did display a certain interest in the topics discussed and who thought that this very short introduction to American ideas, values and experiences was not without its merits. I would also like to mention that some of the other lecturers at our college found my notes quite useful and kept on using them in their courses. In the meantime, however, the syllabus has been changed, leaving less time for the sort of instruction envisaged here. At best, one or two individual chapters can be employed as background information, but even that requires a command of English and a level of knowledge that cannot be expected from technical students on a regular basis. This means that if such individual chapters were to be incorporated in future courses, they would have to be reworked thoroughly in order to meet the specific demands at our establishment.

Which may also answer the question if I would undertake such an enterprise again. The answer is a straightforward 'No'. Does that mean that I regret having done it? Again, the answer is 'No'. I do not deny having profited from my efforts. However, any gains I derived were purely personal; neither did they improve my teaching, nor did they help the students much in any other way. I certainly did enjoy writing these notes, just as I enjoy writing in general; I was glad I could make good use of my ongoing observations of and reflections on certain aspects of the public debate in the United States; and I was proud to discover that I was still able to write in English if I had to (which does not, of course, constitute any claim as to the quality of my English). But apart from that, and with hindsight, it seems to be me that the undertaking had something of the Quixotic about it. This also applies to the postscript that I include – an essay I wrote a short while ago, mainly to amuse myself. As it also deals with American thought and values, I thought it might fit into this volume fairly well.

And this is exactly how this volume should be read: by no means as a document of academic achievement, but rather as a piece of my personal and doubtlessly rather idiosyncratic writing. Not that I would wish to insinuate that these chapters contain anything new or original – far from it. The idiosyncrasy should be seen in the choice of subject rather than in the ideas expressed. In the foreword to a textbook on logic I once came across the remarkable opening sentence, ‘Nothing in this book is original except perhaps my mistake.’ In this sense, it must be hoped that these chapters do not contain anything original at all. But then, being original does not always have to be a virtue in itself; setting out what is already known, in a concise and lucid manner, may be equally meritorious.

H. W. Valerian
June 2006

INTRODUCTION

Strange as it may seem, the concept of an American Dream was not formed until the 1930s, and it is the historian James Truslow Adams who is generally credited with having coined the term. Writing in 1931, he concluded his voluminous study, *The Epic of America,* by summing up those reasons that in his mind were at the root of the country's amazing success story: 'If [...] the things already listed were all we had had to contribute', he warned, 'America would have made no distinctive and unique gift to mankind.' But, he continued, there has also been the '*American dream':*

> [...] the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

Significantly, Adams reiterated his view that the aim had never been restricted to material gains: The dream, he insisted, 'that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily.'

> It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.

At this point, Adams struck a note that might sound slightly self-congratulatory today: Even if the dream had only been realised imperfectly in the USA, he maintained, it had still been 'realised more fully in actual life here than anywhere else'. On the other hand, he cautioned his fellow citizens, the dream may also make demands; pursuing it, they will have to set their aim high.

> The point is that if we are to have a rich and full life in which all are to share and play their parts, if the American dream is to be a reality, our communal spiritual and intellectual life must be distinctly higher than elsewhere, where classes and groups have their separate interests, habits, markets, arts, and lives. If the dream is not to prove possible of fulfillment, we might as well become stark realists, become once more class-conscious, and struggle as individuals or classes against one another. If it is to come true, those on top, financially, intellectually, or otherwise, have got to devote themselves to the 'Great Society,' and those who are below in the scale have got to strive to rise, not merely economically, but culturally. We cannot become a great democracy by giving ourselves up as individuals to selfishness, physical comfort, and cheap amusement. The very foundation of the American dream of a better and richer life for all is that all, in varying degrees, shall be capable of wanting to share in it. It can never be wrought into a reality by cheap people or by 'keeping up with the Joneses.' There is nothing whatever in a fortune merely in itself or in a man merely in himself. It all depends on what is made of each.

It is worth noting that Adams is putting forward a social vision in the sense that he is talking of the way *society* should be organised. Such an approach is rather unusual in the American tradition, as will be seen later. It leads to the surprising result that some of the sentences in the passages just quoted could have been said by a European socialist or even by a sympathizer of the Communist party – take, for example, the idea of a 'better and richer life for all', or the concept of 'unhampered development' unrestricted by any social barriers. In the

last analysis, Adams seems to advocate nothing less than a classless society. Keeping this in mind, it could be claimed that the American Dream, at any rate in the way James Truslow Adams chose to present it, is nothing but another Utopia: the fiction of a perfect or near perfect society set apart in time or space, but at the same time serving as a goal and thus providing a bearing for day-to-day navigation. The fact that Adams was writing at the time of the Great Depression may partly explain his emphasis; at the same time, he appears to have been in tune with tendencies that should lead to the inauguration of a 'New Deal' by President Franklin D. Roosevelt a short time later. In any case, it is important to remember that the author is putting forward a vision; and like so many visionaries, he ends on an exhortative note. Realising Utopia, no matter how it may be conceived, has always been an uphill struggle:

> If we are to make the dream come true we must all work together, no longer to build bigger, but to build better. [...] In a country as big as America it is as impossible to prophesy as it is to generalize, without being tripped up, but it seems to me that there is room for hope as well as mistrust. The epic loses all its glory without the dream. The statistics of size, population, and wealth would mean nothing to me unless I could still believe in the dream. [...] We have a long and arduous road to travel if we are to realize our American dream in the life of our nation, but if we fail, there is nothing left but the old eternal round. The alternative is the failure of self-government, the failure of the common man to rise to full stature, the failure of all that the American dream has held of hope and promise for mankind.[1]

Talking to Americans today, one will probably discover three things in connection with the American Dream: first, that practically everybody has heard of it, and that many people seem to agree with the basic assumption that there is, indeed, some such dream; they might even concede that it has influenced their own beliefs in some way.

[1] James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America,* as quoted in Peter Freese, ed., *Viewfinder Special: Lese- und Arbeitsbuch für die gymnasiale Oberstufe* (München: Langenscheidt-Longman, 2. Aufl. 1999), pp. 179f.

Second, it is very hard to determine what the dream actually says; quite obviously, it means different things to different people. Certain aspects can easily be identified in the passages quoted above, but apparently that is not enough. This may be the reason why, finally, the American Dream has become a standard piece of political rhetoric. One gets the impression that no major speech is complete without at least a fleeting reference to it. Bill Clinton's second inaugural address in 1997, for example, was remarkable not only because he referred to the 'dream' as such, but also because he managed to evoke Martin Luther King's famous 'I Have a Dream' speech of 1963:

> Thirty-four years ago, the man whose life we celebrate today, spoke to us down there at the other end of this mall in words that moved the conscience of a nation. Like a prophet of old, he told of his dream that one day America would rise up and treat all its citizens as equals before the law and in the heart. Martin Luther King's dream was the American dream. His quest is our quest – the ceaseless striving to live out our true creed. Our history has been built upon such dreams and labors, and by our dreams and labors we will redeem the promise of America in the 21st century. [...] May those generations whose faces we cannot yet see, whose names we may never know, say of us here that we led our beloved land into a new century with the American dream alive for all her children, with the American promise of a more perfect union a reality for all her people, with America's bright flame of freedom spreading throughout all the world.[2]

No doubt this sort of rhetoric can sound rather pompous, not just to foreign observers. On the other hand, the very fact that politicians think it appropriate to constantly evoke some kind of 'dream' indicates its popularity: it must strike a chord with the electorate, otherwise they would not do it. To all appearances, the American Dream, whatever its meaning, has become an integral part of American culture; and therefore, we may assume, it has also become a driving force behind

[2] op. cit., p. 182. Martin Luther King had delivered his speech at the Lincoln Memorial, i.e. 'at the other end' of the Mall seen from the Capitol where Clinton was speaking. His inauguration coincided with Martin Luther King Day on 20 January.

what Americans try to achieve politically, what they expect and what they hope for.

This explains its significance for people outside the United States. For one thing, it may not be possible to fully understand individual Americans one meets either at home or abroad, without realising that what at first glance may sometimes appear as their self-righteousness or even hypocrisy is nothing but their assumption that they come from a society which has advanced farther than any other towards the realisation of age-old dreams of mankind. At the same time, awareness of this belief also explains the slightly superior, if not missionary pose Americans sometimes strike, and which can be observed not only in individual citizens, but also in US foreign policy as a whole. On the other hand, the history of the United States definitely *is* a success story, or has been up to now. Not surprisingly, American ideas and concepts are increasingly being taken as a model world-wide, not least here in Europe. In consequence, the American Dream is being dreamed by more and more people outside the United States; even in Austria, there are tendencies to make society more 'American' by implementing at least certain elements of the Utopian vision as expressed by that 'dream'. In this sense it has become all pervasive, which would be reason enough to make a study – however short and fragmentary – worth while.

It goes without saying that such a study can only highlight a few selected aspects; after all it has to be remembered that even to Americans their dream has remained elusive, and if there is any agreement on its contents, it probably is that there cannot really be any sound agreement. On the other hand, it would be all too easy to take a critical approach and confront the 'dream' with the reality of the United States. No doubt, what we have called the tendency of Americans to appear, at times, somewhat self-righteous or even hypocritical, would invite such debunking. However, two major

considerations speak against such an approach: For one thing, any such undertaking would inevitably have to be based on a study of the 'dream' as a first step. The second step is made fairly easy by the amount of information we have on American affairs. Indeed, such information has become so abundant that detrimental views could not be concealed from the world even if Americans wished to do so. The work of measuring the lofty aims of the American Dream against American reality can thus be left to the individual student with some justification. In addition, it should be remembered that Americans quite often do the work themselves: There has never been a lack of critical voices in the United States.

So, what could the more important aspects of the American Dream be? In trying to identify the most influential ones, we will follow a roughly chronological order, mainly because it is hoped that students will find it easier to follow: from the expectations, both secular and religious, of the earliest settlers through the 'nation building' of the Founding Fathers and the frontier experience of pioneers moving west to the hope of going from 'rags to riches'. It has to be kept in mind, however, that a course like this cannot hope to enter on a comprehensive discussion of such a complex phenomenon as the American Dream. For better or for worse, a choice has to be made. Of course, whether it is a happy one must remain a matter of debate. Nevertheless, it may sometimes be better to make a bad choice rather than no choice at all – a practical-minded approach that is also said to be quite typically American.

1

ROOM TO MOVE

While it is legitimate to play down the materialistic aspects of the American Dream, it has to be said that they undoubtedly exist, and that they have played a prominent role throughout the history of the United States. It can even be argued that among the images that 'lured' immigrants to the New World, those of affluence, of space and abundance have always been in the foreground. This is not to say that the material aspect was the only one, nor does it imply that the majority of immigrants came to get rich quickly and in the easy way. It is to imply, however, that whatever the contents of the American Dream might be, its basis has always been the richness and the vastness of the newly discovered continent. Arguably, the American Dream could never have developed without these geographical and climatic conditions.

In the beginning, the American Dream actually was the dream of European immigrants; and what they dreamed, what they hoped to find in America, can only be understood in contrast to their situation in Europe. In the seventeenth and to some extent even in the eighteenth centuries, our continent was a rather dismal place, ridden by plague, famine, war and oppression. Societies were characterised by a rigid hierarchy with the land-owning gentry at the top. The vast majority of people were employed in agriculture, very often at subsistence level.

Arable land was scarce and expensive. Therefore, it is no surprise that from the very beginning of English colonisation in North America, exactly those aspects were emphasised in the attempt to find settlers willing to cross the Atlantic: for a share in the Virginia Company worth £12 10s., a contemporary pamphlet promised, a man 'shall be made lord of 200 acres of land, to him and his heirs forever. And for the charge of transportation of himself, his family and tenants he shall be allotted for every person he carries 100 acres more.' This was aimed at the rich rather than the poor, as twelve and a half pounds were quite a substantial sum at that time. To the poor, the promise was one of illimitable forests providing inexhaustible supplies of free fuel and free housing materials. Indeed, the astonishing richness of the American flora and fauna was another aspect that fascinated Europeans from the outset. According to one contemporary source, at the time of the first settlement of Virginia (from 1607), there were

> turkeys that weighed seventy pounds or more, and ducks so numerous that flocks seven miles long shut out the sunlight as they passed overhead. Streams swarmed with fish so large that ordinary nets would not hold them and so plentiful that a horse could not wade across a river when they were running.[1]

In pre-industrial times land was the most precious commodity, while the only way a common man could earn his livelihood was bound to be by manual labour. Therefore, the new colonies in North America presented a unique opportunity to masses of landless farm labourers in Britain and, later, in Europe as a whole. No wonder America came to be seen as a veritable 'Garden of Eden', planted by the Lord himself.

'Opportunity' in this sense does not suggest riches that are won easily and quickly; quite the contrary: it offers a chance to make a

[1] Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA* (London: Penguin Books, 2nd ed. 2001), p. 8f.

living by hard and steady work. If there is any promise of wealth, it will only come later, possibly after generations. Still, the fact remains that there was some kind of opportunity: no such hope in Europe for anybody born low. Although settlement in the British colonies across the Atlantic was instigated by the crown and developed under strict control from London, it proved impossible to impose the social structure of the homeland on the colonies; the distance was too long, communication too volatile, while the size of the newly settled territories themselves prevented any tight grip on local communities, even by colonial authorities. It was size as much as abundance that created opportunity and therefore, in the last analysis, freedom.

The connection should make itself felt throughout the following centuries. The flow of immigrants, mainly from Europe, grew steadily, reaching its peak only in the first two decades of the twentieth century; at that time, more than a million immigrants entered the United States every ten years. While after, say, 1850 a growing proportion found work in the expanding industries, many could still get what they were after: a piece of land to be farmed. This was the main reason why the frontier between civilisation and wilderness was steadily pushed westward, opening vast stretches of country to settlement. The losers were the native Americans. From 1862 the so-called Homestead Act provided for ownership of hitherto unclaimed land: a family could stake out a plot of up to 160 acres, the only condition being that it had to be cultivated for at least 5 years.

Talking about size, the United States ranks third among the countries in the world as far as the area is concerned (surpassed only by Russia and Canada). The distance from New York to San Francisco is approximately 2,500 miles (4,000km), from Lake Ontario and the Canadian border to New Orleans on the Gulf of Mexico it is approximately 1,300 miles (more than 2,000km). In Europe, this corresponds to the distance that separates Lisbon from Moscow and Copenhagen

from Palermo, respectively. It has been said that the European Union at its present state only covers about one third of the area of the United States although it has a significantly bigger population. In this respect, the United States with about 270 million inhabitants also takes third place (after China and India). And yet, the average density of population in the United States is only 28 people per square kilometre, which says a lot about the vastness of the country if it is compared with 239 in Great Britain, 229 in Germany, or 105 in France (Austria: 95).[2]

In the course of time, space and natural wealth combined to create what has been called a 'psychology of abundance'.[3] Its influence on American thought could be summarised as follows:

(1) In Europe, experience suggests that one man's riches are other men's want. For people who think they have practically limitless resources at hand, the logic will clearly present itself differently: anybody can acquire as much wealth as he or she wants to and is able to, without restricting the chances of anybody else – there is always enough to go round. Wealth, in Europe often viewed with suspicion, thus loses any stigma it may have carried. This was borne out when it came to be measured in terms of industrial production rather than arable land. From then on, it could be perceived as actually increasing – an 'ever-expanding pie' that would always grow faster than the demands made on it:

> In the 1800s, the nation grew in size, as new western lands were settled and became states. In the 1900s, when the continent had been settled, Americans invented new products and techniques of production, such as

[2] *World Population Prospects 1994* (New York: United Nations (UN) Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, 1995), as quoted in *Microsoft Encarta Weltatlas - Version 98* (Microsoft Corporation, 1995-1997); see also Douglas K. Stevenson, *American Life and Institutions* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, revised edition 1996), pp. 7 and 16.

