

Claus Offe: Reflections on America: Tocqueville, Weber and Adorno in the United States

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Regular Reviews

Claus Offe: *Reflections on America: Tocqueville, Weber and Adorno in the United States*

Cambridge 2005: Polity Press, 140 pp.

Millions of Europeans have gone to America in search of a new life, a life better than the life they lived in their homelands – too poor to feed them, or too intolerant to want them. Some Europeans went to America in search of a lesson. They wished to learn what was there, in America, that promised a better life, a life free from the discomforts that the explorers complained of at home; and what was there that threatened to burden that new life with new dangers unknown to the old? They wished to bring back home a two-part lesson: the clue for making life better, and the warning against things they needed to beware of when trying to do so. They believed their voyages of exploration and discovery to be insights into Europe's possible, perhaps imminent, futures: into things to which they should look forward and which arrival they need to speed up, and things which they ought to fear and whose coming they need to prevent.

Claus Offe tells the story of the three most acute observers and most profound thinkers among those explorers: Alexis de Tocqueville, who spent in America nine months in the early 1830s, Max Weber, visiting America in 1904 for thirteen months, and Theodor W. Adorno, who lived there eleven years starting in 1938.¹ Each of the three found himself in America for quite different reasons, but once there, they all followed 'a certain intellectual tradition in European social theory', according to which 'the nature of European problems

and the range of possible solutions were to be understood through their reflection in the realities of America'. America 'has for Europeans always been not an exotic growth but a branch of the same tree. But how is it that this branch bears such unfamiliar blossoms and fruits?' (p. 3) Populated and run by the newcomers from Europe, 'America' (this is how the United States were called and thought of), was obviously an offspring or outgrowth of Europe, a close relative with whom one can communicate and one would understand; but deprived of Europe's long, twisted, tormented and gory history (some would say: blessed by that deprivation), America was also a young, boisterous country, unburdened by its past – and so, unlike the old Europe with its frozen social hierarchies and political routines and the heavy ballast of inherited ways and means, free to experiment and blaze extraordinary trails which the dwellers of the old continent had never imagined and would not dare or were unable to follow.

Among the three, Tocqueville was the first – and, in Offe's view, still the best 'master of ambivalence, dialectical reversals, simultaneous observation on both sides of the coin...he is unequalled by either of the other travellers whom we shall consider later' (p. 10). He combined the virtues, while managing to avoid the vices, of an 'aristocratic moralist', 'radical democrat' and 'detached political sociologist'. This merit allowed him to foresee developmental tendencies inherent to a modern version of democracy grounded in the equality of law – at a time when its essential contours were yet poorly sketched and few if any perceptive minds foresaw its fu-

ture as the dominant, or aspiring to dominance, form of societal organisation. For Tocqueville, America entered almost matter-of-factly, by a stroke of historical luck, into the 'virtuous circle', in which social institutions and human attitudes, 'habits of the heart' and 'habits of the mind', start to feed and reinforce each other to the benefit of human – individual and collective – freedom of self-assertion. That is, it could jump directly into the enchanted land of liberty without having first – like Europe would have to eventually – to violently dispossess the privileged classes; it reached the 'stable state' of, so to speak, complete democracy, straightaway – without having first to face the risks and to accumulate the traumas of the 'period of transition'. America, therefore, has never fallen into the *vicious* circle of the powers fearing freedom of opinion and opinions hardening under the yoke of censorship. Hence America, with its complete freedom of the press, is a country that contains the fewest germs of revolution. Paradoxically, or perhaps not so paradoxically, readers of the press hold firmly to the press-insinuated 'unreflecting convictions'; not because they are convinced of their unshakable truth, but because they are not sure that there are better to be had... Such way of holding convictions (one would say, belief resting on cacophony of opinions) can hardly inspire the holders to go to the barricades in their names...

