



Reflections on

America

TOCQUEVILLE, WEBER & ADORNO
IN THE UNITED STATES

CLAU S O F F E

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Tocqueville, Weber and Adorno in the United States

Claus Offe

Translated by Patrick Camiller

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Abbreviations

- DiA Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. [1835, 1840], 1945
- DoE Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1986
- ES Weber, Max, *Economy and Society*, 1978
- GARS Weber, Max, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, 3 vols. [1920], 1988
- GAWL Weber, Max, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 1968
- GPS Weber, Max, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, 2nd edn, 1958
- GS Adorno, Theodor W., *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20 vols., 1997
- PE Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1958
- SSP Weber, Max, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*, 1988

Acknowledgements

This little book is based upon the Adorno Lectures I gave at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in November 2003. The occasion provided a welcome opportunity to revisit the institute in the close academic neighbourhood of which I began my career forty years ago. It also gave me the chance to revisit the writings of three classical authors in the work of whom some common threads and themes are to be discovered and who propose alternative ways of how we can make sense, to the extent we still can, of the notion of 'the West'. Helpful suggestions have been provided by David Abraham, Harald Bluhm, Christian Brütt, Axel Honneth, Martin Jay, Hans Joas, Peter A. Kraus and Anson Rabinbach, as well as my graduate students Julien Deroin, Nicole Dolif, Dominik Sommer and Robert Schwind at Humboldt University.

Claus Offe
Berlin, 1 March 2005

It is not, then, merely to satisfy a curiosity ... that I have examined America; my wish has been to find there instruction by which we may ourselves profit.

Alexis de Tocqueville

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Introduction

Towards the end of 2002, when Axel Honneth did me the honour of inviting me to give the Adorno Lectures of 2003, it might already have been foreseen that relations between Europe and America would define the current intellectual and political debates. In choosing my theme, however, I had no intention of involving myself in current affairs, and I would like to hold to that decision, even if not in a completely consistent manner. My academic teaching has already concerned itself with Max Weber's largely unclarified relationship to Alexis de Tocqueville¹ – to whom he was clearly indebted for many of his ideas or actual concepts, yet whom he never once mentions – and with the subterranean relationship of Adorno and the so-called Frankfurt School to Weber's sociology and diagnosis of the times. There are also a few things to be discovered about the intellectual legacy that links Adorno to Tocqueville (who was widely read among émigrés of the 1940s in 'German California'), not the least being the latter's surprisingly developed theory of a 'culture industry' in the 1830s. I therefore welcomed the opportunity to shed some light, if not on a continuity and contemporary elaboration of common intellectual themes,

¹ See Hecht 1998.

then on thematic affinities and divergences that the three great social scientists display, from their different temporal vantage points, in their analyses of a common object, the United States, as well as in the questions they raise about the condition of Europe in their time. The object of these lectures is the disturbing special case of the American model of Western modernization in contrast to European social conditions and the dangers and prospects of development in store for the continent.

To be more precise, the common theme of our three travellers is the precarious fate of liberty in modern capitalist societies. 'Tyranny of the majority', 'iron cage of dependence', 'reification' and 'administered world' – these are the well-known formulas they used, at least in some parts of their work, to characterize the negative destiny of Western modernity, while constantly searching for counter-forces to halt its advance or even to change it for the better. The road to serfdom is the theme they all pursued, for an observation period amounting to no less than 120 years. They saw in America a highly ambiguous combination: both the emergence of a society of free and equal individuals, and its tragically misdirected outcome, which presented itself to them as a system of imperceptible and therefore all the more effective (or anyway inescapable) constraints that took its toll on liberty and ultimately also on equality.

The task I set myself in these lectures was therefore to reconstruct the contrasting self-descriptions and sociological diagnoses of contemporary Europe that arose out of, and as a result of, their trips to and inside the United States.

If, by 'trip', we understand a temporary change of residence with the intention to return, then we may describe as trips all three of these stays in the United States (however different their causes and circumstances). All three are equally governed by a comparative perspective on the European place of origin. These self-perceptions from afar belong to Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber and Theodor W. Adorno; their trips took place in 1831–2, 1904 and 1938 respectively, with roughly two generations between Tocqueville and Weber and

one more generation between Weber and Adorno. They stayed in the United States for nine months (Tocqueville), thirteen weeks (Weber) and eleven years (Adorno), for reasons that could not have been more different from one another: in Tocqueville's case to conduct study and exploration on the instructions of his government department (the French justice ministry); in Weber's to accept an invitation to a conference, followed by a tour; and in Adorno's to escape from Nazi Germany and to find work in the field of the social sciences.

The three travellers were following a certain intellectual tradition when they set foot on American soil – a tradition in European social theory going back to the late seventeenth century, for which the nature of European problems and the range of possible solutions were to be understood through their reflection in the realities of America. Asia and, especially, Africa were felt by Europeans to be alien regions, and as such the objects of a detached interest in exotic conditions completely different from their own. It is true that America also displayed traces of the exotic in its indigenous peoples, and in the structures and traditions that had been largely destroyed in the process of colonization. But its settlement by Europeans and its share in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition gave it the status of a more or less distant relative whose independent destiny, though perhaps of interest because the welfare of kith and kin was at stake, inevitably also irritated us – and challenged us to make comparative assessments – because of its evident deviation from European patterns.

'America' – both here and there the customary term for the territory of the United States – has for Europeans always been not an exotic growth but a branch on the same tree. But how is it that this branch bears such unfamiliar blossoms and fruits? America provokes a question that makes no sense in relation to Asia or Africa: whether over time we will become like them or they like us – and, if neither, how the persistent differences should be explained and evaluated. We cannot describe America without describing ourselves as Europeans – whether as more or less similar variants of 'Western' society, or as a configuration of contrasts. Observation of the American

social experiment has always been a cause for reflection and self-interpretation concerning European identity.²

Since the late seventeenth century, it has become customary in Europe to approach the society taking shape in North America as though in a time machine. In 1690, in connection with his contract theory based on natural rights, John Locke wrote: 'In the beginning all the world was America.'³ And, according to Kamphausen, 'in the eyes of the Old World, America really brought about a new beginning in world history', offering to Europeans the model of a 'natural' social evolution that stretched from the first settlers, as hunter-gatherers, fur-traders and stockbreeders, down to intensive agriculture, industrialization and urbanization.⁴ With this time machine it was possible to travel in both the past and the future. It was possible in the past since the relatively short and transparent history, from the first settler communities in the wilds of nature to the gradual formation of a federal and democratic state system of the USA, was simply claimed as a model of development. That which, in Europe, lay hidden in the mists of a long untraceable past could be read as from an open book in the case of the United States. 'Only by becoming Indians can [the settlers] survive in the colonies; they must return as hunters and gatherers to the first developmental stages of humanity, followed by fur-traders and stockbreeders and the growth of intensive agriculture down to industrialization and urbanization.'⁵ This conceptual model has defined the American sense of identity down to the present day. It has often been pointed out that many Americans still have great difficulties with the idea that any citizen in any other country could ever opt for economic, cultural or political conditions

² Kamphausen 2002, 146f.

³ Locke 1988, 301 (§49, and cf. §108). In the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Elementa Philosophiae* (1642), *libertas* is already presented as synonymous with the state of nature, through the image of 'a woman wielding a spear and bow and wearing no more than a grass skirt' – 'an obvious allusion to the savage natives of America' (Münkler 1993, 46).

⁴ Kamphausen 2002, 169f.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.