[3] Eckhard Fiedler, Jansen Reimer, and Mil Norman-Risch, *America in Close-Up* (Harlow: Longman, 1990), p. 27.

> Henry Ford's mass production of cars on the assembly line. The expanding economy created new jobs, and the pie continued to grow larger and larger. Under these circumstances, Americans came to believe that their heritage of abundance would last as far as they could see into the future. [4]

(2) Even if the land turned out not to be inexhaustible after all, there was always enough space to move on. The most notorious episode of this kind took place in Oklahoma in the thirties, when intensive farming had eroded the soil which, after a spell of dry weather, was carried away by the wind. The result was a 'dust bowl' of enormous proportions; thousands of farmers were forced to migrate to California. Generally speaking, nature was often treated rather carelessly by Americans. However, two things should be kept in mind when making such a statement: first, that the climate is rather harsh in the United States as anybody who has been there can testify; working the land under such conditions – and without any air condition – must have been a tough job indeed, and so it is not surprising that Americans have tended to consider nature as more or less hostile. Second, there has also been an opposite trend, one that seeks to protect nature and natural resources, as highlighted by the writer Henry David Thoreau. In 1845 he withdrew to a remote place in the forest in order to perform an experiment in simple living and economy which he later described in his book *Walden* (1854).[5] The USA was the first country to set aside parts of its territory for the creation of national parks (Yellowstone, 1872). Today, such parks and preserves occupy

[4] Maryanne Kearny Datesman, JoAnn Crandall, and Edward N. Kearny, *The American Ways: An Introduction to American Culture* (n.p.: Prentice Hall Regents, 2nd ed. 1997), p. 91.

[5] Thoreau's experiment was interrupted by a gaol sentence for refusing to pay taxes – he did not want to help fund a war the government was then waging. With his essay, *Civil Disobedience* (1849), he should become an influential voice in the American tradition of political nonconformism and protest. His stance was inspired by the philosophy of 'transcendentalism', which propounded the individual's intuition as supreme authority and thus promoted self-reliance as well as a disregard of tradition and authority: cf. Roswitha Sieper, *The Student's Companion to the USA* (Ismanig: Max Hueber Verlag, 1998), p. 198. See also the famous essay "Self-Reliance" by another prominent transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *Selected Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 175-203.

enormous areas. Still, it can be claimed with some justification that ecological concepts and the insight that there are ‘limits to growth’ cannot be reconciled with the American Dream easily.

Needless to say, the ‘psychology of abundance’ also has its positive side. For one thing, it may be at the root of the optimistic outlook that is another aspect of the American Dream: it has never been a nightmare. What is more, people in the United States can be magnanimous to an extent that often astonishes and touches European visitors, and they have often proved their willingness, even eagerness to help people in want. Austrians above a certain age, for example, may still remember the CARE parcels that alleviated life for many families during the grim years after World War II.

Americans like to celebrate the size, wealth, diversity and beauty of their country; this is done in popular songs such as ‘This land is your land, this land is my land...’ or, more importantly, in literature. It is hard to think of any other culture in which travelling and exploring one’s own country plays a similar role. One classic novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (first published in 1885), tells the story of a journey, by Huck and the runaway slave Jim, down the Mississippi on a raft. At the end, Huck decides to ‘light out for the Territory’ rather than subjecting to any further attempts by well meaning adults to ‘sivilize’ him.[6] Originally, ‘moving on’ was done on horseback or in the settlers’ wagon. Later, these were superseded by railways, and the ‘lonesome whistle’ of an engine must have made generations of Americans restive. Hobos and tramps used to travel free by riding freight cars, as described by another well known writer, Jack London, in *The Road* (1907). As late as 1980 or so, the following

[6] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 369; the ‘Territory’ refers to vast stretches of country to the west of the Mississippi acquired by the US from France in the so-called Louisiana Purchase (1803).

advice could be found in one of those ‘travel cheaply’ guidebooks for young people:

> One method of travel that I found extremely useful was riding freight trains. It’s a lot easier than it sounds: first go to the freight yard, usually some distance from the passenger terminus. Pick up a friendly looking workman involved in menial work (avoid Supervisors), and ask him when the next train to wherever is leaving, and from where. [...] Then, shortly before it leaves, hop in an empty wagon and you’re away.[7]

In the course of the twentieth century, trains in turn were gradually replaced by cars and coaches. Hitchhiking became the cheapest way of getting around, celebrated, amongst others, by Jack Kerouac in his novel *On the Road* (1957):

> My first ride was a dynamite truck with a red flag, about thirty miles into great green Illinois, the truckdriver pointing out the place where Route 6, which we were on, intersects Route 66 before they both shoot west for incredible distances. Along about three in the afternoon, after an apple pie and ice cream in a roadside stand, a woman stopped for me in a little coupe. [...] She drove the first few hours [...], and then I took over the wheel and, though I’m not much of a driver, drove clear through the rest of Illinois to Davenport, Iowa, via Rock Island. And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up.[8]

One could also be hired to drive a car across the continent (with or without the owners), or one could buy a cheap car oneself and see how long it would last. Alternatively, there was the ubiquitous Greyhound bus:

> At dawn my bus was zooming across the Arizona desert – Indio, Blythe, Salome [...]; the great dry stretches leading to Mexican mountains in the south. Then we swung north to the Arizona mountains, Flagstaff, clifftowns. I had a book with me I stole from a Hollywood stall, *Le Grand*

[7] Michael Von Haag and Anna Crew, eds., *A Moneywise Guide to North America* (London: Travelaid, 1979), p. 18.

[8] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 17f.

> *Meaulnes* by Alain-Fournier, but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along. Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing. In inky night we crossed New Mexico; at grey dawn it was Dalhart, Texas; in the bleak Sunday afternoon we rode through one Oklahoma flat-town after another; at nightfall it was Kansas. The bus roared on. I was going home in October. Everybody goes home in October. We arrived in St Louis at noon. [...] The bus roared through Indiana cornfields that night; the moon illuminated the ghostly gathered husks [...].[9]

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the great American passion of travelling has, of course, also found its way into films; the sixties classic *Easy Rider* immediately comes to mind, in this case motorcycles being the chosen vehicles. Nowadays, people tend to take a plane if they have to cross the continent, but strangely, this way of travelling has apparently not been able to inspire similar poetry – not yet, at any rate. That Americans are exceptionally mobile has often been noted before. It is estimated that on average, they expect to move home at least twice in their lifetime, usually to get a better job. In this sense, the old idea of 'moving on' is still powerful.

It also fosters that sense of freedom which is so dear to Americans. Without doubt, freedom is at the heart of anything Americans cherish, a key value in their culture and therefore an indispensable element of the American Dream. The fact that they live in a free country inspires their patriotism more than anything else. Whatever Americans may envisage for their society or for the world at large, freedom will certainly be a top priority. In the twentieth century, this identification was reinforced by the fight against totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and later, in the Cold War, the Soviet bloc. The fact that so many refugees from these regimes found a safe haven in the United States was regarded as the ultimate confirmation of the basic value of

[9] op. cit., p. 99.

freedom; by the same token, it served as an argument for the superiority of a society based on liberal principles.

Although the awareness that freedom is a fundamental value has become commonplace in the civilised world, one should keep in mind certain traits that seem to distinguish the specific American interpretation. For one thing, the emphasis is on *individual* freedom; as a matter of fact, the two words, freedom and individualism, are often used synonymously. For an American it is of utmost importance to remain independent in order to feel free. This links up with another key concept, self-reliance. Freedom in this sense is primarily regarded as freedom *from:* from the control of authorities, for example, from regulations, from social obligations of all kinds. Quite obviously, this concept of freedom is closely related to the political system as incorporated in the constitution; for many Americans, the prime task of any government is to guarantee their freedom, in other words to leave them alone, an attitude which may help to explain the political apathy so many Americans display as well as their hostility towards any form of government. The latter attitude is sometimes carried so far as to smack of anarchism, even if the average American would be shocked by such an allusion.

On the other hand, the American concept of freedom invariably involves the freedom *to do* something. In this sense, it is synonymous with opportunity. Primarily, this is seen as the opportunity to be successful, success being usually measured in dollars. This idea of freedom is closely connected with the vastness and the wealth of the country. It is the freedom of the frontier or, to put it more succinctly, of the prairies and as such only workable in a country that has enough space and resources to support opportunity in all its forms.

The question is if these resources will suffice to sustain the American way of life in the future: if the pie will really continue to grow, to take up the metaphor once more. There are doubts these days,

and some even fear that as material growth is petering out, the American Dream may be coming to an end – although that would imply that it has been purely materialistic after all.

2

THE PROTESTANT HERITAGE

Although the American Dream can hardly be said to be predominantly religious, the extent to which religion permeates life in the United States – both publicly and in the private sphere – cannot be ignored either. Even in its most secular form, it could be argued, the American Dream rests on foundations that are, at least in part, strongly religious; to be more specific, they go back to the Protestant creed that has influenced developments in America from the very beginning. Three aspects of this heritage will be highlighted here: the Utopian ideal of the early settlers, the marked individualism inherent in the Protestant faith, and its distinctive work ethics. All these elements have survived throughout the centuries and lie behind many American attitudes, even today.

It should be remembered that from the very beginning, the settlement of the English colonies in North America was also motivated by religious fervour. As early as 1620, a group of religious dissenters, the 'Pilgrim Fathers', landed at Cape Cod and founded the colony that later became Massachusetts. Throughout the seventeenth century, a stream of like-minded emigrants from England, the Puritans, crossed the Atlantic to their 'New Jerusalem' (or 'New Israel'), as they came to view their settlement. This indicates the Utopian vision they

had in mind. They wanted to establish a ‘city on a hill’, i.e. a model community to which people all over the world would turn their eyes. Although the social experiment had more or less failed by the end of the seventeenth century, many more dissident groups sought refuge in the new world over the years, and some of them tried to realise their specific vision of an ideal community based on the Bible, which was often read quite literally. Accordingly, some of these groups lead a rather picturesque life today, such as the Amish in Pennsylvania who refuse, among other things, to use motorcars and still talk their ancient native accent (which makes it possible to converse with them in German).

The notion that America is a land chosen by God for very special purposes, first propagated by the Puritans, has survived until today. In mid-nineteenth century, it found popular expression in the concept of a ‘Manifest Destiny’: ‘In its magnificent domain of space and time’, wrote its creator, a certain John O’Sullivan, ‘the nation of many nations is destined to manifest the excellence of divine principles.’[1] As late as 1983, the then President of the US, Ronald Reagan, professed in a public speech that he had ‘always believed that this blessed land was set apart in a special way, that some divine plan placed this great continent here between the two oceans to be found by people from every corner of the Earth [...].’[2]

When the Protestant branch of the Christian faith broke away from the Roman Catholic church during the Reformation in the sixteenth century, one major point of dissent was the innovative idea that each believer should try and understand God’s will individually. The means by which this could be achieved was studying the Bible. This entailed,

[1] Quoted in Sieper, *The Student's Companion to the USA*, p. 199.

[2] From a speech at the Association of National Religious Broadcasters’ Annual Conference, January 31, 1983, as quoted in Fiedler, Reimer, and Norman-Risch, *America in Close-Up,* p. 222.

on the one hand, that in order to be a good Christian it was important to become literate, not only in the sense of being able to read and write – although that was important enough in itself – but also in the sense of being versed in the scriptures, of being able to discuss them. Consequently, Protestants have always laid great emphasis on education, and from quite an early stage, the excellence of the public school system in North America was regularly praised by foreign visitors. No village seemed to be complete without the schoolhouse where children were taught the '3 Rs' (reading, writing, 'rithmetic), unfortunately, at that time, often to the sound of the hickory stick. More generally speaking it could be argued that the Protestants bequeathed a culture based on texts, especially on written texts, and on arguments about these texts (oral as well as in writing); the Catholic tradition, in comparison, seems to have favoured music and the arts.

On the other hand, the individual believer suddenly bore the main responsibility for the purity of his or her faith, for his or her doings and ultimately for his or her salvation. The clergy – such as there are in Protestant churches – have never played the same role as in the Catholic church, and they certainly do not hold the keys to heaven, as the saying goes. Some denominations insist that there should only be independent local congregations without any additional layers of authority above them. The Puritans in New England accepted no more than five offices only two of which, the pastor and the teacher, had to be ordained ministers. Basically, each individual was considered to be in an equal position vis-à-vis God – the 'priesthood of all believers', as this concept was called.[3] Equally important, many Protestant

[3] Denominations that follow this line are often grouped under the label 'Presbyterian', while denominations that do accept the authority of bishops and archbishops, especially those of the Church of England, are called 'Episcopalian'. There are quite a few Protestant sects, and some of them – such as Methodists, Baptists, and even Mormons – have played a noticeable role in American history.

denominations reject most of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of confession; it is for the individual believer to search his or her conscience, to decide what he or she had done wrong, to seek God's forgiveness and to mend his or her ways. In this way, a further burden was placed on the individual's conscience.