So far, so good. Tocqueville, in Offe's succinct summary, cannot accept that, according to the (democratic) majority rule, not the 'best' but the 'most' become masters of the law. 'Equality in the spheres of politics and culture... means that the majority's standards, principles and criteria of judgment will from now on apply to everyone – and this is where the danger to liberty begins' (p. 22). The danger is the 'freedom-destroying, tyrannical, conformist and despotic potential of "equality", that is, of a society based on contrac-

tual market relations and competitive individualism, with its material insatiability' (p. 28).

Each one of the three explorers whose legacy Offe expertly analyses came to America with questions matured in Europe of his time. No wonder they did not look to the 'social and moral resources' Tocqueville had spotted among the American 'rugged individualists' for the effective medicine of the European disease of 'expropriation of human beings in all institutional spheres' and bobbing humans of 'responsibility for themselves and of the opportunity to exercise it' (pp. 56, 51). Weber, famously baptised by Wolfgang Mommsen 'a liberal in despair', came to America appalled by the unstoppable rising spectre of bureaucracy, which reserved the 'praxis of freedom' only but a few while casting the rest in the state of soullessness, expropriation, proletarianisation, dependence, professional specialisation and so on. 'Given the basic fact of the irresistible advance of bureaucratisation', Weber asked, with a note of despair in his voice, how can one possibly save *any remnants* of "individualist" freedom? (p. 52). Nor does Weber invest much hope in the inchoate democracy of early-20th century Germany when looking at the practice of its American, 'mature' version. Democracy, he noted, 'offers only one choice: it can be run either cheaply by rich people in honorary positions or expensively by paid officials' (p. 65). The grain of hope found Weber instead in the 'puritanical asceticism' of American Protestant sects, to which he ascribes the power to sustain a 'self-conscious, individualistic and sober attitude to life that confronted the state power with an anti-authoritarian skepticism'. Weber hoped that once 'honesty in business is rewarded by wealth yet is not practiced for the sake of wealth but purely to meet the requirements of the religious life, citizens discover, as it were to their own pleasant surprise, the utility of virtue' (p. 63). But one cannot hope to cure

the future with the drugs that passed their use-by date. Weber himself noted the ever more pronounced retreat of the old sectarian virtues. Religious fervour, and even more the ethical propriety it begets, failed spectacularly to survive the arrival of the virtue-rewarding wealth with the infinite prospects it opened of the much more enjoyable consumerist alternative to the 'puritanical asceticism' of the bygone Protestant saints.

The third character in Offe's story, Adorno, was an unwilling visitor to the US, swept to the other shore of the Atlantic by the storm that overwhelmed Europe; the same storm forced him to stay there longer than he would have wished. Adorno was appalled by what he saw in his place of exile: the autonomous bourgeois culture turning into mass culture and unscrupulous, profit-chasing culture industry; he thought he found there as well all the nightmares of Tocqueville and Weber tuned into reality. The 'American problem', and given the rising global domination of the United States also the 'problem of America', inspired Adorno to seek frenetically, in Offe's poignant summary, the 'ambivalences, salutary antidotes, countervailing tendencies, a set of self-correcting mechanisms offering the possibility of escape from the "iron cage of dependence" and the "administered world"... Was there anything in the realities of America that might serve as the basis of such mechanisms?' He did not find much. Wherever he looked, he saw the pressures towards standardisation, compulsion to uniformity, intolerance to deviation and difference, paranoid fear of strangers and nonconformists, collective narcissism and a wish to belong (pp. 82–84).

All this is now a rather old story; voiced if not from a different America, then most certainly from a different world, and a different place occupied by America among other lands of the planet. Claus Offe perfectly pinpoints that difference (p. 100):

It is not only the current US administration that pursues the self-given mission of 'making the world a better place' *manu militari*; behind this mission we can see an identity-building obsession, through which the inner cracks of American society are covered up with military means directed towards the outside world. Another peculiarity of today's United States that sharply contrast with the three authors' findings is the fact that it is the only country which can, in the case of claimed necessity, treat external rules, principles and agreements as non-binding; it does not, as President George W. Bush so aptly put it, need to seek 'a permission slip' from anyone, simply because no one could effectively forbid it to do anything it wanted. In case of necessity, so its current leadership appears to believe, the United States can command recognition of its brute power from all other participants of the international system, and thereby drop claims for moral authority without suffering any harmful consequences.

