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STRANGE NEW WORLD

JOHN E. LONGHURST

IN JAMES FENIMORE COOPER'S *Homeward Bound* (1838) we strike up a shipboard acquaintance with Mr. Steadfast Dodge, who is on his way home to America after a tour of inspection of the decadence of Europe.

Mr. Dodge found the Parisians to be immoral and depraved, a natural consequence of their drinking wine and eating meals at improper hours. The Cathedral of "Notter Dam" was marred by an irreligion of structure, a lack of piety in architecture, and was much inferior in comfort and true taste to the simpler (and healthier) American churches. The music at the Grand Opera was altogether inferior to American music, particularly to the spiritual songs of the Sabbath. The dancing at the French Ballet was more suited to a funeral than a ballroom and couldn't begin to compare with a good American cotillion. The National Gallery was filled with obscene art, although it did have a few good still-lives of fruit which looked natural enough to eat, and there were a few other like paintings which were on a par with the work of a young American genius named Cooley who painted realistic store signs in Dodgetown, U.S.A.

Steadfast Dodge's contribution to the pleasures of shipboard life was to bring to his fellow-passengers some of the pleasures and experiences of American education and self-government. The education part consisted of a collection of aphorisms with which Mr. Dodge daily edified his companions: men are equal in every way; and no man can pretend to be better than another; it is presumptuous in an American to pretend to be different from his

fellow-citizens; no man has a right to be peculiar in a free country; the idea of exclusiveness is odious to the People; the People rule, and ought to rule; true liberty means "equal laws, equal rights, equality in all respects, and pure, abstract, unqualified liberty, beyond all question, sir." And: "Liberty . . . is a boon that merits our unqualified gratitude, and which calls for our daily and hourly thanks to the gallant spirits who, in the days that tried men's souls, were foremost in the tented field, and in the councils of the nation."

For education in the principles of self-government, Mr. Dodge proposed the formation among the passengers of a society to perpetuate the morals and the religious principles of the nation's forefathers. He also sought to create a society for abstaining from liquor, and another to conduct a straw vote on the forthcoming presidential election.

The practice of self-government was as important on the high seas as it was on land. The only proper way to run a ship—or anything else—was by majority vote. So Mr. Dodge canvassed the passengers on navigation matters and confronted the Captain with the intelligence that Popular Opinion was opposed to his judgments on the handling of the ship. The direction of the ship's course was "monstrous unpopular" and, Mr. Dodge warned, "public opinion is setting so strong against you, that I expect an explosion," and furthermore, that if news of all this got into the papers back home it would spread "like fire on the prairies."

Steadfast Dodge was a democrat—a democrat so pure that he would allow no man a right even to his own senses except by popular consent. He was a product of that part of America where people lived and thought in gangs, where few had the moral courage to assert their own individuality, and where the great mass was blindly addicted to the proposition that while everyone had privileges, nobody had any rights. Dodge, who was too meek, and "too purely democratic ever to speak aloud unless under the shadow of public opinion," was thus transformed into an American demagogue—a genuine Inquisitor—"precisely in obedience to those

feelings and inclinations which would have made him a courtier anywhere else."

Majorities [Cooper goes on] were his hobbies, and though singularly timid as an individual, put him on the strongest side and he was ready to face the devil. In short, Mr. Dodge was a people's man, because his strongest desire, his "ambition and pride," as he often expressed it, was to be a man of the people. In his particular neighborhood at home, sentiment ran in veins, like gold in the mines, or in streaks of public opinion; and though there might be three or four of these public sentiments, so long as each had its party, no one was afraid to avow it; but as for maintaining a notion that was not thus upheld, there was a savor of aristocracy about it that would damn even a mathematical proposition, though regularly solved and proved. So much and so long had Mr. Dodge respired a moral atmosphere of this community character and gregarious propensity, that he had, in many things, lost all sense of his individuality; as much so, in fact, as if he breathed with a pair of county lungs, ate with a common mouth, drank from the town-pump, and slept in the open air. . . .