The Protestant faith thus laid the foundations for the emerging individualism of Americans; and a religious foundation is the strongest one could wish for. Not surprisingly, the individualist creed easily survived the onset of more secular philosophies in the eighteenth century – the so-called enlightenment. In America, it found an eloquent representative in the person of Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790). He was born in Boston, a Puritan stronghold, but at the age of seventeen he went to Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) and set up a printing press which he ran with enormous success. With his many-sided interests and his perpetual curiosity, he seemed to epitomise the ideal of enlightenment:

> Franklin was an internationally eminent inventor and scientific experimenter, a brilliantly skilful politician and social organizer, and an innovative philanthropist. He contributed to the understanding of electricity and constructed musical instruments, served as adviser on all political moves of the new nation, as representative of the colonies to England and of the nation to France, and founded hospitals, universities, and street-cleaning departments. And throughout a brilliantly busy career, Franklin wrote [...].[4]

Today, his fame seems to rest mainly on two achievements: he is credited with the invention of the lightning rod, and he is the author of the popular *Autobiography* (first published posthumously in 1818), in which he tells the success story of an archetypal self-made man. Quite typically for this breed, Franklin also liked to lecture his audience on

[4] Marcus Cunliffe, ed., *American Literature to 1900*, Sphere History of Literature in the English Language Volume 8 (London: Sphere Books, 1973), pp. 64f.

how to achieve a similar success; his main advise was to get up and start work early; not to waste any time during the day, never to be idle, not to be distracted by amusements or other temptations; and to keep economising, constantly finding new ways of saving a penny. No wonder Franklin is also credited with having coined that much repeated phrase, *time is money.* 'Reading was the only amusement I allowed myself', Franklin confessed in his *Autobiography.*

> I spent no time in taverns, games, or frolics of any kind; and my industry in my business continued as indefatigable as it was necessary. I was indebted for my printing-house; I had a young family coming on to be educated, and I had to contend with, for business, two printers who were established in the place before me. My circumstances, however, grew daily easier. My original habits of frugality continuing, and my father having, among his instructions to me when a boy, frequently repeated a proverb of Solomon, 'Seest thou a man diligent in his calling, he shall stand before kings, he shall not stand before mean men,' I from thence considered industry as a means of obtaining wealth and distinction, which encouraged me, though I did not think that I should ever literally *stand before kings,* which, however, has since happened; for I have stood before *five,* and even had the honor of sitting down with one – the King of Denmark – to dinner.[5]

The Puritan roots of Franklin's philosophy ought to be fairly obvious; the important point to note here is the belief in the individual's ability to improve, to prosper, and to rise in the world, solely by his or her own efforts. No doubt, even in this worldly undertaking a lot of soul-searching is required; and it has been observed that Franklin brought an accountant's approach to morals: keeping, as it were, a kind of ledger in which good deeds and incremental improvement were entered on the credit side, against temptations and lapses on the debit side. It has also been said that part of the Protestant heritage, and especially its Puritan variety, engendered an ascetic attitude, even if it was secular in its aims:

[5] Quoted from Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 483f.

pleasures were not to be avoided primarily with a view to gaining a place in heaven, but with a view to prospering in the world.[6]

At the same time, the value of hard work has always been central to the Protestant set of convictions. Without entering into a theological discussion it can be said that particularly in the Calvinist tradition, work takes on the function of worship: *laborare est orare* – to work is to pray:

> By the Puritan moralist the ancient maxim is repeated with a new and intenser significance. The labour which he idealizes is not simply a requirement imposed by nature, or a punishment for the sin of Adam. It is itself a kind of ascetic discipline, more rigorous than that demanded of any order of mendicants – a discipline imposed by the will of God, and to be undergone, not in solitude, but in the punctual discharge of secular duties. It is not merely an economic means, to be laid aside when physical needs have been satisfied. It is a spiritual end, for in it alone can the soul find health, and it must be continued as an ethical duty long after it has ceased to be a material necessity.[7]

Interestingly, this attitude has also survived to the very day, as demonstrated by David Landes, a retired professor of economics at Harvard. We are living in a 'dessert age', he complains in a recently published book: 'We want things to be sweet; too many of us work to live and live to be happy. Nothing wrong with that; it just does not promote high productivity. You want high productivity? Then you should live to work and get happiness as a by-product.'[8] Which also answers the question what a modern 'workaholic' may be worshipping.

[6] Most famously, such observations were made by the German sociologist Max Weber in his essay "Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus," written in 1904. Cf. Max Weber, *Die Protestantische Ethik* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 8. Aufl. 1991), pp. 40ff.

[7] R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 240. – Mendicants: members of a religious order living mainly on charitable donations (alms).

[8] David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), p. 523.

And yet, even in his undisguised ambition to be successful, to make a lot of money, to rise in society, ultimately even to gain power, this 'workaholic' still finds himself rooted in the Protestant tradition. For Protestants – and again, especially Calvinists – could view success as a visible sign of God's grace. Given that it is man's duty in the divine order of the world to answer his 'calling' (i.e. his profession) as well as he can, it follows that any success he might achieve is itself part of that divine order – ultimately, it is God's will. The logic was reinforced by the Calvinists' belief in Providence: a successful enterprise, the reasoning went, had been intended to succeed by God in the first place. In this way, acquiring wealth lost any bad odour it may have carried and became a form of worshipping God, similar to hard work. And again, it is easy to see how the formula of 'success as worship' was eventually turned into the worship of success that is so characteristic of American attitudes today (and not just American ones, it may be added). Consider, for example, what has been observed about sports in the USA:

> American sports are becoming more competitive and more profit-oriented. As a result, playing to win is emphasized more than playing for fun. This is true from the professional level all the way down to the level of children's Little League sports teams, where young players are encouraged by such slogans as 'A quitter never wins; a winner never quits,' and 'never be willing to be second best.'[9]

Arguably, the marked individualism that characterises so much of American thought, together with Protestant work ethics and the consecration of success, are the most profound differences to the European tradition, or at any rate to its main stream. Most Americans seem to believe strongly in the individual's ability to improve and so to better his or her situation. As a consequence, the individual's fate lies

[9] Fiedler, Reimer, and Norman-Risch, *America in Close-Up,* p. 248.

entirely in his or her own hands – you have nobody else to blame but yourself. Not that this is entirely alien to European thought (and politics); but there has always co-existed an alternative approach which held that the individual's lot depends on circumstance as much as on character. The lack of such an alternative may explain why the United States is the only industrialised nation without any socialist movement worth speaking of. Trade unions – 'labor unions' in US diction – do exist, but they gained official recognition comparatively late (in the thirties), and what is more, they have never developed anything like a political programme; socialist thinking just has not gained a foothold in America.

Accordingly, problems of unemployment and poverty are approached from a completely different angle; and again, this approach has its root deep down in Puritan tradition. If the greatest of all evils is considered to be idleness; if the poor are seen as the victims not of unfortunate circumstances, but of their own 'wicked ways'; then charity in the traditional sense is quite obviously wrong: it adds to the problem rather than alleviating it. Giving aid to people in need is tantamount to pampering them, spoiling them even more than they are anyway. In the Puritans' eyes charity, hitherto considered a virtue, thus became an indulgence, if not a sin. The right course would be to make the poor work, and if there has to be any help, it should only enable them to earn a living for themselves. In the modern world, the sentiment is usually cloaked in phrases such as the 'poverty trap' meaning that once below the poverty line, people may be induced to stay there in order to benefit from relief programmes – the gist of the argument being that these programmes should be cut back. No, exclaims David Landes, discussing the lot of poor countries in today's

global economy, ‘what counts is work, thrift, honesty, patience, tenacity.’[10]

For a long period in history, Protestantism was very much the religion – or, in modern terms, the ideology – of the rising middle classes. Both the saintliness of success, or of wealth (in business, the two are synonymous), and the proposed cure for poverty must have been grist to the mill of businessmen, as they still are today. The same could be said of Protestant work ethics. At the same time, one cannot help but notice the deeply right-wing, conservative nature of certain religious movements in the United States, and the way some popular preachers quite unashamedly amass a fortune along the way, a fact that does not seem to trouble their followers in the least. Of course, this is not something the American Dream explicitly aims at; but it illustrates the intimate connection that exists, for many Americans, between piety on the one hand and any form of success on the other: a testimony to the Protestant heritage.

[10] Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations,* p. 523. See also Tawney on “The New Medicine for Poverty,” *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism,* pp. 251ff.

3

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

On 19 April 1775 a detachment of British troops was confronted by a group of armed colonists, so called Minute Men, at the village of Lexington, near Boston. A shot rang out; and even if it was not really 'heard around the world', as the American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson should later claim, the skirmish that followed did signal the beginning of the colonists' rebellion against their motherland – the War of Independence (1775-1783) or, as some historians prefer to call those tumultuous events, the American Revolution.

This is not the place to relate the rather complicated story leading to the settlers' rebellion, nor of the war itself. What we have to focus on are ideas: in particular, those ideas that may have entered the American Dream. Whatever the motives for the rebellion may have been – and as we know today, they were much more complex, even contradictory than contemporary rhetoric made them out to be – it is certainly true that the war offered the thirteen colonies unique chances. For one thing, the long and arduous struggle forged them into a unity that would have been unthinkable before.

> In it a nation was born and discovered its identity, its destiny. Without the disasters (the several occasions when all was nearly lost) and the suffering, as well as the triumphs, the American people as such [...] might never have

> come into being. Too early success might have left a handful of squabbling little states, under the informal and treacherous tutelage of France and Spain, clinging to the seaboard while the great continent behind them was developed by the peoples of Canada, Louisiana and Mexico. As it happened, the war produced a more remarkable outcome than any of the might-have-beens.[1]

At the same time, the bid for independence also opened the way for something that had inspired the American Dream from the very beginning: building a new nation, a 'New Jerusalem', even if in the eighteenth century the motivating force was not so much religious but rather political, inspired by the Enlightenment in Great Britain and France. As a contemporary was quick to observe, the Americans were 'the first people whom Heaven has favoured with an opportunity of deliberating upon, and choosing, the forms of government under which they shall live.'[2]

The major step towards independence undoubtedly came with the Declaration of Independence, proclaimed on 4 July 1776. Nominally, it was to be drawn up by a committee of prominent public figures, Benjamin Franklin among them; but in the end, it was chiefly one man, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), who left his mark on the document. The greater part of the declaration is given to listing the colonists' past grievances as well as the English monarch's wrongdoings as perceived by the Americans. Therefore, it is a strangely defensive document, designed to give an apology for what must have been, at the time, a step into the unknown. In the second paragraph, however, Jefferson spelled out some of the more basic assumptions behind the colonists' rebellious stance.

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that

[1] Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA,* pp. 167f.

[2] Quoted *ibid.,* p. 167.

> among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.[3]

Quite obviously, this expressed basic sentiments of the political enlightenment as developed, among others, by John Locke in England, and Jefferson himself reportedly admitted that there was not much new in the declaration. Still, there was a fundamental difference to political thinking in Europe: in America, such ideas were about to be realised. From an European point of view, some of the notions put forward in the Declaration of Independence were highly subversive: most conspicuously perhaps the concept of equality, or the suggestion that the sovereign derives his powers from the consent of his subjects (the 'social contract' as conceived by many enlightenment thinkers and underlying practically all modern political thought in Europe and America). Usually, attempts to transform a society along such radically new lines encounter stiff resistance from the old order, in which case 'nation builders' feel they have to carry out some ruthless demolition before they can embark on their more constructive schemes (as happened in France after 1789 and in the Soviet Union after 1917). The Founding Fathers in America were lucky in facing no such obstacles, or only few and weak ones, whereas some of the concepts that might have appeared revolutionary to Europeans were already well entrenched in American society and institutions. It should be remembered that by the time independence was declared, 169 years had elapsed since the first permanent English settlement (Jamestown, Virginia,

[3] Quoted from Richard D. Heffner, *A Documentary History of the United States* (New York: Mentor Books, 6th ed. 1999), pp. 9f.

1607). Even if change in those centuries was not as rapid as it has been since the Industrial Revolution, there had still been time enough for a new and distinctive political culture to develop: 'Britain's colonists might, and in practice frequently did, insist on their rights as Englishmen, but they were also aware that their own histories and traditions set them apart from Englishmen at home. In particular, they cherished their right to regulate their own affairs, through their elected assemblies, and not to have laws and taxes thrust on them by the mother country.'[4]

Once independence had been won, the colonies were faced by the all too predictable problem of how to organise their affairs from then on. The answer they eventually came up with was a completely new constitution, drafted by a Constitutional Congress in 1787 and ratified in 1788. Without going into detail, we can discern three major principles in the document: the system of 'checks and balances', the federal principle, and the democratic principle.

(1) The renowned system of 'checks and balances' relies on the division of powers within the federal government itself. The constitution provides for three such powers or branches, as they are also called.

Legislative Branch	*Executive Branch*	*Judicial Branch*
CONGRESS • House of Representatives (435 members) • Senate (100 members)	PRESIDENT VICE-PRESIDENT	SUPREME COURT

Each of the three branches can alter or even overthrow decisions made by the other branches; the idea being that none of them should ever

[4] Peter Marshall and Ian Walker, "The First New Nation," in *Introduction to American Studies*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley (Harlow: Pearson Education, 3rd ed. 1998), p. 46.

gain too much power for itself, and certainly not enough to permanently disturb the delicate balance between the institutions. At the same time, the system is seen as a safeguard against rash or all too populistic measures, a danger that loomed large in the minds of some of the Founding Fathers. In this sense it could be said the constitution even contains a safeguard against too much democracy.

(2) There is also a horizontal division of powers between the federal government (in Washington, D.C.) and the states of the Union. These states have always been rather jealous of central government, ceding powers only reluctantly. Europeans tend to forget that the United States is actually made up of 50 individual states, each with its own legislative body (the State Congress) and hence its own laws. This is why it depends on which state you are in 'where, when and at what age you can legally drink; whether you may carry a concealed weapon, own fireworks, or legally gamble; how old you have to be to drive; whether you will be killed in the electric chair, by lethal injection or not at all, and how bad you have to be to get yourself in such a fix; and so on', as the journalist Bill Bryson recently complained, only half-jokingly.[5]

(3) Nevertheless, the constitution also promoted democratic principles on a strictly national scale. It did so by providing for representatives to be elected by popular vote, rather than through state legislatures (since 1913, this has also applied to Senators); and the same is true for the president although in his case, the process runs through two consecutive steps involving electors in the so-called Electoral College. In this way, the federal government in Washington came to be seen as a national body, and its politics became a national affair. At the same time, elections at all levels helped to ingrain

[5] Bill Bryson, "The States Explained," in *Notes from a Big Country* (London: Black Swan, 1999), p. 156.

democratic principles in American life. In fact, it is not just political representatives that are subjected to the vote of the public; the same applies to judges, attorneys and senior law enforcement officers (the 'sheriffs').

It has often been noted with admiration that the US constitution of 1788, although only a ten-page document, is still in force today; it has proved its worth in many a crisis, and it has also proved to be highly adaptable to changing conditions. Although no provisions were made for a change of the original text, there is a procedure for the ratification of 'amendments', and the first ten of these came into force as early as 1791, constituting the so-called 'American Bill of Rights'. It contains guarantees for the individual's rights and liberties, such as the freedom of religion, speech, press, and peaceful assembly (1st Amendment), or the right to a fair and speedy trial, in most cases by jury (5th-7th Amendments). The 2nd Amendment insists that the right to 'keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed'. The reason for this is all too often forgotten, namely the Colonials' experience that a 'well regulated militia' – such as the Minute Men at Lexington, for example – was 'necessary to the security of a free State.'[6] Whether today's militias, always at the forefront of the campaign to preserve the 2nd Amendment, fulfil this purpose may be open to debate.

At the time the constitution was drafted, American society was not quite the same as it is today: apart from the fact that it was much smaller, it was predominantly agricultural both in structure and in outlook. Therefore, it was assumed that citizens would vote as more or less independent individuals, not as members of a mass party; and this assumption in turn was based on the fact that differences in wealth and status were much smaller. Accordingly, in the young nation the

[6] Heffner, *A Documentary History of the United States,* pp. 30ff. To date, there have been 27 amendments to the constitution.

concept of ‘democracy’ was taken to be more or less synonymous with the concept of equality. One of the most prominent foreigners ever to comment on the United States, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, could say of his visit (May 1831 to February 1832): ‘Amongst the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people.’

> I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less empire over civil society than over the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce. The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived, and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.

Consequently, his much quoted book *Democracy in America* (first published in 1835) offers an extended study of how such an egalitarian society works, tracing its influences from the intellectual life down to everyday manners.

> The citizen of the United States is taught from infancy to rely upon his own exertions, in order to resist the evils and the difficulties of life; he looks upon the social authority with an eye of mistrust and anxiety, and he claims its assistance only when he is unable to do without it. This habit may be traced even in the schools, where the children in their games are wont to submit to rules which they have themselves established, and to punish misdemeanors which they have themselves defined. The same spirit pervades every act of social life. If a stoppage occurs in a thoroughfare, and the circulation of vehicles is hindered, the neighbors immediately form themselves into a deliberative body; and this extemporaneous assembly gives rise to an executive power, which remedies the inconvenience before anybody has thought of recurring to a pre-existing authority superior to that of the persons immediately concerned.[7]

[7] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Specially edited and abridged by Richard D. Heffner, New York: Mentor New American Library, 1984), p. 26 and p. 95.