Offe's book comes timely. It speaks, apparently, of the bygone thoughts of bygone thinkers a century or two old, but it addresses the major concerns of our times – issues that will in all probability constitute the major, life-or-death challenge of our 21st century. The 'problems of America', and by the same token the 'American problem', has today acquired unprecedented importance. It is no longer the problem of Europeans: it affects the whole planet, just as it does American military power and the extent of its interests and the 'self-given mission' it claims. True, other countries follow the decisions of their own leaders; but, as Jonathan Friedland of *The Guardian* recently pointed out, 'had George W. Bush decided the other way, Britain would not have gone to war in 2003' – and this blunt verdict does not apply to Britain alone. As to other aspects of America's vital importance to the rest of the world, now more than at any other time the rest of us catch

a cold when America sneezes. The horrifying financial crisis shaking the world-wide banking-and-credit system at the time of writing (October 2008) has been wholly 'made in America'. And so has been, to a great extent, the crisis in which the planetary eco-system has fallen. A quarter of the planetary climate-changing pollution is produced by a country inhabited by only 5% of the world's population. As before, all eyes are fixed on America. Alas, unlike in the case of Tocqueville, Weber and even (occasionally) Adorno, much more so in apprehension than in hope.

Zygmunt Bauman

Notes

¹ The English translation is by Patrick Camiller. The original title in German is *Selbstbetrachtung aus der Ferne: Tocqueville, Weber und Adorno in der Vereinigten Staaten*, Suhrkamp Verlag 2004.

Frances McCall Rosenbluth (ed.):
The Political Economy of Japan's Low Fertility

Stanford, CA, 2007: Stanford University Press, 222 pp.

Fertility as an academic subject passed from demography to a broader field of inquiry a few years ago. This volume thoroughly studies the interaction between women's employment and fertility decisions from a political economy point of view by analysing factors determining labour demand and supply of women and mothers in Japan, a nation at the centre of much European and American research due to its exceptionally low fertility. The contributions, written by an illustrious array of Japanese and American scholars assume that women's welfare is an indirect indicator of fertility levels; consequently, the labour market as the main source of women's financial independence is at the centre of the analysis. Over nine well-structured, concise and

mostly elegant chapters, the links between income, education, skills, employment and fertility are empirically explored through quantitative analyses. The individual chapters address women's economic status and its impact on fertility (Chapter 2), skills as explanation for occupational segregation (Chapter 3), the effects of feminisation of occupational sectors on pay and working conditions (Chapter 4), types of employment available to mothers (Chapter 5), the impact of public policies on mother's labour supply (Chapter 6), changes in distribution of and access to day-care centres (Chapter 7) and lastly the effect of private education of children on their mother's employment (Chapter 8). The main thesis of the book is that fertility is an indirect indicator of women's well-being, and that low fertility levels in advanced democracies may in part be accounted for by vested interests impeding women's access to employment, rather than by women's choices (4).

Concise and jargon-free, each chapter addresses a different aspect of women's employment in relation to motherhood, yet the linkages to the overall hypothesis are not always evident. Apart from Margarita Estevez-Abe's contribution (Chapter 3), the chapters rely to a large extent on a theory-light analysis of different quantitative datasets. The chapters are well structured and written, however some of the conclusions catch the reader unawares. Furthermore, while most concepts are defined well, one of the most important ones – fertility – regrettably is not. Frances McCall Rosenbluth in the introduction makes the distinction between women who delay childbirth, those who reduce the number of children they have over their life course and those who go without having children altogether. Unfortunately, this analytic distinction is not taken up in the subsequent chapters' research design. Also, women's welfare is not explained beyond arguing that it is related to women's economic independence, leading to an almost inter-