[He] never did anything beyond acts of the most ordinary kind without first weighing its probable effect in the neighborhood. . . . No Asiatic slave stood more in terror of a vindictive master than Mr. Dodge stood in fear and trembling before [the majority]. . . . As to the minority, he was as brave as a lion, could snap his fingers at them, and was foremost in deriding and scoffing at all they said and did. . . .

Steadfast Dodge was a man that wished to meddle with and control all things, without possessing precisely the spirit that was necessary to leave him master of himself; he had a rabid desire for the good opinion of everything human, without always taking the means necessary to preserve his own; [he] was a stout declaimer for the rights of the community, while forgetting that the community itself is but a means set up for the accomplishment of a given end; and [he] felt an inward and profound respect for everything that was beyond his reach, which manifested itself, not in manly efforts to attain the forbidden fruit, but rather in a spirit of opposition and detraction that only betrayed, through its jealousy, the existence of the feeling. This jealousy, however, he affected to conceal under an intense regard for popular rights, since he was apt

to inver [that] it was quite intolerable that any man should possess anything, even to qualities, in which his neighbors might not properly participate. All these, moreover, and many similar traits, Mr. Dodge encouraged in the spirit of liberty!

But Steadfast Dodge was after all a coward and a sneak, and—as contemporary wisdom has it—it isn't fair to condemn a whole group just because of the actions of a certain few. Fenimore Cooper does not let us off so easily. In his next novel (*Home as Found*, also 1838) we are introduced to Aristabulus Bragg, a compound of honesty and duplicity, kindness and selfishness, impudence and humility—a man, in short, like most of us. And what has Aristabulus Bragg become in the new egalitarian Utopia of North America? Like Steadfast Dodge, he is a “political mushroom.” His notion of honesty is that anything is honest if it is not against the law. He has a “secret sense” that he is qualified for any station in life; he never hesitates to speak on any subject whether he knows anything about it or not, on the theory that opinion imposes no obligation to knowledge. He recognizes no distinctions among men except those based on money (to which he gives a “practical deference”) and political success (toward which he feels the reverence of a serf for his feudal lord). And, of course, he abdicates all personal judgment in the face of the mass.

Steadfast Dodge would have been a despicable character in any environment. But Aristabulus Bragg was a product of circumstance:

Had it been his fortune to be thrown earlier into a better sphere, the same natural qualities that rendered him so expert in his present situation, would have conduced to his improvement, and most probably would have formed a gentleman, a scholar, and one who could have contributed largely to the welfare and tastes of his fellow-creatures. That such was not his fate, was more his misfortune than his fault, for his plastic character had readily taken the impression of those things that from propinquity alone pressed hardest on it.

On the other hand, Steadfast [Dodge] was a hypocrite by nature,

cowardly, envious, and malignant; and circumstances had only lent their aid to the natural tendencies of his disposition. That two men so differently constituted at their birth, should meet, as it might be, in a common centre, in so many of their habits and opinions, was merely the result of accident and education.

This must have sounded like strange language from a native American patriot, and a Jeffersonian liberal at that. Fenimore Cooper had a passionate love of America, and he never lost his conviction that America could offer to all mankind the greatest opportunity for freedom and happiness ever provided on this planet. During a visit to Italy he wrote:

It would seem that, as nature has given its periods to the stages of animal life, it has also set limits to all moral and political ascendancy. While the city of [the] Medici is receding from its crumbling walls, . . . the Queen of the Adriatic [is] sleeping on her muddy isles, and Rome itself is only to be traced by fallen temples and buried columns, the youthful vigor of America is fast covering the wilds of the West with the happiest fruits of human industry.

In 1833 Cooper returned to America after seven years abroad, and he was shocked by what he saw. Soon after his arrival he wrote his friend William Skinner that in the short time since his return¹ he had already seen enough to convince him that "anti-American sentiments" were more popular in his native land than true American ideals. From that time until his death in 1851, Cooper's life was consumed by an unhappy passion for correcting the evils into which his country was drifting. He not only failed, but in the words of Howard Mumford Jones, whose latest volume* inspires this brief essay: "Alas for republics! Cooper was jailed, suffered many times from the tyranny of majority opinion, and lost his pristine enthusiasm for 'democracy.'"