More significantly perhaps, there also evolved a new egalitarian view of public office, postulating that 'all men were essentially of equal talents, that each American of normal intelligence was capable of holding any position in government, and that democracy required a rotation in office to prevent the development of an untouchable and undemocratic political bureaucracy.'[8] This period in the history of the United States – roughly, the 1820s and 1830s – is usually labelled as 'Jacksonian democracy' after the highly popular President Andrew Jackson (1767-1845, 'Old Hickory' to his followers, president 1829-1837). On the day of his inauguration, 'the White House was invaded by a triumphant mob, which snatched all the refreshments meant for its betters and was only ever got outside again because tubs of punch were placed alluringly on the lawns.'[9] Notwithstanding such egalitarian zeal, Jacksonian democracy also saw the birth of mass parties complete with party machines and professionally managed election campaigns. To pay for all this, the so-called 'spoils system' was installed. After each election, all available political and administrative posts were filled with followers of the victorious party: 'to the victor belong the spoils', as the saying went. In a sense, even this system served the egalitarian spirit of the times, providing as it did for what would nowadays be called job rotation: a 'forthright expression of the simple democratic instinct for replacing office holders whose party had been repudiated with those who were more clearly "the people's choice".'[10] Indeed, the enthusiasm for equality went so far that thoughtful observers started to wonder whether it might not before long endanger the Americans' liberties; the fear was that 'King Numbers' (i.e. majority rule) might be

[8] Heffner, *A Documentary History of the United States,* p. 99.

[9] Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA,* p. 273.

[10] Heffner, *A Documentary History of the United States,* p. 99.

capable of turning into a sovereign just as despotic as any other in history.

And today? It can hardly be claimed that equality still is uppermost in Americans' minds when they think of democracy; rather, they tend to associate it with freedom, with free elections, presumably also with wealth, maybe even peace. One of the reasons for this change in outlook may have been the Cold War when democracy and liberty were perceived as being in sharp contrast to and competition with the ostentatiously egalitarian system in the Soviet bloc. No wonder that equality lost much of its status as a democratic value. In any case, it would not have served propaganda purposes very well, for the simple reason that American society had demonstrably moved away from the Jacksonian ideal of equality, towards increasing inequality; and what is more, this tendency, so far from being regretted, was considered to be in line with what American society ought to be, and what ought to be expected – a turnaround that will have to be discussed in a later chapter.

For the time being let it suffice to say that in the eyes of most Americans, the prime asset of their political system seems to be that they do not have to bother about it. It has often been noted before that Americans display an almost instinctive suspicion of government and politicians.

> They especially tend to dislike 'those fools in Washington' who spend their tax money and are always trying to 'interfere' in their local and private concerns. Many would no doubt agree with the statement that the best government is the one that governs least. Polls show that only a fourth of those asked want the federal government to do more to solve the country's problems. Neighborhoods, communities, and states have a strong pride in their ability to deal with their problems themselves, and this feeling is especially strong in the West.[11]

[11] Stevenson, *American Life and Institutions,* p. 47.

This observation is borne out by notoriously low voter turn-out, even in presidential elections. No doubt it could be argued that in the last analysis, this is what freedom is all about. On the other hand, sceptics fear that the American people are ready to sell their right of self-government – which had inspired their predecessors throughout the centuries – simply for convenience. As for equality, it remains to be seen if it has been relegated from the American Dream for good; after all, the concept did surface unexpectedly in the past, inspiring huge programmes such as Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' in the 1930s or Lyndon B. Johnson's 'Great Society' in the 1960s.

4

THE FRONTIER EXPERIENCE

When Americans talk about the ‘frontier’, they do not just refer to the imaginary line that used to separate ‘civilisation’ (i.e. the European settlements) from ‘wilderness’; rather the term is used to designate a certain area on the civilised side of that line in which certain special conditions prevailed – not quite savage, one could say, but not quite ‘civilised’ either. In this sense, the ‘frontier’ is not just a purely historical concept; it also describes something like a state of mind. As such, it has become an integral part of the American Dream.

It has to be admitted that discussing the frontier experience is all but easy. In no field do people from abroad think they know more about America, and in no field their knowledge is more superficial, if not haphazard. The reason for this lopsided perception seems to be twofold. On the one hand the frontier existed for almost 300 years, from the time of the very first settlements in the early seventeenth century right up to 1890 when it was officially declared closed by the Superintendent of the U.S. Census. In the course of this long stretch of time, it changed location constantly, mainly by moving from the east to the west. Originally, the Appalachian mountains formed a natural barrier; later, the Mississippi was thought to offer an insurmountable obstacle against further westward expansion. However, before long the

Great Plains began to be settled and the frontier moved towards the Rocky Mountains. At the same time, it moved out towards the east from California. In a way, the process was mirrored by the construction of the first transcontinental railway which proceeded simultaneously from the east and the west; in 1869, the two legs met at Promontory Point in Utah. As the frontier moved on, it also changed its character. The image foreigners usually have in mind is based on a rather short period in history, from about 1860 to 1890, when the frontier was in its final phase. And even this snapshot, as it were, is grossly misrepresented due to the imperatives of the film industry.

On the other hand, any popular image of the West will inevitably be one that has been created and disseminated by Hollywood films. This highlights the second difficulty encountered when speaking about the frontier experience: nowhere, one feels, is fact more intimately interwoven with myth; and what is more, it has been so from a fairly early stage. American literature has been inspired by the frontier experience (as conceived by the authors) to a considerable extent, most notably maybe in James Fennimore Cooper's so-called 'Leather-stocking novels' in the first half of the nineteenth century. Later in the century, the indissoluble marriage between fact and fiction, between the 'real thing' and show business (an American characteristic in itself), was personified by a certain Bill Cody, one-time scout to the infamous General Custer in the Indian wars, who as Buffalo Bill achieved fame, not least in Europe, with his celebrated Wild West show. As we are not concerned with history here, at least not primarily, but with those ideas that have shaped the American Dream, it is not necessary to try and separate fiction from fact at every stage. From our point of view, the question to what extent the ideas we are discussing are historically accurate is of minor importance; it is enough that these ideas have actually made an impact in one way or another.

But what exactly could the frontier experience have been? It has been noted that two images, not necessarily conflicting, but certainly incongruent, reflect how Americans tend to view this aspect of their past.

> The first image is that of the self-reliant frontiersman. Armed with only an axe, a rifle, a Bible, and a strong will (and sometimes a bottle of whiskey against "snakebite"), he goes out into the wilderness alone and survives. He asks no man for help ("God helps them that help themselves"). The second historical image is that of the pioneer community, the groups that circled their wagons for protection, shared their food, and helped each other when things got rough. They came together to build each other's houses. They had great barn-raising parties in which everyone took part. All together helped to build the community school, hire the teacher, find the doctor, fight the fire and pay the sheriff. When a neighbor needed help, the help was there ("A friend in need is a friend indeed").[1]

In addition, one has to remember that for long periods of time loneliness and monotony were among the major problems on the frontier; human settlements were few and far between, and communications were rather bad. Frontier life was often described as 'bleak' by those who were subjected to the experience. Not surprisingly, visiting travellers were highly welcome as a change to the dreary and backbreaking routine as well as a source of news from the outside world.

> The brutal realities of the frontier also shaped this tradition of hospitality. Someone traveling alone, if hungry, injured, or ill, often had nowhere to turn except to the nearest cabin or settlement. It was not a matter of choice for the traveler or merely a charitable impulse on the part of the settlers. It reflected the harshness of daily life: if you didn't take in the stranger and take care of him, there was no one else who would. And someday, remember, you might be in the same situation.[2]

[1] Stevenson, *American Life and Institutions,* p. 74.

[2] op. cit., p. 127.

There were many outstanding personalities on the frontier who became legendary and thus helped to create the myth of the West, starting with Captain John Smith, leader of the first English settlers at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, and usually remembered in connection with the native American girl Pocahontas; another celebrated pioneer was Daniel Boone, who opened Kentucky to European settlement and later moved on to the Missouri area. Asked why he was leaving his beloved Kentucky, he is credited with the laconic answer, 'Too crowded'. (Reportedly, stepping out of his cabin one morning, he had seen smoke rise beyond the hills.) Davy Crocket achieved fame not only as a distinguished representative of the West in Congress, but also for his part in the battle of the Alamo (1836), where he died. Other names still remembered today are, for example, Jesse James or Kit Carson, not to forget prominent native Americans such as Tecumseh or Sitting Bull, to name only two. It may be equally instructive, however, to turn to more anonymous representatives. The following is taken from an account written in 1848 and describes so-called mountain men who earned their living as hunters and trappers in the far West.

> He lived on his own in a neolithic world far removed from the Steel Age civilization that had bred him. He brought along only a few of its tools: traps, rifle, knife, awl, powder and lead. [...] He owned a mule or horse or two and an Indian girl. He dressed in skins she worked up for him, and she had warm water ready for his feet when he came into his camp from wading the icy beaver streams. In the summer when trading caravans came from St. Louis he packed the spoils of his year's plunder to the great trappers rendezvous in the mountains, bartered it for a whoop and a holler and a howling hangover, and set out on the next long hunt. He floated on the rolling rivers in boats of skin or bark or rafts of logs. [...] Probably the mountain men surpassed the Indians in at least a number of the necessary skills of reading signs, hunting, living off a wild and ominous land, fighting and hiding and running like agile beasts, lying concealed in brush and rocks throughout a thirsty day if necessary, starving, stealing horses, going dirty, enduring sun and cold and cracking alkali. In some of these things they must have surpassed the Indians to survive, for the Indians were living at home, cushioned by the web of their established society, and the mountain

> men were interlopers with no support to back them up other than what they carried in their hands, so far in time and space from the established society from which they had sprung that they had all but forgotten its existence.[3]

In 1893, shortly after the frontier had officially been declared closed, a young historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, published a paper on 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History'. Among other things, he drew attention to the indispensable function the frontier had fulfilled in forming the nation.

> The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. [...] Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [...]. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. [...] Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a growth of independence on American lines.

But the most important effect of the frontier, Turner maintained, had been its 'promotion of democracy'.

> As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression.

Not surprisingly, Turner proceeded by pointing out certain 'intellectual traits' that had originated in the conditions of frontier life and continued to exert their influence even when the frontier itself had moved on.

[3] Quoted in Freese, *Viewfinder Special,* p. 65.

> The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom – these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.[4]

From what has been said so far it should be possible to deduce some of the more influential ingredients of the frontier experience such as

- extreme individualism, frequently referred to as 'rugged individualism';
- self-reliance, of individuals as well as of families and small communities;
- in the latter case, the frontier must also have fostered the spirit of mutual help and of volunteerism;
- inventiveness and a pragmatic 'can-do spirit';
- equality and, consequently, pronounced republicanism;
- plus a certain amount of *machismo.*[5]

As some of these concepts have been discussed before it should be easy to see how, on the one hand, American attitudes have been shaped by the frontier experience from the very outset, while on the other hand the frontier might also be viewed as something like a laboratory where the American Dream could be put into practice, tested, and adopted according to need. In no place, one is tempted to say, was the American Dream closer to coming true.

[4] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," as quoted in Heffner, *A Documentary History of the United States,* pp. 213-222.

[5] Cf., among others, Kearny Datesman, JoAnn Crandall, and Edward N. Kearny, *The American Ways,* pp. 64ff.

If this were accurate, however, it would prompt a startling question. After all, the frontier experience was far from idyllic; it also involved anarchy, crime, violence and murder on a considerable scale. Thus, even the rather picturesque account of mountain men quoted before has to be qualified; in the eyes of many contemporaries, these people were 'revengeful, blood-thirsty, drunkards, gamblers, regardless of the laws of *meum* and *tuum';* 'constantly exposed to perils of all kinds', it was observed, 'they become callous to any feeling of danger, and destroy human as well as animal life with as little scruple and as freely as they expose their own.'[6] Most notoriously, the violent nature of frontier life was revealed in the Indian Wars as campaigns against native American nations all too often ended in massacres like the one reported by a captain of the US army in 1861:

> The Navahos, squaws, and children ran in all directions and were shot and bayoneted. I succeeded in forming about twenty men. [...] I then marched out to the east side of the post; there I saw a soldier murdering two little children and a woman. I hallooed immediately to the soldier to stop. He looked up, but did not obey my order. I ran up as quick as I could, but could not get there soon enough to prevent him from killing the two innocent children and wounding severely the squaw. I ordered his belts to be taken off and taken prisoner to the post. [...] Meanwhile the colonel had given orders to the officer of the day to have the artillery brought out to open upon the Indians. The sergeant in charge of the mountain howitzers pretended not to understand the order given, for he considered it as an unlawful order; but being cursed by the officer of the day, and threatened, he had to execute the order or else get himself in trouble.[7]

Similar incidents repeated themselves again and again in what amounted to a campaign of outright genocide, right up to the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, which marked the irrevocable end of the Indian Wars (and coincided with that of the frontier).

[6] Quoted in Freese, *Viewfinder Special,* p. 67.

[7] Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (London: Pan Books, 1972), p. 16.

The evidence suggests that violence somehow plays a role in the American Dream. Of course, this is not meant to imply that the dream as such aims at a violent state of things; however, it would be equally wrong to claim that the American Dream excludes violence altogether. It certainly is not a pacifist's dream, and it has never been. The observation is borne out, first by a look across the border to Canada whose development, after all, took place under conditions that were comparable in some respects. Still, violence has never been such an integral part of Canadian life and attitudes as in the United States. 'During the Klondike gold rush at the turn of the century', it has been reported, 'prospectors came through Skagway, Alaska, one of the most violent towns in North America. Those who got out with money and supplies intact were robbed on the way back instead. When they reached the Canadian border, the Mounties confiscated their hand guns, and so Dawson, the centre of the Klondike, was one of the safest places in the world.'[8] Secondly, even a quick glance at American popular culture cannot fail to detect a striking obsession with violence. In Western films, there used to be a recurrent motif featuring a man who, for some reason, had vowed never to fight again, never to touch a gun again; invariably, events drive him to a point where he simply has to break his vow (and, needless to say, turns out to be an invincible fighter): 'Sometimes you've got to fight to be a man.' The point is not just that even the most well-meaning man cannot live in peace if others won't let him; it is also that in order to achieve an aim it may often be necessary to resort to violence. If the aim is desirable, the violence is wholly justified (and can be indulged in as far as the audience is concerned). As we all know, the message is driven home by an endless succession of run-of-the-mill Hollywood thrillers in which some

[8] Simon Hoggart, "Canada Dry," in *Canadian Mosaic / Mosaique Canadienne*, edited by Dr. Peter Klaus (Berlin: Cornelsen Verlag, 1993), p. 9.

brilliant super hero defeats an evil empire of some kind on his own. More disturbingly, the assumption that the 'good' ends justify almost any means even seems to govern certain areas of real life in modern America, particularly when it comes to maintaining law and order.

