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Book Review

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*Reviewed by Theodore Samore**

AMERICA AS CIVILIZATION; LIFE AND THOUGHT IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY, by Max Lerner. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1957.

The subject of this book is a formidable one for both reader and author, namely, “. . . the pattern and inner meaning of contemporary American civilization and its relation to the world of today” (Foreword). The author is well armed for the task. At present, Lerner is Professor of American Civilization at Brandeis University and a daily columnist for the *New York Post*. He is widely known as a lecturer and radio commentator.

Is America a civilization? On this issue, Lerner has no doubts. “For good or ill, America is what it is—a culture in its own right, with many characteristic lines of power and meaning of its own, ranking with Greece and Rome as one of the great distinctive civilizations in history” (p. 59). If this proposition is accepted, two other questions logically follow. One, what forces, or factors, or events determined or shaped American civilization? Two, what specifically, *are* these characteristics, patterns and forms that combine to yield an American civilization unique from, say, European civilization, Islamic or Far Eastern? Lerner’s answer to the first is brief and sound: “. . . the expanse of space, the mixture of race, the pluralism of region and religion, the fresh start, the release of energies, the access to opportunity, the optimism and pragmatism of a society in motion, the passion for equality—[these] were the crucial shaping forces of the American heritage” (p. 48). One might also add slavery and the Civil War.

The major portion of the book is devoted to answering the second question. The sweep and variety of his approach is determined by his vast subject. A glance at the table of contents furnishes a rough idea of the ground he covers. He discusses in detail American people and places, the culture of science and the machine, capitalist economy and business civilization, the political system, class and status, character and society, beliefs and opinions, and arts and popular culture.

Although Lerner takes great pain to see the bad as well as the good in American civilization, he is more certain of the good than the bad. Too many times he stands a proposition on its

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head to make it fit an admittedly preconceived pattern. In essence, his argument boils down to this: America is a success. On the one hand, it is the only civilization in history capable of abolishing poverty; on the other hand, it can do so without any violation of the democratic process. Indeed, America is rapidly approaching this very millennium. But one can always ask what is so laudable about success—especially material success per se? Are Americans any happier, wiser, and more noble because of it?

Lerner's weakest link in his lengthy chain of analysis is his attempt to derive from the enormous welter of American differences, paradoxes and diversities (as well as uniformities) some meaningful pattern that bears the unique "Made in America" stamp. It may be so yet I find it more meaningful to regard America as a branch of European civilization. Certainly there are distinctive American traits and patterns just as there are British, French and Italian national characteristics. But can one speak meaningfully of British civilization, French civilization, Italian civilization? Furthermore, Lerner completely excludes Canada, Mexico and other American states in this hemisphere. We probably share something unique with our neighbors on this side of the Atlantic.

Spencer's notorious definition of civilization as "progress from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity toward a definite, coherent heterogeneity" seems peculiarly apt for America, except that it should be reversed. Americans are progressing from definite, coherent heterogeneity to an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity. Despite the bugaboo of conformity, of social, economic and political pressure to "fall in line," Lerner is optimistic about the outcome. Americans may act like sheep at times but at least not driven sheep. Any time an American wants to be different he is free to do so. This cantankerous streak also runs deep in American history.

One can dispute Lerner's major premises but still admire his conclusions. His treatment of the American political system and American character and society is keen and balanced. Best of all, he avoids sociologese entirely. Consciously or unconsciously, Lerner has shaped his book according to his image of America—massive, kaleidoscopic, atomistic, pluralistic and boundless. His faith in America is rocklike and convincing. There is room in America for almost everything, and the people, if they so desire, can will almost anything. American waste,

American pragmatism, American Babbitry is balanced by American efficiency, American know-how, and American colleges and universities. What Emerson said a century ago still rings true:

“We think our civilization is near its meridian, but we are yet only at the cockgrowing and the morning star.”

* * *

BOOKS RECEIVED

(Mention of books received neither precludes nor assures a later review.)

A History of the Dollar, Arthur Nussbaum. Columbia University Press, N. Y. 1957. 308 pp.

Desegregation and the Law, Albert P. Blaustein and Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr. Rutgers University Press. 1957. 333 pp.

Labor and the New Deal, ed. by Milton Derber and Edwin Young. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin. 1957. 393 pp.

The Alien and the Immigration Law—A Study Under the Direction of Edith Lowenstein. Oceana Publications, N. Y. 1958. 388 pp.

The Offenders, Giles Playfair and Derrick Sington. Simon and Schuster, N. Y. 1957. 305 pp.

World Peace Through World Law, Grenville Clark and Louis B. Sohn, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1958. 540 pp.