Fenimore Cooper was a fierce individualist, so he was sensitive to tyranny even when it wore the trappings of liberty. And it was

* Howard Mumford Jones. *O Strange New World. American Culture: the Formative Years*. New York: The Viking Press, 1964.

a special kind of tyranny—in a new and strange form which defied even the articulate Tocqueville's efforts to find a suitable word for it—which Cooper found to be the besetting sin of the new "anti-America." It was not a question of political liberty, which Americans enjoyed to a greater degree than any other people. It was, rather, a question of personal liberty, which in America was threatened by the "extra-legal authority" of popular pressure. Cooper speaks of it in his *Gleanings in Europe* (1837):

The American goes and comes when he pleases, and no one asks for a passport; he has his political rights; talks of his liberty; swaggers of his advantages, and yet does less as he pleases, even in innocent things, than the Frenchman. His neighbours form a police, and a most troublesome and impertinent one it sometimes proves to be.

The individuality of American character was slowly being undermined by the advances of an "overwhelming mediocrity" which admitted of no differences among men, which hated superiority and independence of spirit, and which looked on the "insulated effort of the mind" as dangerously aristocratic. Other unhappy consequences derived from this blight of self-satisfied ignorance: the submergence of the individual in a tasteless common identity, with a cheap set of values which worshipped money, despised culture, practiced an aggressive familiarity, and lived in a perpetual boasting and smug self-conceit about its own virtues. This was the strange new world of Steadfast Dodge and Aristabulus Bragg to which Cooper returned in 1833.

The bitter disillusionment of Fenimore Cooper at the betrayal of American ideals by the Americans themselves is not, properly speaking, the subject matter of Mr. Jones's new book. The noted historian from Harvard has set out, in this product of his amber years, to examine America from early times to the age of Jackson ("and beyond"), as it appeared both to itself and to its European parents. His thesis is that the Old World projected into the New "a rich, complex, and contradictory set of habits, forces, practices,

values, and presuppositions," and that the inhabitants of the New World accepted some of these, modified or rejected others, or "fused them with inventions of its own."

Since American History is not within this reviewer's special field of competence, we leave to the practitioners of that art the responsibility of judging how well Professor Jones has discharged his task. But certainly it may be said that a book which spurs its reader on to the pleasures of further inquiry has achieved a rare and worthwhile object. And Professor Jones, in his middle and later chapters (VI, VII, VIII, and IX), where he deals with the general character of the new American "culture" of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, has driven us to reading the likes of Benjamin Franklin, Tom Paine, Jean de Crèvecoeur, Noah Webster, and finally to wading through the heavy prose of Cooper's novels.

One of the major notions of American culture to develop in the early years was that the New World was a kind of terrestrial paradise, the hope of the human race. The American settlers, says Professor Jones, looked upon themselves as the "heirs of all the ages in the foremost files of time. . . . They believed they were opening a new epoch in the history of mankind." The *Royal American Magazine* in 1774 suggested that the highest perfection of all branches of knowledge had been reserved (presumably by Inscrutable Providence) for the "land of light and freedom." In a July 4th oration in Boston in 1825 Charles Sprague announced—as many others have done before and since—that the achievement of American independence "will stand in history [as] the epoch from which to compute the real duration of political liberty." Noah Webster saw a Mosaic parallel between the new American era and the "promulgation of the Jewish laws at Mount Sinai." Tom Paine, a modern Joshua in a new Canaan, declared that "alien vices" linger and die in the healthful climate of "the land that floweth with milk and honey, America." Crèvecoeur, whose *Letters from an American Farmer* is a melodious blend of natural history and bucolic hosannas, speaks in tones reminiscent

of St. Paul's exhortations to the Gentiles on the happy fruits of Mystical Union: "We are the most perfect society now existing in the world." "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles." "Here an European, fatigued with luxury, riches, and pleasures, may find a sweet relaxation." Here, the newcomer "begins to feel the effects of a sort of resurrection; hitherto he had not lived, but simply vegetated." "How happy we are here. . . . How thankful we ought to be."