How powerful the image of the frontier hero still is, even today, and even at top level, may be illustrated by the following episode. When Henry Kissinger, one-time Secretary of State and highly esteemed if controversial foreign policy expert, was once asked about the secret of his success, he confessed after some hesitation that the main element had probably been his always acting alone: 'Americans admire that enormously. Americans admire the cowboy leading the caravan alone astride his horse, the cowboy entering a village or city alone on his horse. Without even a pistol, maybe, because he doesn't go in for shooting. He acts, that's all; aiming at the right spot at the right time. A Wild West tale, if you like.'[9]

[9] Interview with Oriana Fallaci, 1972, as quoted in Freese, *Viewfinder Special,* p. 211. – Kissinger (born 1923 in Germany) served as personal adviser to President Richard Nixon from 1968 to 1973 and then as Secretary of State until 1977. In 1973, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam (who declined the award).

5

RAGS TO RICHES

Picturesque as the frontier may have been, it was by no means the only place that offered opportunity to adventurous individuals, nor was it the most important one. As a matter of fact, very few frontiersmen actually managed to create lasting wealth for themselves, even if they did quite literally hit a goldmine. Real opportunity lay somewhere else, far behind the frontier, in parts where more civilised lifestyles prevailed. It has been observed that American history 'shows not a stream of would-be farmers flowing from the cities to the West, but instead a flood of disgruntled farmers seeking their fortunes in the city. Possibly twenty farmers moved to town for every industrial labourer who moved to the land, and ten farmers' sons went to the city for each who became the owner of a farm anywhere in the nation.'[1] Industry and commerce also offered a certain challenge for the adventurous, although of course of a completely different character; whereas its rewards were, at least when viewed with a cool head, richer and more lasting than at the frontier. There was a second frontier, it could be

[1] R A Burchell and R J Gray, "The Frontier West," in *Introduction to American Studies*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley (Harlow: Pearson Education, 3rd ed. 1998), pp. 115f.

argued with some justification, the ‘frontier’ of free enterprise. Its influence on American thought can hardly be denied; after all, the hope to get rich has been an integral part of the American Dream ever since it had been conceived, and presumably, the people who dreamed it most passionately were those who had to start from humble origins, who hoped to rise from dishwasher to millionaire or, as the saying goes, from ‘rags to riches’ – the stuff of the once popular novels by Horatio Alger. Even if they are not read anymore, the myth still engenders as much pride and patriotism in Americans as the fact that they live in a free country.

Discussing the significance of free enterprise, one ought to keep in mind a few very basic considerations. To begin with, ‘enterprise’ in the sense the word is generally used only came into being with the Industrial Revolution. Originating in Great Britain in the eighteenth century, it began to transform the American economy in the early 1800s. Later developments drastically changed the meaning of the word ‘free’ as used in terms such as ‘free enterprise’ or ‘free market’. The problem is that even today, these terms are still used in the old way – a constant source of confusion.

In its original sense, ‘free enterprise’ was associated with comparatively small businesses: a manufacturing plant for example, a single factory, or a commercial firm. They were usually run by the owner who most likely had founded them in the first place and who, by his personal skills, had secured such expansion as there may have been. In other words, business was highly personalised. The key figure was the businessman, the entrepreneur. Typically, these people were ‘self-made men, or at least men of modest origin who owed little to birth, family or formal higher education’, and this fact also bolstered their self-esteem so that they were ‘imbued with the ferocious and dynamic self-confidence of those whose own careers prove to them that divine providence, science and history have combined to present

the earth to them on a platter.'[2] They were driven by the desire to better their situation, i.e. to get rich; and they applied their ambition, their inventiveness, their restless, dynamic and innovative spirit to the task. At the same time they were willing to work tremendously hard and to live a comparatively frugal life, completely in line with Protestant ethics to which they usually subscribed wholeheartedly, ploughing most of the profits back into the business in order to facilitate further growth. Quite generally, their strictly utilitarian no-nonsense approach insisted on measuring absolutely everything in terms of monetary profit, and such terms alone. Of course, this rather single-minded conduct of business also implicated a certain degree of selfishness and ruthlessness. To put it in a nutshell, entrepreneurs tended to view themselves as being at war, although in their case it was the strictly economic strife better known as competition; and at war special laws apply, as everybody knows: it is not just allowed but absolutely vital to deceive your opponent, to outmanoeuvre him, in the end even to destroy him if you get the chance; whereas it is equally imperative that you are absolutely true to your own side, that you are even willing to sacrifice yourself for your friends and comrades-in-arms. This may explain why so many successful businessmen, while thoroughly cold-blooded and merciless in their business transactions, were lovingly devoted to their wives and their children.

At the same time, these people considered themselves superior members of society. Without their contribution, they argued, there would not be any jobs to begin with; and consequently, there would be neither wealth nor progress. If society was compared to a coach, the reasoning went, the worker could be viewed as the horse, whereas the entrepreneur saw himself as the 'driver, conductor, pathfinder, caterer

[2] E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848* (London: Abacus, 1995), p.228.

and provider of provender all rolled into one'.[3] There was some truth in these claims. In the decades before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the Northern states of the Union were bustling with energy. 'A delight in ingenious inventions and a shrewd sense of how to make money by them was [...] at least as common in New as in Old England', and although the Industrial Revolution had set in later than in Great Britain, it advanced at such a pace that 'it was not long before the Americans outstripped Britain, and the Yankee inventor became proverbial for his ingenuity.'

> Even as early as the War of the Revolution [1775-1783] a hopeful engineer had demonstrated a practicable steamboat to George Washington, and before the Battle of New Orleans [1815], thanks to the genius of Robert Fulton, such boats were already common on the Mississippi and its navigable tributaries. By 1846 Cunard had established the first transatlantic steamship line. In 1844 Samuel Morse set up, between Washington and Baltimore, the first electric telegraph, and flashed along the wire the message: 'What has God wrought?' In 1854, at a great industrial exhibition in Paris, an American threshing machine was exhibited which beat all comers: it could thresh 740 litres of wheat in half an hour, which was not only better than six men (60 litres) but better than its nearest competitor, an English machine, which could thresh 410 litres in the time. Although the steam railway was an entirely British invention, the speed and completeness of its application to North American conditions was uniquely astounding. The first American railroad was the Baltimore & Ohio, opened in 1830. By the time Fort Sumter fell [the beginning of the Civil War, 1861] there were 31,256 miles of railroad track in the United States. Soon after the Civil War, Thomas A. Edison got busy improving the telephone, inventing the phonograph (or gramophone in British English) and perfecting the electric light bulb.[4]

[3] Harold Perkins, *Origins of Modern English Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 222. My portrait of early entrepreneurs owes much to Perkins's chapter on the "Entrepreneurial Ideal," pp. 221ff. Although both he and Hobsbawm (see note 2 above) talk about Great Britain, much of what they say applies to any society in the process of industrialisation. After all, just as the Industrial Revolution spread to many parts of the world, so did that new type of economic agent, the entrepreneur.

[4] Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA,* p. 378.

Significantly, it was a man from the Northern states who improved the cotton gin (a device for mechanically reaping cotton) to an extent that should radically transform the society of the Southern states; in fact, the rapid industrialisation of the North was among the major causes for the rift that should eventually plunge the Union into civil war. Another decisive development that ought to be mentioned was the so-called 'American system of manufacture' by which parts could be produced so accurately that they became replaceable for the first time (although it was still necessary to apply finishing touches by hand) – a major step towards mass production.

As we have seen, the period before the Civil War was also one that cherished the ideal of equality. At that time, industrialisation was not seen to conflict with this ideal. True, the factory owner had to hire his workers, and there were some voices that compared the 'labour market' to a slave market. However, it was argued that the position of a workman was not permanent; on the contrary, it could serve a thrifty worker to save enough means to set up a business himself. If a man remains dependent on somebody else's wages throughout his life, Abraham Lincoln once remarked, it is not because he is a slave for life but because he prefers it that way; otherwise, he could easily become self-employed.[5]

All this changed dramatically in the years after the Civil War. The main agent were improved communications: railways had been developed rapidly during the war and continued to be built at breathtaking speed, together with telegraph lines. The result was that hitherto isolated economies were drawn into a single huge market that transcended state boundaries and traditional regions. Increased size

[5] Cf. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1988). Unfortunately I had to resort to the German translation, *Für die Freiheit sterben: Die Geschichte des amerikanischen Bürgerkrieges* (München, Leipzig: List Verlag, n.d.), pp. 10ff. and p. 23.

called for a completely new economic structure, for new types of companies, and for new methods of management. Thus, the age of huge corporations was ushered in, of trusts and monopolies. As usual, a period of economic revolution created enormous opportunities for individuals with sufficient vision, vigour and perseverance who were lucky enough to be at the right place at the right time. Such men were, among others, John D. Rockefeller, J. Pierpoint Morgan, or Andrew Carnegie – so-called ‘robber barons’ who eventually amassed colossal fortunes in oil, banking, and steel respectively. To understand their role it may help to have a closer look at the career of one of them, John Davison Rockefeller.

Born in 1839, he grew up in Cleveland, Ohio; his childhood was rather poor as his father had deserted the family. Throughout his life he was a devout Baptist. Initially, he took up work as an accountant, but soon he founded his first business; his hour came when oil was discovered in a small place called Titusville, Pennsylvania, at the Western foot of the Appalachians. This resulted in a ‘black bonanza’ with hundreds of drillers flocking into the area in order to make a fortune quickly. It soon emerged, however, that the ‘black gold’ differed from the real stuff in that it had to be refined and distributed to the consumers. Rockefeller began to buy up refineries, and by 1872, his newly established company, the Standard Oil Company, controlled practically all the refineries around Cleveland. This enabled the company to negotiate specially favoured rates with the railroads. It acquired pipelines and terminal facilities, purchased competing refineries in other cities, and expanded its markets both in the United States and abroad. By 1882 Rockefeller’s Standard Oil companies, meanwhile reorganised into a ‘trust’, were close to holding a monopoly of the oil business in the United States. In this way, it has been said, he ‘left his stamp on an age that lauded inventors, not administrators.’ As he himself was to claim later, ‘Our nation was in a

state of transition from agriculture to wholesale manufacture and commerce, and we had to invent methods and machinery as we went along.' Rockefeller has been singled out as 'the greatest business administrator America has produced' and 'the single most important figure' in shaping not only the oil industry, but also 'in the history of America's industrial development and the rise of the modern corporation.'[6]

By creating his near-monopoly Rockefeller had to violate another cherished principle of the 'free market'. Today, the belief that competition is beneficial has achieved the status of an economic dogma. It is worth noting, however, that since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when big business began to develop, 'the most significant revolt against free-market capitalism came not from reformers or zealous ideologues but from businessmen who couldn't control the maddening fluctuations in the marketplace.' In the traditional economy of small-scale businesses, 'they had to improvise the rules of the game as they went along.' Constantly pestered by overproduction, Rockefeller, like some of his contemporaries,

> didn't see how they could build vast, enduring industries in a volatile economy disrupted by recessions, deflation, and explosive boom-and-bust cycles, and he decided to subjugate markets instead of responding endlessly to their changing price signals. Thus, Rockefeller and other industrial captains conspired to kill competitive capitalism in favor of a new monopoly capitalism.[7]

Rockefeller should always insist that his business practices, deplorable as they might appear to others, were developed in order to help an industry suffering from the effects of cut-throat competition. 'It was forced upon us,' Rockefeller reportedly said of his Standard Oil

[6] Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (London: Warner Books, 1999), p. 228.

[7] op. cit., p. 148.

trust. 'We had to do it in self-defence. The oil business was in confusion and daily growing worse. Someone had to make a stand.' At the same time, he saw quite clearly that setting up extensive, complex business organisations controlling the whole life of a product – so-called vertical trusts – had revolutionised the way of doing business all over the world. 'The day of combination is here to stay', he is quoted as saying with considerable foresight. 'Individualism has gone, never to return'.[8]

Rockefeller and his associates acquired fortunes on a scale that is hard to comprehend by lesser mortals; in the mid-1890s his income was calculated to be a stupefying $ 10 million per year, at a time when the average American was earning less than ten dollars a week.[9] No wonder that he was one of the most controversial persons of his time and at the centre of a number of legal and political battles. After all, it was not only individualism that perished in the 'Gilded Age' of the robber barons, but the ideal of equality as well. In 1913, it has been estimated, two individuals, John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan, between them owned 20 per cent of the national wealth, while the top two per cent of the population procured no less than 60 per cent of the national income.[10] Contemporaries complained with some justification that the rule of the game had been changed, and there were even fears for the democratic system of the USA. Hence repeated attempts, most notably by Theodore Roosevelt (president 1901-1909), to pass and enforce anti-trust legislation; none of these attempts was wholly successful – Standard Oil survived, as did other business empires.

[8] loc. cit.

[9] op. cit., p. 396.

[10] Hermann Kinder and Werner Hilgemann, *dtv-Atlas zur Weltgeschichte Band II: Von der Französischen Revolution bis zur Gegenwart* (München: dtv, 1966), p. 117.

Hand in hand with the economic transformation, a significant modification took place in the way the American Dream was perceived. The change was instigated by a set of ideas which, though not American in origin, came to influence American thought to an extraordinary degree – Social Darwinism. The Englishman Charles Darwin (1809-1882) had ventured to explain evolution, basically by invoking two agents: the incidental alteration in the genetic set-up of an organism, i.e. mutation, and the subsequent selection of such changes according to their increased or decreased fitness in the natural environment. Another Englishman, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) transformed these strictly biological theses into a social concept. It was Spencer, not Darwin, who coined the phrase of the 'survival of the fittest'. According to his view, it has been observed, society was an arena in which men met to compete.

> The terms of the struggle were established by the market. Those who won were rewarded with survival and, if they survived brilliantly, with riches. Those who lost went to the lions. This competition not only selected the strong but developed their faculties and ensured their perpetuation. And in eliminating the weak, it ensured that they would not reproduce their kind. Thus, the struggle was socially benign and, to a point at least, the more merciless, the more benign its effects, for the more weaklings it combed out.[11]

The time when the tremendous fortunes of John D. Rockefeller and his ilk were made was also a period of widespread poverty and degradation. It could hardly be overlooked that wealth was acquired at a cost – to others; and frequently, the techniques were rather rude. According to the Social Darwinist doctrine, none of this had to lie on the rich man's conscience: natural selection was at work. As Rockefeller once explained to a Baptist Sunday School class: 'The

[11] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (London: Penguin Books, 4th edition with a new introduction 1991), p. 48.

growth of a large business is merely the survival of the fittest [...]. The American Beauty Rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it.' As with the rose, so with Rockefeller's monopoly: 'This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working-out of a law of nature and a law of God.'[12] Equally important, Social Darwinism served to legitimise the sons of the big business tycoons, the heirs, as it could be claimed that the founder's qualities were genetically transmitted to the following generations.

This is a far cry form the concept of equality as originally conceived in the New World. Still, talking to Americans today, one will be surprised how firmly Social Darwinism is rooted in their minds. Of course, the ideal of equality has not been relinquished completely; instead, it has strictly been reduced to equality at the starting line, and only there. Everyone has the same chance, it is still claimed; but the chance is now one in a million, comparable to the chance of tadpoles in a puddle to metamorphose into a frog. There can never be more than a handful of Bill Gates in one generation. And even the belief in equal opportunities may not be as well founded these days as it used to be: while according to one source about one third of all the wealth in modern America is owned by not more than one per cent of the population, about 'one-third of the 100 wealthiest individuals in 1993 got there by inheriting their wealth rather than creating it'; and even that number 'perhaps understates the importance of inheritance in determining the distribution of income. According to surveys, two-thirds of the top 1 percent of wealthholders in America inherited a substantial fraction of their property.'[13]

[12] Quoted *ibid.,* p. 51.

