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Shaping American Culture

Review article

John Harmon McElroy, Finding Freedom: America's Distinctive Cultural Formation. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989. xiii+164 pp. ISBN 0-8093-1515-7. Price: \$24.95 (hardback).

Culture, in John H. McElroy's words, is a "unique set of simple beliefs formed and communicated over generations of time through behavior". Operating with this definition, the author examines the formation and distinctive characteristics of four cultures formed in the Americas: those of the United States, Canada, Brazil and Spanish America. Each of these was initiated by European "extracontinental imperialism", but McElroy focuses on the degree to which these four cultures differ from European culture. The central thesis of the book is that out of the four cultures in the Americas that of the United States is the least European.

McElroy, who is a professor of American literature at the University of Arizona, marshals an impressive array of arguments in favor of his central thesis. Perhaps the most crucial part relates to the origins of the culture of the United States and concerns the conditions under which emigration took place to central North America, which term designates the United States prior to its independence, and to the other three areas. McElroy identifies an important difference in these conditions. Emigration to Canada, Brazil and Spanish America was characterized by "close imperial supervision and emigrant screening", which conspired to preserve "a European group conformity". By contrast, it is emphasized that in the 17th and early 18th centuries Britain followed a permissive policy about the selection of emigrants to central North America. This open policy on the part of Britain "had little to do with political liberalism". Rather it was only an expedient strategy for exploitation, for it was contingent upon the continuing loyalty and subservience of the colonies in central North America to the British crown. The idea of allowing generally unrestricted emigration to central North America was attractive to the British government because unlike France, Portugal and Spain, the imperial masters of Canada, Brazil, and Spanish America, respectively, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Britain faced "an internal displaced-persons problem". McElroy identifies changes in British agricultural practices and beginning industrialization in the eighteenth century as leading to this problem of displaced persons. Also, the quick settlement of the colonies in central North America was

regarded as creating a prospective and lucrative market for British goods produced by industrialization. A further factor was religious, for "governmental intolerance of nonconforming religious sects caused other social strains and conflicts in Britain which also made unselective emigration desirable".

Such different factors resulted in a permissive British immigration policy in central North America. The policy was permissive in respect of Englishmen. However, equally or perhaps even more significantly, it was also permissive in respect of many other European nationalities, as McElroy emphasizes. He estimates that during the colonial period of United States history, that is, from 1607 to 1775, perhaps one million Europeans emigrated to central North America. So large was the proportion of non-Englishmen that given the evidence of last names, by the end of the eighteenth century their share was perhaps one half of the population.

The point about permissive British immigration policy in central North America during the colonial period of American history is important because it enables the author to formulate his central concept of self-selected and self-selecting emigrants. To a significant extent emigration to Canada, Brazil and Spanish America was government-controlled, but emigration to central North America was self-selecting. This concept of self-selected emigration is the key to McElroy's study and in the opinion of the present reviewer it constitutes the single most important contribution of the book. Self-selected emigrants populated central North America by choice rather than by accident of birth. Ultimately, the concept of self-selection leads to and underlies the distinctive American cultural belief in self-responsibility, self-improvement and the equality of liberty. McElroy formulates the first two of these important aspects of American culture with eloquence:

American culture was committed to the idea that anyone could succeed if he made up his mind to it. The wisdom of social stratification is the wisdom of knowing one's place and staying in it, while carefully minding one's manners and being humbly grateful for whatever favors may be conferred by one's "betters" in a higher social "station". This European outlook did not fit the conditions in America.

The idea of equality in central North America then took on a radically new meaning. Not only were the lowborn and the highborn equal as human beings, but there was "no inherent reason why the two might not change places after they began life, depending on a person's individual qualities and achievements".

Emphasizing the newness of American culture, the author argues persuasively that the real American revolution was not the American war of independence against Britain. Rather, the "real American revolution was the new cultural formation that took place in central

North America between 1600 and 1750, which the war for independence from Europe expressed".

McElroy is aware of European philosophers in the 1600s and 1700s who "wrote about the idea that human beings have equal worth by virtue of being born human beings," but he goes on to observe pointedly that at that time "belief in equality of birth was not enculturated behavior from generation to generation in Europe". Indeed, he proceeds to raise the question of the direction of cultural influence by asking "whether the idea of equality would ever have become credible and influential throughout the world, including the continent of Europe," if it had not been enculturated in America.

It followed from the distinctive American belief in the individual that theocracies did not flourish in central North America. McElroy discusses attempts to establish them and their failure. As he puts it, "in American culture, the form and content of religious belief are a matter of personal choice, not a matter of governmental decision". This radical departure from the culture that prevailed in Europe at the time also ensured that in central North America there were never any religious wars.

The remarks above relate to what the present reviewer takes to be a central theme—or perhaps even the central theme—of the book, the formation and emergence of the culture of the United States and the distinctiveness of that culture from European culture. There are many aspects of the book, and even of this central main theme, that cannot be covered in this review, for reasons of space and economy. Such aspects, discussed in stimulating detail by McElroy, include the distinctive characteristics of the cultures of Canada, Brazil and Spanish America, the significance, to culture, of geography, the role played within American culture by "other Americans", and reasons why there was so little colonization of central North America in the 16th century. In chapter 4 he refers to frequent European characterizations of America and American culture as innocent or naive, and relates these to the visionary perception of reality in American culture. In the final chapter there is an examination of American culture in the twentieth century. McElroy chronicles the deployment of the American military in wars outside North America, but emphasizes that in none of them did the United States gain or seek to gain territory or even reparations, not even when the United States itself was attacked by Japan. This is in sharp contrast to European traditions. At the same time, in domestic affairs McElroy sees in twentieth century American culture a shift away from the natural law, a shift away from a belief in the idea of "man as a creature having a connection to a transcendent spiritual reality". In this shift the author sees the danger of American individualism "degenerating into licentiousness and selfishness".

What one may quibble with in the book is not significant. In one or two places a slightly more explicit discussion might have been appropriate. For instance, when discussing the origins of the political culture of the United States, McElroy argues against invoking the British constitution of the time and its theoreticians as the model for the United States. His argument against invoking a British model is entirely convincing, but one may wonder if a discussion of, or at least a reference to, theoreticians of the French Enlightenment, including Montesquieu, might have been appropriate here. This would perhaps have led to a comparison of the French and American revolutions. This is all the more relevant because several of the features that, as McElroy emphasizes, were distinctive of the American revolution, such as the elimination of royalty, also applied to the French revolution. The point about the United States Constitution is of interest from another perspective as well. The author refers to the mystique of the United States Constitution, replacing "the mystique of the State as ultimate authority that has been so important to European thought". A mystical belief in the state has indeed been important in European history and culture and McElroy might have lifted the point from a parenthesis and developed it in some detail. Also, given the unique significance of the United States Constitution, he might have examined it at more length, in comparison with both contemporary and later constitutions in the other four regions.

Such critical remarks are insignificant quibbles. They may serve as pointers to follow-up work, but they do not detract from the overall merit and enduring value of the book. There is little doubt that the author succeeds in his central concern of tracing the origins and development of America's cultural formation and in identifying its distinctive properties. The book is written in a very lucid style throughout. It comes out at a good time, given the increasing interest, especially in Europe, in American studies. Thus the book will be a welcome addition to the syllabuses of American studies. Where American studies is not yet a discipline in its own right, it may be used by English departments as a reading on American cultural history and as background to the study of American literature. It is not only a good textbook, it may also be read with pleasure and profit by members of the general public wishing to learn about the distinctive character of American culture. In view of its focus, it is clearly of special interest to readers in the United States, Europe, Canada, Brazil and Spanish America.