America was Arcady as well as Canaan. It was graced with beautiful flora and magnificent lush landscape (unlike the original Arcady), and was peopled by the Noble Savage, a red counterpart of Daphnis and Chloe, possessed of the same innocence and virtue. The Noble Savage soon dispelled some of these notions with his tomahawk but the ideal he represented was transferred to the white man, with the European immigrant now taking on the virtues infused by the natural environment of the new Utopia across the sea. Professor Jones tells of a traveller in America in the late 1750's who reports of some German settlers in the Shenandoah Valley that, living in the midst of scenes of unsurpassed pastoral splendor, they enjoy perfect liberty; they know neither poverty nor vices, and covet none of the (corruptive) elegancies of life. Rather, "they possess what many princes would give their dominions for, health, content, and tranquility of mind."

Paine, Jefferson and most others considered the farmer to be the ideal political unit in the new society—a manly, independent citizen, his personality fulfilled and his intelligence flowered by his daily contact with the soil. Literary men sang paeans to the self-reliance, industry, domestic virtues and religious faith nurtured on the farm. Crèvecoeur defines the rustic virtues of the farmer's counterpart, the granitic seafaring people of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard:

They have all, from the highest to the lowest, a singular keenness of judgment, unassisted by any academical light; they all possess a large share of good sense . . . [which] approaches nearest to the infallibility of instinct. Shining talents and University knowledge

would be entirely useless here, nay, would be dangerous; it would pervert their plain judgment.

Which explains why Crèvecoeur's local farm-belt minister prepared his best sermons while he walked behind the plough. And which also explains the curious sub-title of one of Noah Webster's books (*The Prompter*): "A Commentary on Common Sayings and Subjects, which are full of Common Sense—the Best Sense in the World." In any event, it certainly explains Poor Richard.

Out of all this there evolved, by fundamentalist law, the Whore of Babylon tradition in American thought. Professor Jones supplies numerous examples of American feeling toward the luxurious, effeminate and degenerate European world left behind. The *American Magazine* in 1757 denounced European luxuries (mostly French), from ostentatious buildings to masquerades. A local Reverend in 1763 preached against excessive trade with Europe lest it result in an inundation of the wealth and luxury of that corrupter continent. The *Royal American Magazine* in 1774 informed its readers that Europeans "whom the circling cup of luxury intoxicates" were "unfit to cultivate Ohio's banks." One Tench Coxe wrote of the "madness for foreign finery" which "rages and destroys" and warned that America held no charms for the "dissipated and voluptuous part of mankind." We are also disappointed to learn that the urbane and intellectual Jefferson warned that a young man (under 30) would be better off to stay at home. In Europe he learns drinking, develops a fondness for European luxury and dissipation, becomes dazzled by aristocracy, and in general "loses in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits, and in his happiness." We know what to expect from Tom Paine: he describes France (before the Revolution, of course) as a "country that was like the lap of sensual pleasure," and an "Augean stable of parasites and plunderers." As for humor, what is funny in Europe is certainly not funny in America:

European wit is one of the worst articles we can import. It . . . debauches the very vitals of chastity, and gives a false coloring to every thing it censures or defends. We soon grow fatigued with the excess, and withdraw like gluttons sickened with intemperance.

Under such circumstances as these, it is no surprise that learning and literature did not prosper in the new Arcady. Professor Jones assesses the general influence on America of the traditions of European Renaissance culture which flourished during the early centuries of American colonization, and concludes that they had little if any effect in America. During the colonial period, some Americans went on the grand tour through Europe, and occasionally somebody owned a Renaissance painting. It may also be said, for the sake of irrelevant argument, that the Virginia gentry and the New England Brahmin are in some degree modeled on the courtier of Castiglione. But the fact remains that "direct contact between Renaissance culture, however defined, and the rising American republic diminished and virtually disappeared with the Revolution."

In the matter of Spanish influence on American culture, Professor Jones starts out bravely to make a case for it:

It was this Spanish culture, founded in medievalism, reshaped by the Renaissance, and transformed by the Baroque and by the Enlightenment, with which the English, after them the British and the British North Americans, and finally the citizens of the United States were incessantly in contact.