[13] Paul A. Samuelson and William D. Nordhaus, *Economics: International Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 15th ed. 1995), p. 368f.

Two final remarks, one concerning John D. Rockefeller, the other Social Darwinism: From about 1890 onwards, Rockefeller gradually withdrew from business – it was handed over to his son, John Davison Junior – and devoted himself to charity. It has to be said that this was in line not just with his own convictions, but also with those of other tycoons of the time, most notably perhaps Andrew Carnegie's. 'The man who dies thus rich', Carnegie once wrote, 'dies disgraced.'[14] Rockefeller not only set up the University of Chicago but, equally consequential, the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research (later renamed Rockefeller University) and the Rockefeller Foundation, whose contribution to science can hardly be exaggerated. When he died in 1937, he had given away more than $500 million.

Regarding Social Darwinism it is important to realise that like so many other attempts to apply a scientific concept to social affairs, this is a fallacy. What Social Darwinists take to be selection is not performed by nature, let alone by God, but by human beings. Social convention, and nothing else, determines what constitutes 'fitness' and therefore, who we consider 'fit' and who not. Not for nothing did the Austrian Nobel Prize winner, Konrad Lorenz, warn that this kind of 'intra-specific' selection can very well be detrimental to the species; and he used to point to the accelerating pace of modern life with all its consequences such as ulcers, high blood pressure, or neuroses, as its most stupid results.[15]

[14] Andrew Carnegie, "Wealth," as quoted in Heffner, *A Documentary History of the United States*, p. 209.

[15] Konrad Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse: Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression* (Wien: Dr. G. Borotha-Schoeler Verlag, 1963), p. 57.

PERSPECTIVES

The 1890s were a decisive period in American history: not only did the frontier cease to exist, as we have seen; both the economy and the structure of society underwent a profound transformation from individualism towards corporatism, from the equality of independent farmers and entrepreneurs to the hierarchical structure of 'big business'. Economic reorganisation along the lines discussed in the previous chapter propelled the United States to the forefront in terms of industrial production, and that meant that sooner or later it simply would have to assume a role as a first-class world power. Adapting to such a role ideologically was made easier by the fact that once the internal frontier had vanished, Americans started to turn to the world at large and to seek adventure abroad.[1] At the same time, it can be argued, the American Dream had more or less acquired its definite shape. In later years, there may have been shifts in emphasis, and there may also have been variations in the way certain ideas were interpreted; apart from that, however, it is hard to make out any new ideas that may have entered the Dream in the course of the twentieth century.

[1] For a more detailed discussion of this process see the chapter "End of a Dream: The United States 1890-1902" in Barbara Tuchmann, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War 1890-1914* (London and Basingstoke: Papermac, 1997), pp. 117-167.

That century has also been called the 'American century'; a description that is apt considering the astonishing rise of a nation that previously had been very much at the margin of world events – a rise that would lead not just to prominence, but to considerable global influence, at least as far as popular culture is concerned, and in the final years of the century even to worldwide dominance. Obviously, such an ascent makes fascinating history; but history in the usual sense is not what we have been concerned with in these pages. Rather, we have focused on the history of ideas. If it is true that by the end of the nineteenth century the basic ideas of the American Dream had been formed and had taken hold of people's imagination, our story has come to its end. The rest, one is tempted to say, is history – the familiar history of 'real' events, that is, of political, economic, and social developments.

As we were tracing the evolution of the American Dream through the history of the United States, it has become quite clear that the popular perception of that dream is not identical with the version that the creator of the term, James Truslow Adams, set forth. This may sound like a contradiction in terms – after all, it could be argued, if Adams coined the term, we will have to accept his definition – but a closer look will reveal that such a divergence is to be expected. Adams, we said earlier, wrote at the time of the Great Depression following the stock market crash in 1929, when unemployment and destitution on a gigantic scale seemed to tear apart the fabric of society and worse still, they seemed to threaten everything the United States had ever stood for – opportunity, freedom, equality, self-reliance – and thus, in the end, the American Dream itself. Adams's view chimed in with the mood of the times. The thirties bred a conviction that should influence the history of the twentieth century more profoundly than is usually acknowledged: it was the belief that social planning would be superior to the *laissez-faire* of traditional capitalism. In Europe, this

concept is associated with the name of the English economist, John Maynard Keynes. Although his ideas never gained a similar influence across the Atlantic, the Great Depression caused a major turnaround in politics even in the United States: President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal initiated government intervention in economy on a vast scale, both to fuel growth by public spending and to alleviate the lot of the poor by social programmes. It has to be said, however, that Roosevelt's approach was never supported wholeheartedly, mainly because it was considered to go against basic American values such as self-reliance. This is where John Truslow Adams's vision conflicts with what most Americans would regard as their 'dream' today. For the same reason, another ambitious programme, the 'Great Society' as implemented by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s, did not really catch on with the voters. It is doubtful if a majority of Americans would still subscribe to Adams's assertion that 'we cannot become a great democracy by giving ourselves up as individuals to selfishness, physical comfort, and cheap amusement.' It may even be doubted if they would agree with the notion that the American Dream is not 'a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.'[2] Dreaming of a 'social order', and a more egalitarian one at that? There is too much in American society today that goes against such ideas; not just in the actual structure but – even more important for us here – in what is being thought and discussed. This is particularly true for any concept of social equality, as has been demonstrated.

[2] See above, pp. 3ff.

The American Dream certainly has played a role in the United States' rise to power. The problem is that as the United States entered the stage of world politics, its self-image of being profoundly different from other nations was gradually shattered. Its involvement in World War I highlights the dilemma quite clearly. When the US entered the war in 1917, the pronounced aim was 'to make the world safe for democracy', and in doing so, it was hoped that this would be 'the war to end all wars.' It can hardly be denied that President Woodrow Wilson, together with many of his compatriots, honestly believed in these aims;[3] and yet, a major reason for America's war effort was the fact that by 1917, France and Great Britain were so heavily indebted that a German victory – which seemed to be within reach at that time – would have meant enormous losses to American banks. 'In the last resort, the United States went to war so that America could remain prosperous and rich Americans could grow richer.'[4]

The same pattern repeated itself over and over again throughout the twentieth century. It cannot be denied that the American Dream inspired much of what the United States did and achieved; unfortunately, the opposite can hardly be denied either: that whatever the United States did, there always was a seamier side as well. Reference to the Dream provided a powerful driving force behind US politics, both at home and abroad, and at the same time it served as a smokescreen behind which rather base motives could be hidden. One more example may help to illustrate this ambiguity. The involvement in Vietnam certainly was one of the darkest episodes in American history, not just because it was such a blatant failure, but also because

[3] For a recent confirmation of this view see Simon Heffer, "Battering the Boche," Review of *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* by Margaret MacMillan, *Literary Review* (September 2001), 10-11.

[4] A J P Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 171.

it developed into a ‘dirty war’ in which the means applied eventually eroded the ends ostensibly being pursued. For one thing, it was claimed that freedom had to be defended against Communist aggression. Yet South Vietnam was anything but ‘free’; it was ruled by a succession of extremely corrupt regimes without the least regard for their subjects’ rights or wellbeing. Rather than winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of the Vietnamese, the United States resorted to area bombing and the spraying of vast stretches of jungle with Agent Orange (an act of chemical warfare that caused horrible deformations in babies). What was worse, a substantial part of the American population seemed to support this kind of warfare, even to the extent of exonerating outright crimes. On the other hand, the second strongest opposition the Pentagon planners encountered, after that of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese on the ground, came from the anti-war movement at home. It staged massive demonstrations in which tens and even hundreds of thousands took part. In April 1967, for example, 400,000 marched on the United Nations building in Manhattan, and in October that year, a march of 50,000 ended in the night-long ‘Battle of the Pentagon’, a symbolic event in the history of the anti-war movement. Nevertheless, the policy of ostensibly defending freedom and democracy by supporting the most awfully dictatorial regimes can be traced throughout the Cold War, as any government or movement that was not held to be Communist was regarded as ‘our friend’. And again, every mean and dirty trick seemed to be justified in this kind of war.

In the sixties of the twentieth century, there was yet another attempt to reconcile reality with the ideals of the American Dream: the Civil Rights movement. Originally none of the professed ideals such as liberty or equality were meant for the slaves imported from Africa (nor for native Indians). Not even the Civil War (1861-1865) was really fought for the abolition of slavery, at least not at the beginning.

Opinion in the North was anything but unequivocally abolitionist. If slavery would save the Union, Abraham Lincoln reportedly said once, he would quite happily take up with it. When the slaves had been legally freed after the Unionist victory, they were far from being treated as equals; in the Southern states, discrimination and even oppression in one form or other continued well into the twentieth century. In the 1960s, Afro-Americans began to take action against this kind of treatment. Very soon they were joined by white activists from the North. They met fierce and all too often violent resistance. In 1963, 200,000 mainly Afro-American protesters took part in a peaceful March on Washington which culminated in a rally at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. At that occasion, the leader of the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr., held his famous speech that drew so much rhetorical power from its explicit reference to the American Dream.

> I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow. I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'
> I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.
> I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream... I have a dream that one day in Alabama, with its vicious racists [...], one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.[5]

[5] Quoted in Heffner, *A Documentary History of the United States,* pp. 413f.

There is a tendency for people from abroad either to idolise the United States or to condemn it. However, one thing should always be kept in mind, no matter what is being said by the media, or what the policy of the government in Washington may be at a given time: even within the United States there exists a constant tension between what is and what should be – in other words, between reality and the American Dream. The tension can be felt at all times, and it may surface in surprising places. Take for example the story of Doris Haddock, better known as Granny D, who celebrated her 90th birthday on 24 January 2000 in Cumberland, Maryland.

> It was not a quiet affair. She had walked over 3,000 miles across America to be there, and celebrated by delivering a heartfelt speech on electoral reform to a large crowd. She then shared a birthday cake with local activists and, sent on her way by thirty local people singing 'This Land is Your Land', set off again for Washington DC. There, she gave three rousing speeches outside the Capitol, and was arrested twice.

Her one-year trek across the continent had started at Pasadena, California, and was intended as a visible protest against the growing corruption in America's political system due to vast donations to the party machines by corporations and labour unions. Granny D's protest was taken seriously enough for her to be arrested, first for attempting to read out the Declaration of Independence in the Capitol, and then for trying to do the same with the Bill of Rights.

So far, this may sound like a story along the familiar lines of an exceptionally courageous (or obstinate) individual taking on the establishment. There is, however, a surprising twist. Granny D was taken to court over her demonstrations at the Capitol and duly sentenced, although only symbolically.

> In sentencing, Chief Judge Hamilton of DC federal district court said to her and her fellow demonstrators: 'As you know, the strength of our great country lies in its Constitution and her laws and in her courts. But more fundamentally, the strength of our great country lies in the resolve of her citizens to stand up for what is right when the masses are silent. And,

> unfortunately, sometimes it becomes the lot of the few, sometimes like yourselves, to stand up for what's right when the masses are silent, because not always does the law move so fast and so judiciously as to always be right. But given the resolve of the citizens of this great country, in time, however slowly, the law will catch up eventually.'

Talking about her trek across America, Granny D had once said that it was, 'of course, a fool's errand.' But, she continued, 'there are no impossible causes on this earth if they are good causes. My dream of political reform will come true. I may live to see it from this side of life, or I will smile to see it from the other side.'[6] There can be little doubt that James Truslow Adams would have sided with her.

[6] The story of Granny D is related by Noreena Hertz, *The Silent Takeover: Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy* (London: William Heinemann, 2001), pp. 89-93.

POSTSCRIPT

WHEN THE GUN IS MIGHTIER THAN GOD

IT WAS BY PURE COINCIDENCE that one night, zapping through the channels on my TV set, I hit upon a Western that caught my attention. At that time I did not even know its title. Only later, by means of a web search, did I find out that I had seen the German version of *Purgatory,* a film released in 1999 for cable TV. It is directed by Uli Edel and features a cast that may or may not be known to a wider audience, but certainly does not comprise any prominent stars. The screenplay is by a certain Gordon T. Dawson. The amazing thing about the film is that although it never pretends to be more than a run-of-the-mill sample of the Western genre, it comes with an intriguing twist. Because of this, it can be seen as highlighting certain tendencies in popular American culture; and it does so all the more lucidly as no such effect seems to have been intended at its conception. But then it is of course a well-known phenomenon that straight-forward and apparently unsophisticated representations of popular culture may tell us more about the stuff a civilisation is actually made of than more high-brow attempts in literature, in the arts, or in philosophy.

To say that *Purgatory* is a Western may look like giving the game away. After all, the genre has been milked for every conceivable plot

including, in later years, every conceivable variation on well-tried plots in order to achieve yet another surprising twist and yet another innovation. In fact, this may be regarded as one of the reasons why the genre has not been particularly fertile of late; although it could be argued with equal justification that the all too naive hero worship at the heart of the genre has also contributed to its demise. Not that hero worship as such had lost its prominent position in American popular culture, of course; but these days, the central characters tend to be so much more brutal and cynical than, say, thirty years ago that they can hardly be imagined in a classic Western. This means, in turn, that writing and producing a Western today meets with considerable difficulties. Not only must the conventions of the genre be adapted to contemporary tastes; we also expect variation, as ever in popular culture, a new spin on an old tale. Quite obviously, such considerations inspired the remarkable twists that characterise the plot of *Purgatory.*

The film starts conventionally enough. Fleeing a posse, a band of outlaws led by a character called Blackjack Britton ride into a small, quiet town called Refuge. The intruders are welcomed warmly and are offered food and accommodation, but at the same time warned not to swear. Refuge appears to be an exceptionally peaceful and civilised place as none of the residents, not even the sheriff, carry any weapons; they all go about their affairs in a strangely sober and determined manner. Gradually, the spectator comes to realise two things: First, that the major characters resemble famous figures out of Western lore, although they appear under different names. Sheriff Forrest, for example, can be identified as Wild Bill Hickok; others carry the features of Doc Holliday, Billy the Kid, or Jesse James.[1] Second,

[1] cf. “Purgatory (1999 TV),” *IMDb Internet Movie Database* (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0158131, Internet Movie Database Inc.), and “Purgatory (film),” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia* (http://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/Purgatory_(film)).

Refuge turns out not to be quite of this world. Indeed, it is a place where the legendary gunfighters – together with the rest of the population – have to spend a ten-year period of trial and purification. Above all, they strictly have to abstain from any form of violence. Those who cannot keep their temper are immediately summoned by an old native American who takes them away on his mule and tosses them into a nearby canyon filled with – exactly – infernal fire.

For the newly arrived outlaws, the town presents itself as an easy prey. The inhabitants have no choice but to bear their insults and humiliations. Inevitably, the situation escalates. Things come to a head when an innocent young maiden attracts the attention of one of the bandits. Eventually, the gunfighters of Refuge have to make a difficult decision: whether to turn their backs on the town and thus earn themselves salvation, or to rid the place of its invaders, at the peril of eternal damnation. This being a Western, they quite predictably opt for the latter. The result is a beautifully choreographed showdown. Needless to stress which side carries the day.

