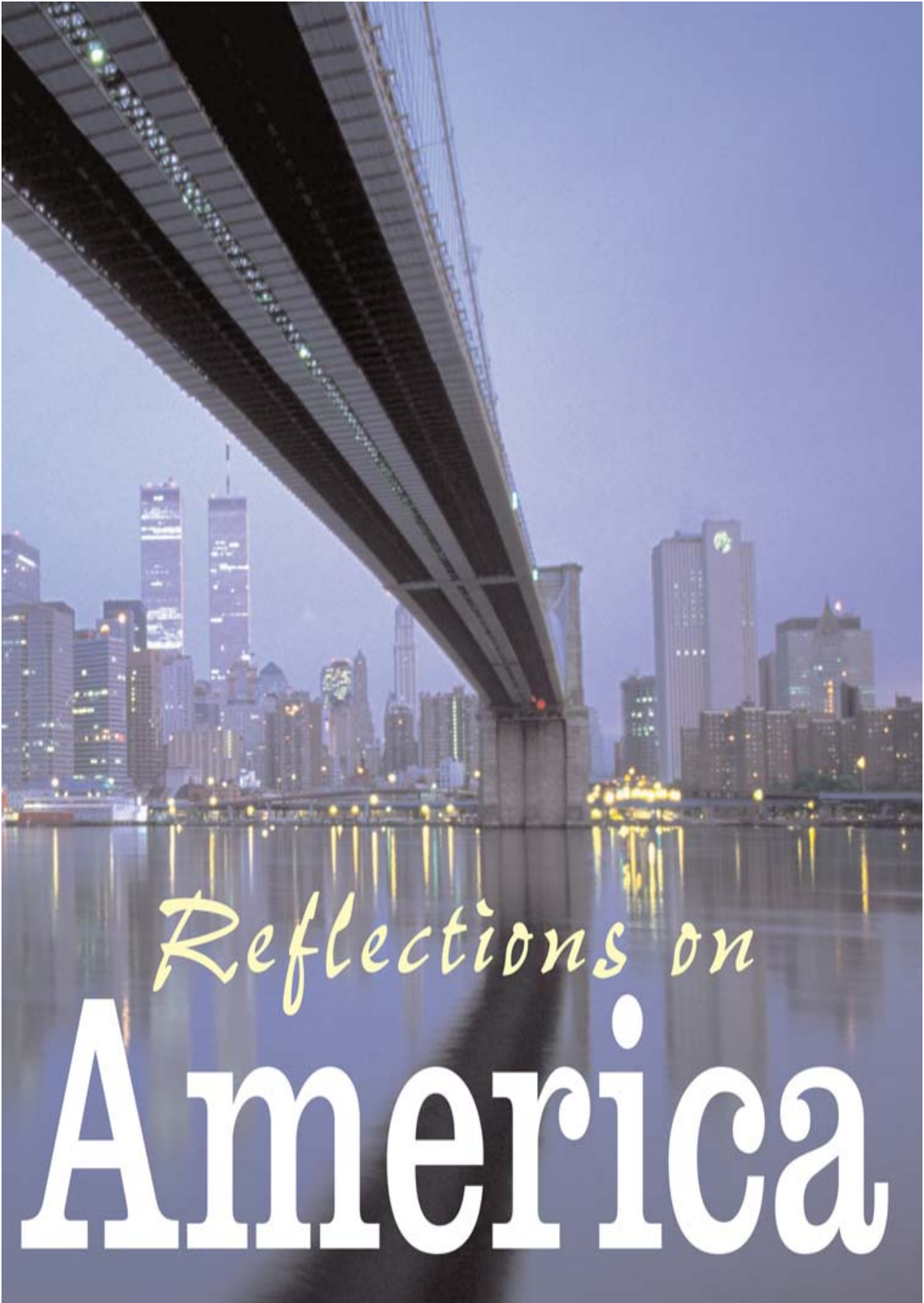




Reflections on
America

TOCQUEVILLE, WEBER & ADORNO
IN THE UNITED STATES

CLAU S O F F E



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Claus Offe

Translated by Patrick Camiller

polity

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Contents

Abbreviations

Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

2 Alexis de Tocqueville or the Tyranny of the Middle Class

3 Max Weber: American Escape Routes from the Iron Cage?

4 Theodor W. Adorno: 'Culture Industry' and Other Views of the 'American Century'

5 The United States in the Twenty-First Century: Traditions of Religious Socialization and Struggle against 'Evil'

References and Bibliography

Index

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

1

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, 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 wellknown formulas they used, at least in some parts of their work, to characterize the negative destiny of Western modernity, while constantly searching for counterforces 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)