However, when we get down to cases, we learn that American interest in its Spanish cultural heritage seems to have been confined largely to incidental effects of the Spanish presence in North America: the use of the Spanish language in the American southwest; the California mission; a vocabulary for the American cattleman, and tourist attractions (churches, buildings, fortifications) for the "wandering Anglo-Saxons." In music there is little evidence to offer until the 20th century when the tango and rhum-

ba came into vogue, if one considers that to be evidence. In literature, Spanish influence in America before Washington Irving appears in the confections of a handful of "romantic" novels, of which Simms's *The Damsel of Darien* (1839) is an instructive example. As Professor Jones says, in classic understatement, none of this stuff really plumbs the "depths of Spanish character."

It is (happily) undeniable that Massachusetts Bay in the colonial and early national periods was a center of intellectual activity in a great many fields. But this tradition, particularly the sense of historical connection with the ancient past which characterized the educated European of the 19th century, was soon dissipated in America. "Few statesmen," says Professor Jones, "were convinced, as the Revolutionary and Federal generations had been, that classical history and the classic philosophers offered guide lines to the nation." And, "The administration of John Quincy Adams (1825-29) probably closed the era in which the classical past was a dynamic force in American public life."

If the Americans rejected the learning of the past in general, and of Europe in particular, they seemed to be little inclined to put anything in its place. "Learning" and "culture" were, after all, corruptive artifacts of the degenerate luxuries of Europe, and contrary to the healthy traditions of the Arcadian rustic. Hear this remarkable passage from Crèvecoeur. His wife cautions him against letting it be known that he has taken to writing, for "there would be no end of the talk of the people." He could well be accused of "vain notions" and suspected of being up to some mischief. Some would wonder what it was that a man could possibly write so much about; others might think he had aspirations for public office. Consider, she warns, that his reputation might be at stake. Instead of their being well looked upon as they were, and living in peace with the world, the neighbors would be making strange surmises. "I had rather be as we are, neither better nor worse than the rest of our country folks." So let his writing remain a secret, "as great a secret as if it were some heinous crime." Englishmen and Europeans may write, says she, because they are

"strange people" and have nothing else to do, since they live on bank notes and don't work.

Crèvecoeur's American farmer describes his library as consisting of a few musty books which his father had brought from England, and which consisted mostly of hardnosed Scotch Divinity. So too does Franklin tell us in his *Autobiography*: "My father's little library consisted chiefly of books in polemic divinity." And George Ticknor's description of the difficulties he encountered in 1813 trying to learn German in Boston (a comparative citadel of American intellectualism) recalls the obstacles faced by the Renaissance Italian in his efforts to learn Greek before the coming of Chrysoloras. Even Noah Webster, whose chief mission in life was to create a native American language free from the corruptions of Europe and guided by democratic rather than literary principles, complained at length about these problems: "Our colleges are disgracefully destitute of books;" "scarcely a branch of science can be fully investigated in America for want of books;" "in the higher branches of literature our learning is superficial to a shameful degree;" "as to classical learning, history . . . mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, botany, and natural history . . . we may be said to have no learning at all;" "I see everywhere a disposition to decry the ancient and original authors." There was a reason for it, a viewpoint implicit in the new Arcady, and it must have pained a patriot like Webster to say so: "a man who has grown suddenly from a dunghill, by a fortunate throw of the die, avoids a man of learning as you would a tiger."

America's "secular Bible," says Professor Jones, is the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin. Reading this volume again, after a good many years, one is struck with Franklin's wisdom and common sense unadulterated by pious delusions. But this reader was also struck with the uneasy suspicion that the wise and honored Franklin understood everything and felt nothing. He escaped being a poet, he says, because his father pointed out to him that people who wrote verse never made any money. Poetry did have some utility, however; it was an amusing way now and then to

improves one's language, "but no farther." This sort of thing is depressing enough in a man of Franklin's stature. But in the lesser endowed tribe of his spiritual descendants Franklin's spirit of practicality and utilitarianism not only denies any importance to aesthetic experience, as Professor Jones says, but it encourages the growth of a "dreary self-regard and a drearier hypocrisy." In our opinion, it does even more: It helps to create the modern mutation of Steadfast Dodge and Aristabulus Bragg—the aggressive Philistine of *Main Street* who drains the hills of color and blasphemes the ancient prophets as he sets about to create a strange new world in his own bleak image.