At this point, a viewer might get the impression that the plot could have been designed to convey a religious message or even, more accurately, an anti-religious message. Purgatory, after all, is a theological concept; to be more precise, it forms an integral part of the beliefs Christians hold with regards to the afterlife: final judgement, reward or punishment – in short, their eschatology. This in turn implies that in purgatory, rules of *this* world hardly apply, and certainly not those contingencies that arise out of the free will of human beings. Strictly speaking, there are no 'human beings' in purgatory, only souls; and after the final judgement on doomsday, there is no more room for deliberate decisions, just as there is no more opportunity for sinning. All decisions have been made; the sentence has been passed, and for all that we are told by theologians, it will be final; no leave to appeal granted, not the slightest prospect of a reversal.

In deciding to take up the fight, the gunfighters thus consciously break rules that can only have come from God himself. In doing so, one could infer, they revolt against God, but not out of viciousness or hubris, but precisely because they want to act morally. In their moral code, one of the most fundamental rules states that you have to help people in need, and that the weak and defenceless have to be protected. Faced with a conflict between this imperative and a contradicting divine order, the heroes opt for the *human* choice, as opposed to the theological one, as it were. In this sense their attitude could indeed be called 'humanist', and to find it propagated in a run-of-the-mill Western would certainly be quite astonishing. True, defiance of divine law for the sake of a better world here and now is a theme that goes back as far as the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus. In a way, it can be seen as one of the concepts that triggered the emancipation from religious dogma that took place, first, in ancient Greece in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE and then again in Renaissance Europe from circa 1500 onwards, eventually spawning the ideas and, even more consequential, the analytical approach of the Enlightenment. Not for nothing has a 'Promethean' element been identified in the philosophy of Karl Marx.[2] In the 20th century the concept was taken up, among others, by the French writer Albert Camus, most notably perhaps in his essay *L'homme révolté* (1951). In the last analysis, however, the Promethean revolt must of necessity turn against the idea of a Supreme Being, and certainly of God in the Christian sense. If we cease to believe that God's commandments are, by their very nature, indisputably good; if we feel impelled, therefore, to reserve judgement as to whether these commandments are to be obeyed until we can base our decision on the distinct circumstances of a given situation – if all this

[2] Leszek Kolakowski, 'Three Motifs in Marxism', *Main Currents of Marxism, Vol. 1: The Founding Fathers* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press Paperback, 1981), pp. 408–416.

applies, we cannot honestly hold on to our belief in God, at least not in the way the Christian faith asks us to see Him: omniscient, omnipotent, and benign. In this sense, any morally motivated revolt against a divine commandment would constitute the first step on the road to atheism, if not an outright confession of atheism in itself.

It is hard to believe that an average Western out of commercial US American production should venture into such hazardous waters. Not surprisingly, the religious outlook prevails in the end. The desperate gunfighters await their fate by the side of the road outside the town, accompanied by the sympathetic inhabitants of Refuge. But it is not the native American with his mule that comes to meet them; rather, it is a beautiful stagecoach that comes careering down the highway and that they are invited to board, the viewer being left in no doubt whatsoever as to the meaning intended. Although our heroes have *ostensibly* broken God's law, we have to conclude, they have still executed His will in this special case; and thus, not only are they redeemed, but God's order is restored in the end or rather, to be accurate, it turns out that it has never been disturbed in the first place – no need for any religious controversy, no need for conservative Christian groups to start campaigning.

This leaves us with a second, and more conventional motif. It has to do with moral questions, in particular the moral justification of guns. On the face of it one would, of course, expect a Western to contain a fair amount of gun powder, fist fighting and related spectacles; and one would certainly not demand any second thoughts about the morality of all this. Clean fun, one might say; and it is striking indeed how 'clean' the violence in Western films is normally depicted – highly stylised, even ritualised, almost like Chinese opera, one is tempted to say. The victims of gun fights can be seen tumbling down or over in the most picturesque ways, bearing witness to a highly developed art form reminiscent, in a way, of the sophistication of ballet dancing; whereas

the audience is never allowed to catch a realistic glimpse of open wounds, blood (unless in homeopathic doses), shattered skulls, or abdomen gashed. In real life, bullets would doubtlessly have caused exactly such carnage which, together with at best rudimental medical treatment, must have made gun fights a gruesome affair.

The sanitised depiction on the screen helps to reinforce an assumption underlying the genre of the Western in general: that violence is virtually ubiquitous and as such, a more or less natural occurrence. This implies that it is morally neutral. The good and the bad (not to speak of the ugly) all use their guns and their fists in the same matter-of-fact way. The question is not whether this is justified; the question is only, who's winning. In the convention of the Western, these are invariably the 'goodies'. This in turn presupposes that they are the better fighters.

As we have said, these observations apply to the majority of mainstream samples of the genre, and it is just what the audience expects. Therefore it comes as a surprise to discover that even in films from the classic era of the Western, there is a recurrent motif which gives this reasoning an unexpected twist. We are talking about the type of plot featuring a man who, for whatever reason, has vowed to abstain from violence or at any rate from using a gun; and yet, in the end he is forced to do just that, due to inescapable circumstances. Unfortunately, I have to confess at this point that I find it hard to quote examples for this sub-genre. The reason is that I am not such a keen film pundit. In contrast to my reading experience, I cannot automatically remember the titles and the directors of films that have impressed me. To be sure, I have seen most of the great Western films at some time in my life, but this happened in a rather casual manner – off-hand, one might almost say. As a part-time freelance writer I lack the resources and above all the time to start an elaborate search for exactly those films that I have in mind. In this respect I suppose I owe an apology to the

reader. One film that I was able to identify with the help of the web is *The Man That Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), but sadly I cannot remember it vividly although I must have seen it at one stage. Another film that has impressed me is *The Big Country* (1958) starring Gregory Peck and Charlton Heston. The former plays a sea captain who comes from the east coast and refuses to play according to the rules of the West. In particular, he declines to join in the archaic bragging, duelling and feuding that are the norm in the 'big country'. On the other hand, I can remember a film that highlights the theme we are talking about quite graphically, but whose title I cannot recollect. It features a reformed gun fighter who, disgusted by his former career, has decided to mend his ways and become a preacher. Needless to say, he does not carry a gun and abhors violence altogether. He finds himself, however, in a Western town which is being terrorised, either by bandits or by that other stock figure, the cattle farmer at war with poor sheep rearing settlers. In any case, the plot being what it is, the converted hero eventually finds himself in such a tight corner that he is practically forced to take up his gun once more. The dilemma arises out of moral considerations, it ought to be stressed; it is a matter of conscience. His task completed, he leaves the town.

It is noteworthy that in all these instances, the main characters are by no means depicted as cowards. Even if they appear to be 'soft', this is only at first glance, or in the eyes of unsophisticated ruffians. Gradually, the viewer is brought to admire their humility, their self-discipline and above all, their inner strength. Indeed, these heroes are great individualists in the sense that they take a stand against the generally accepted norm. From a moral point of view, there is no doubt left that 'turning the other cheek' is an admirable stance, although it demands almost superhuman self-denial. In the same vain, the dilemma these characters find themselves in can only be understood in moral terms as the plot is quite elaborately developed in such a way

that the only acceptable option they are left with is to resort to the gun and consequently, to hurting and killing human beings. Adhering to their principles, it is insinuated, would betray even more fundamental moral rules, not least the chivalric code of helping the weak and defenceless, especially if they happen to be lovely young maidens. Strictly speaking, the conclusion drawn in these films only holds true for the rather special situation outlined there; but we may assume with some confidence that in the end, the audience is left with the impression of having learned a fundamental lesson of general validity: 'Sometimes you've got to fight to be a man.'

But is this really the whole answer? After all, this message is driven home by any other Western as well, not to speak of scores and scores of action and science-fiction films. Why have producers found it necessary – or profitable – to probe deeper into such moral questions? Why has there always been the desire to base the conventions of the Western, and especially its inherent violence, on sounder foundations? The fact that the motif under discussion has surfaced repeatedly seems to point to a certain self-consciousness at the heart of the 'you've got to fight' philosophy, to certain reservations at the back of many a mind. It is almost as if the type embodied by and identified with, say, John Wayne had realised somewhere deep down that notwithstanding all his bullish confidence and self-assertiveness, his case is all but certain. Yes, it may be true indeed that *sometimes* you have to fight – but when? In what circumstances? Under what conditions?

In general, I think it can fairly be said that few people will have qualms about accepting the necessity of resorting to violence in certain, well specified cases. Among these cases, self-defence will doubtlessly be the most prominent one; but defending others will also be widely accepted. Strictly abstaining from any violence in such circumstances would require a saintly effort and no matter how people may admire such a stance, at any rate in theory, most of them will be

honest enough to concede that they themselves would not be able or willing to submit to a series of grave offences humbly. On a collective level, things may be viewed more sceptically. Again, the justification of national self-defence is only disputed by comparatively few; but general acceptance usually carries the rider that the threat be real and serious, not just a pretext as it has been all too often in the past. The need of coming to the aid of other nations or ethnic groups is treated with even more suspicion; but once more, we may assume that it is not really opposed on principle. The only ones who might object are pacifists. It has to be said, however, that their objections are often directed against a given policy rather than against an abstract rule. The turbulent opposition against American involvement in Vietnam, it may be remembered, drew its vigour primarily from the conviction that it was wrong for the United States to intervene in Indochina by force. As far as I can remember, there was never any suggestion that the Vietcong or the soldiers in the armed forces of the Republic of North Vietnam should lay down their arms true to pacifist principles. Accordingly, hostility against the US forces ceased fairly quickly once they had been disentangled from the Vietnamese quagmire (and, cynics might add, once the draft had been abandoned). Pacifism pure and simple is a creed that is encountered very rarely indeed; and even then it often turns out that it has never been put to the test. If it is, it can fade surprisingly fast. This was demonstrated by the German Green Party in the late 1990s when they had entered government as junior partners of the Social Democrats. Their figure head, Joschka Fischer, served as Foreign Secretary. Among the international crises he was confronted with was the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo embarked upon by the Serb state. Should the Federal Republic of Germany, for the first time in its history since 1955 and despite the memories of World War II, send troops abroad to prevent mass deportation and possibly even genocide? The Green Party, hitherto one of the most

militant pacifist groupings (if the apparent contradiction is excused), were facing a painful dilemma. In the end, and after considerable soul-searching, they finally decided that yes, they would have to accept the moral case for using armed forces, not just in strict self-defence, but even if it is a matter of coming to the rescue of others.

The point I am trying to make is this: If it were true that the underlying principles of a Western like *Purgatory* were really just those of self-defence and the help of others, it would hardly be necessary nor, for that matter, even good business to ram home the argument yet again. If *Purgatory* really wanted to prove that 'sometimes you've got to fight', it would preach to the converted. As we have seen, pacifism never really posed a serious threat. Neither was the era of the classic Western in the 1950s and early 1960s characterised by manifest pacifist tendencies, nor was there any observable revival in the 1990s when *Purgatory* was shot. On the contrary, both these periods can be said to have been predominantly conservative and hence patriotic in a strictly conventional sense. If there ever was a pacifist threat in the US, it came in the late 1960s and early 1970s, accompanying the Vietnam War. Significantly, this was also the time when the classic Western with its distinctive features of a morality play gave way to the 'Spaghetti Western' which shed the last pretence of morality in favour of an uninhibited, although aesthetically refined, celebration of violence. The very fact, I would like to argue, that a film like *Purgatory* has to rely on such an intricate plot simply to arrive, near the end, at the customary showdown, points to a certain uneasiness on the part of those who otherwise pretend to speak for mainstream America, for the 'silent majority'.

In order to understand this hidden agenda, as it were, it may help to have a second look at the way the plot in *Purgatory* is constructed. The basic arrangement could be said to rely on three layers on top of each other. The bottom one comprises the inhabitants of the Western town

of Refuge. They are depicted as completely ordinary people: hard-working, polite, pious, and peaceful. This is exactly why they are utterly helpless when the bandits intrude. Quite obviously, these represent the second layer. At this stage, the film emphasises once more the view that might comes before right. The idyllic town of Refuge falls victim to anarchic violence without any trace of resistance. (In *Purgatory,* it may be noted, the sheriff himself has to refrain from violence according to the nature of the place; in other films of this kind, he is shown as being feeble or corrupt – or both.) The predicament of the good citizens is exacerbated by their being humiliated, quite frequently even in front of their loved ones. There is no knowing how far the situation may yet deteriorate. In the tradition of the Western, this is the point where the star has to make his appearance (the third layer): enter John Wayne. In *Purgatory,* by contrast, the heroes are there from the very beginning and so the turning point comes when they decide to take up their guns, despite the regime they are under. Nevertheless, the denouement is achieved in exactly the same way: by means of superior fighting skills.

Each of the layers can also be understood as carrying a moral message. To begin with, the ordinary life of ordinary people is clearly depicted as 'good', although perhaps somewhat dull. There is no doubt left whatsoever that these are decent people, reliable and steadfast. The problem is just that they are thoroughly defenceless against any violent aggression. According to the conventions of the genre, such occurrences are simply inevitable. In the face of the threat, the 'good' citizens can only try not to get involved, hiding in their houses or, if they have to venture outside, timidly sneaking along the sidewalk. As a consequence, they are equally incapable of helping any of their neighbours who are hapless enough to attract the attention of the bandits scourging the town. The audience is left in no doubt how to judge such behaviour. It is not just cowardly, a deadly sin in itself by

the standards of a Western; but saving one's skin, we learn, also leads to sacrificing others – not willingly to be sure, but by necessity. In this sense, a serious flaw is exposed in the moral fabric of the 'good' citizens. More precisely, we have to conclude that although they may *be* 'good', they sadly lack the ability to *do* good, most conspicuously so in extraordinary circumstances. It takes a gun-toting hero to put things right.

Such a hero, on the other hand, does by no means have to be totally 'good' in order to play his customary role; on the contrary, showing him as a man of rather dubious past and acting out of mixed motives, constitutes another well-tried tradition of the genre, often used to add a trace of complexity to an art form that otherwise relies on highly predictable characters and plots. In addition, it could be said that the shady past is almost a prerequisite for our hero as he has to prove himself superior in the face of formidable enemies. This means that somehow, he must have acquired not just his extraordinary skills, but also an adequate stock of experience. How could he have done so, one is tempted to ask, if he had always and unequivocally been on the side of the law? As it happens, this takes the moral argument yet another step further. The gun, we learn, may be an instrument of evil, to be sure, as amply demonstrated by what we have called the second layer; but overcoming evil takes a gun as well. This may sound like a rather worn out truism; in the Western, however, the argument is pursued with slightly more consequence than usual. It is not just that sometimes, and unfortunately, the use of violence cannot be avoided; rather, violence, and in particular the gun, are also seen as necessary agents for progress: they, and *only* they, promote a state of things that could by any stretch of the imagination be called 'civilized'. But using a gun quite obviously demands a lot of training, and using it competently will also entail a lot of experience. 'Being good' as such, we have to conclude, just is not enough. If you want to achieve

anything ‘good’, you must have put yourself in a position of being able to do so in the first place.

In my opinion, this is exactly the message that films like *Purgatory* are intended to get across. As we have seen, the necessity of resorting to violence in certain, rather special circumstances is widely accepted and thus hardly needs driving home yet another time. But apparently this is not quite enough. What has to be demonstrated, again and again, seems to be that contrary to popular belief – and, we may assume, moral instinct – violence actually is ‘good’, a moral category. To put oneself in a position where on is able to fight, most notably of course by buying a gun, has to be seen as a moral act. It is not just to be accepted, although with great reservations, as something that is unavoidable, even if regrettable; quite the contrary, it should be understood as something to be actively pursued, and to be admired: ‘You wanna be good, son? You get a gun.’

At this point, one begins to wonder if the National Rifle Association may have had a hand in the production of the film. Such dealings, it is reported, are all but extraordinary in the practice of Hollywood, with the Pentagon handing out lavish sums of money to productions that show the armed forces in a favourable light. The suspicion may even be aggravated by another observation worth mentioning here. It concerns an intriguing twist in the plot of *Purgatory* – one is even tempted to say, a gaffe. It comes early in the story when the gang of bandits appear in the town of Refuge. On close inspection, this turn of events could raise further theological questions. As Refuge represents nothing less than purgatory for deceased gun fighters, we have to assume that it has been set up by divine will. If so, it would be unthinkable for human beings to stumble onto a scene which, by definition, is of the other world. We have to remember that according to the Christian tradition, God is held to be both omniscient and omnipotent – there is nothing that can just happen to him, no

coincidence and no unforeseen accidents. The only viable explanation would be that the intrusion from the real world has been preconceived from the outset, possibly as the ultimate trial for the gun fighters' souls. However, there is not the slightest hint in the film that any such concept might have been intended. Without being deprecatory we can fairly assume that it would have been beyond the scope of an ordinary production such as this. The intrusion of the real-world bandits, we have to conclude, is meant to be taken at face value, without any theological overtones. In this, the plot once more follows well-established conventions.

One of the most fundamental assumptions underlying films such as *Purgatory* is not just that violence is totally unavoidable – which may be true up to a point – but that it can never, under no conceivable circumstances, be contained by means of collective action. It is always, as a matter of fact, stronger than any communal effort, not to mention any institutions that may have been put into place in order to protect the average man and woman. Again, that stock figure of Western film convention comes to mind, namely the sheriff that is either too feeble or too corrupt, or both, to provide effective protection. Not surprisingly, the mere option of acting collectively is hardly ever considered, and if so, hardly seriously. In the tradition of the Western, it could be said, it is not only understood that violence will inevitably intrude into a peaceful community – even if this asks for a considerable suspension of belief as in *Purgatory* – but also that the community will always fall easy prey to any aggressor, reacting very much like the proverbial rabbit under the snake's debilitating stare.

It is worth bearing in mind that this does not coincide in the least with what most viewers will have experienced in their lives. Even in the United States, we may assume, it is still the norm that public institutions are able to contain acts of violent aggression and to restore peace and security for the general public, although such acts

undoubtedly occur more frequently than in many European countries. But then of course it would be no more than stating the obvious to stress the fact that the Western is set in completely unfamiliar locations, namely the 'West'. The question is only *why* this may be so – why such conventions concerning settings and plots, although fairly improbable, should be repeated over and over again, and why they do not seem to lose their appeal to the viewing public. The answer, we may surmise, will lead us to what is called the 'frontier experience' or, to be more precise, to what the film industry chooses to convey as this experience. As there is general agreement on the fact that the frontier has played a significant part in the development of American attitudes, we are also dealing with these: values, outlooks, and expectations widely accepted and shared in American society.

Needless to say, the 'frontier' as represented in Western films is an artifice. The real frontier had a long and varied history, constantly moving and thus taking on different regional appearances. The experience resulting from a life at the frontier must therefore have been much more complex than the few standard constellations encountered in Western films would suggest. This is even true if we only take literary representations for a comparison. It is quite interesting to notice, for example, that James Fennimore Cooper's tales, although undoubtedly dealing with the 'frontier experience', by no means fit into the pattern of the Western film. A similar filter of perception has prevented the 'mountain man' from being used as a role model on the screen, notwithstanding the fact that he could be regarded as an archetypal frontiersman with at least as much justification as the legendary cowboy. After all, these mountain men embodied nothing less than the vanguard of the white man's civilisation on its march across the American continent. No doubt, the reasons for this highly selective view of the film industry and, consequently, the rigidly stylised art form of the Western have to be traced back to the

'message' that it is designed to convey – a morality play, as we have said, as much as anything else.

There is nothing new in such observations, to be sure. Considering a film like *Purgatory,* however, we are bound to ask the question why there should be such an obsession with such a limited segment of what must have been the 'frontier experience'. Why is it that the convention has been based on certain segments to the exclusion of certain others, and what has been found to be so suitable in the ones that have been chosen? Part of the answer may lie in the fact that the frontier painted in Western films represents a state of transition. What we are invited to witness is, among other things, the perpetually repeated process of establishing the rule of law, of a 'normal', more or less civilised state of affairs which will allow ordinary citizens to carry on their decent (and, according to the Western, rather dull) lives. But this is only hinted at. It is an iron law of the Western tradition that the climatic showdown comes at the very end of the story; after that, we may only see the hero parting from the people he has just saved, sometimes with a hint of regret, but 'moving on' all the same.

This involves two rather implausible assumptions. To begin with, we are asked to believe that although the 'good' ordinary people of the frontier town in question had enough stamina to move out into the wild, settle there, and eventually even build a town, they suddenly lack the courage and the resources to defend themselves. It begs the question how they could have got to where they are in the first place, and how they could have survived long enough for the gun-toting hero to come to their rescue.

Secondly, it is insinuated that after the hero's intervention, everything will be roses. Again, the suspension of disbelief this requires is quite substantial, given the fact that the audience has been impressed by the dangerous and violent nature of the frontier throughout the previous ninety minutes or so. If the community of

settlers really were so helpless as the plot suggests, certainly the ephemeral intervention by a roaming gun fighter could hardly make a lasting difference. The moment our solitary hero rides out of town, we have to conclude, the whole story will start all over again. If the foe that has just been overcome is an unscrupulous rancher with his small army of cowboys, he will easily be able to build up his forces again and continue the campaign. If he has died in the final shootout, any one of his family could step into his place. Even if that had been ruled out somehow, there must be other ranchers around with the same ambitions and resources. If, on the other hand, evil is represented by a gang of bandits, we simply have to take it for granted that the next bunch are already on their way, the frontier being what we are asked to believe it is.

Granted that the 'frontier' was characterised, among other things, by the gradual establishment of what we choose to call 'civilisation', it is remarkable indeed how the Western never seems to pursue the story to its logical conclusion. True, it is well-known that a deep-seated suspicion of life in civilised society forms another rigid convention of the genre. Not that the undeniable progress of civilisation (from a historical point of view, that is) were altogether ignored; and not that its desirability, and in a way even its moral superiority were denied; but the spectator is left in no doubt whatsoever that such a civilized state is unbearably dull, not meriting any interest whatsoever. The moment we have reached its threshold, the credits start to roll.

Reasons for this strangely selective perception are not hard to find. For one thing, the Western tradition has had to stick to its limited scope because in no other way could the moral of the gun as detailed earlier be put forward with equal credibility. This moral, in turn, rests firmly on the creed of individualism, as personified by our gun slinging hero. Again, it takes a completely fictitious setting for such heroes to make a real difference. This is not just true of Westerns, of

course, but of about ninety per cent of US American film productions in general – action films, sci-fi, whatever. No doubt the idea that an 'evil empire' out there in space (or in some dystopian future here on earth) can be overthrown by one single American hero – still carrying a gun, it may be remembered, although now worked by some kind of science-fiction wizardry –, or at best by a handful of such heroes, is asking for even more of our credulity than the traditional Western. The underlying problem, it seems to me, is that 'civilisation' – any civilisation – represents a system in which people live together according to certain fixed and thus predictable rules. Naturally, there will always be breaches of these rules, as there will always be cases of crime, even violent crime; but a stable society is able to cope with such deviations, and most significantly, it is able to do so without having to wait for the emergence of an outstanding, almost superhuman hero. Any ordinary law-enforcing officer will do. In the same vein, ordinary people most definitely are *not* asked to take up a gun in order to defend themselves or others; in any properly functioning society this is done for them. Indeed, it is commonly accepted that acquiring and then jealously guarding its monopoly on the use of force is a distinguishing feature of any modern 'civilised' state. As a huge system, it cannot allow itself to be dependent on any exceptional skills or on exceptional courage in its officials; rather, it has to be designed in such a way that any average human being can fulfil his or her assigned duties satisfactorily and reliably. Not surprisingly, the values cherished in the Western tradition are anything but democratic or egalitarian, contrary to popular belief; rather, they are openly elitist and aristocratic, as demonstrated by the sinister, solitary gunfighter. In short, we have to come to the conclusion that any 'civilised' society turns out to be a natural enemy of individualism – at any rate of the kind celebrated in popular American films.

Historically speaking, the ‘frontier experience’ may have culminated in the establishment of more or less civilised communities; but this, by its very nature, brought the frontier to an end. It moved on, as long as there was any open space left. What it left behind, was ‘civilisation’, or at least its rudimentary beginnings. This sequence is illustrated, for example, in Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales,* particularly in *The Pioneers*. It also features in many of Mark Twain’s works, set as they are in what could be called the wake of the frontier, most notably the fictitious St. Petersburg of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn.* In *Roughing It,* the same author makes it abundantly clear that any ‘civilised’ state, coarse as it may be, is preferable to the violent anarchy preceding it.

Western films never carry their plots that far. They simply do not care for the end product. They tell stories, no doubt, but they fail to pursue them to the end. They give the impression of being stuck, not just in highly artificial settings, both historically and geographically, but also in a narrative that never comes to any conclusion. Maybe this is why the story can be – or even has to be – retold over and over again, in a seemingly endless run of the production line. At the same time, the popularity of such productions hardly seems to wane. Audiences, we have to concede, apparently love the endless retelling of the unfinished story just as much as the producers (and, needless to say, the shareholders). One cannot help but wonder why this may be so, and what consequences it could have. Trying to find suitable answers, however, we will have to watch our step carefully. It is all too easy to blur the line between fiction and reality or, in our case, between pieces of art on the one hand, and works of history or sociology on the other. Even if certain views are disseminated by products of popular culture, and even if this is done regularly, it does not follow automatically that people actually share them. Conversely, just because they pay to see Hollywood films, it would be precipitate

to conclude that these films express exactly what they want to hear, and nothing else.

All the same, one may be forgiven for suspecting that over the years, such cultural predilections could have engendered an ambiguous attitude towards ‘civilisation’ in real life. Huck Finn, in his time, could ‘opt out for the territories’; no such exit route is open today. Today’s life is predominantly urban: enormous metropolitan agglomerations of masses living in extremely dense spaces, huddled together in high-rise blocks of flats or at best in sprawling suburban estates. This is not just true of Americans, of course, or of the industrialised world. In the 21st century, it is true for a growing number of people all over the world, and the trend continues. In 2008, it has been claimed, more than half of all humanity will be living in conurbations, rather than in the country, for the first time ever.[3] One wonders whether a culture which finds it notoriously hard to appreciate the evolution from anarchic wilderness to a stable society will be well suited for such a world. After all, the United States can hardly be said to present a wholly admirable picture as it is. For example, the ‘home of the free’ can claim the dubious honour of being the country with the biggest prison population in the world, and it is so by a considerable margin.[4] This, we are tempted to conclude, may exactly be the kind of society you will get if you do not really believe in the merits of ‘civilisation’.

[3] UNFPA, *State of World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth* (N. p.: UNFPA, 2007).

[4] Roy Walmsley, *World Prison Population List, Fourth Edition* (London: Home Office, 2003). It should be noted that political prisoners are not included in this list.

Literature used

As stated in the preface, this list of literature is not supposed to be exhaustive, nor even representative. To a large extent it only shows what books I had available at the time of writing – and it may be remembered that this time was rather limited − or could lay my hands on at short notice. I have decided to list these sources here in order to help the reader identify books referred to in the footnotes; but certainly not to pretend a scholarly standard which just is not there.

Bradbury, Malcolm, and Howard Temperley, eds. *Introduction to American Studies*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 3rd edition 1998.

Brogan, Hugh. *The Penguin History of the USA*. London: Penguin Books, 2nd edition 2001.

Brown, Dee. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. London: Pan Books, 1972.

Bryson, Bill. *Notes from a Big Country*. London: Black Swan, 1999.

Chernow, Ron. *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* London: Warner Books, 1999.

Cunliffe, Marcus, ed. *American Literature to 1900*. Sphere History of Literature in the English Language Volume 8. London: Sphere Books, 1973.

Cunliffe, Marcus, ed. *American Literature since 1900*. Sphere History of Literature in the English Language Volume 9. London: Sphere Books, 1975.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." In *Selected Essays*. London: Penguin Books, 1987, pp. 175-203.

Fiedler, Eckhard, Reimer Jansen, and Mil Norman-Reisch. *America in Close-Up*. Edinburgh: Longman Pearson Education, 2000.

Freese, Peter, ed. *Viewfinder Special: Lese- und Arbeitsbuch für die gymnasiale Oberstufe*. München: Langenscheidt-Longman, 2. Aufl. 1999.

Galbraith, John Kenneth. *The Affluent Society*. London: Penguin Books, 4th edition with a new introduction 1991.

Heffer, Simon. "Battering the Boche." Review of *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* by Margaret MacMillan. *Literary Review,* September 2001, 10-11.

Heffner, Richard D. *A Documentary History of the United States*. New York: Mentor Books, 6th edition 1999.

Hertz, Noreena. *The Silent Takeover: Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy*. London: William Heinemann, 2001.

Hobsbawm, E.J. *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848*. London: Abacus, 1995.

Hobsbawm, E.J. *The Age of Capital 1848-1875*. London: Abacus, 1995.

Hobsbawm, E.J. *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*. London: Abacus, 1995.

Hoggart, Simon. "Canada Dry." In *Canadian Mosaic / Mosaique Canadienne*, edited by Dr. Peter Klaus. Berlin: Cornelsen Verlag, 1993, pp. 9-11.

Kearny Datesman, Maryanne, JoAnn Crandall, and Edward N. Kearny. *The American Ways: An Introduction to American Culture*. n.p.: Prentice Hall Regents, 2nd edition 1997.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

Kolko, Gabriel. *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Kramnick, Isaac, ed. *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.

Landes, David S. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*. London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998.

Lorenz, Konrad. *Das sogenannte Böse: Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression*. Wien: Dr. G. Borotha-Schoeler Verlag, 1963.

Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968.

Marwick, Arthur. *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1988. – German *Für die Freiheit sterben: Die Geschichte des amerikanischen Bürgerkrieges*. München, Leipzig: List Verlag, n.d.

Morris, Charles R. *A Time of Passion: America 1960-1980*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986.

Perkins, Harold. *Origins of Modern English Society*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Samuelson, Paul A. and William D. Nordhaus. *Economics: International Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 15th edition 1995.

Sieper, Roswitha. *The Student's Companion to the USA*. Ismanig: Max Hueber Verlag, 1998.

Stevenson, Douglas K. *American Life and Institutions*. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, revised edition 1996.

Tawney, R. H. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975.

Taylor, A J P. *The First World War: An Illustrated History*. London: Penguin Books, 1966.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Specially edited and abridged by Richard D. Heffner, New York: Mentor New American Library, 1984.

Tuchmann, Barbara. *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War 1890-1914*. London and Basingstoke: Papermac, 1997.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

Von Haag, Michael, and Anna Crew, eds. *A Moneywise Guide to North America*. London: Travelaid, 1979.

Weber, Max. *Die protestantische Ethik*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 8. Aufl. 1991.