

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FM - 18
First Feelings about America

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 17.

Gravel Hill,
Burnham Overy,
King's Lynn, Norfolk,
England.

20 May 1968.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Before the memories of a six week trip to America are blurred, it seems worth putting down on paper some of my impressions of this first visit. So many people who have been to the United States have done the same thing that it is hard to be original. Therefore, with this brief experience, all that I can hope to do is to recall my feelings about odds and ends. I am all too aware, moreover, that I saw only a fraction of the country, and I am certainly not prepared to defend dogmatically any of my observations.

My reactions to the United States were undoubtedly tempered by a two year spell in Brazil. The vastness of America, for example, made little impact; indeed, with its network of communications, it seemed much smaller than Brazil. On the other hand, the impersonal nature of American society and its technology hit me as a blow between the eyes.

Since we were flying in from the south, it seemed logical to begin there. After meeting a couple of English friends in Pensacola, Florida, we spent a few days with them driving west to New Orleans and up the delta to Jackson, Mississippi. From there we took a bus to Charlottesville, Virginia, and made our way by degrees up the eastern seaboard to Cambridge, Massachusetts. We also hopped across to Madison, Wisconsin for a couple of days. This crammed six weeks left me to the end bemused by the strangeness and novelty of the country; I had little time to check or modify my initial impressions.

In retrospect, I believe that it was a mistake to have started off in the Deep South. I had imagined that, since it was the part of America most likely to have elements in common with Brazil, it would make an interesting comparison. As it was, insufficient time prevented me from discovering whether this might be so, but certainly at a superficial level it was very different indeed.

Travelling from motel to motel like Lolita and Humbert Humbert, we played a kind of guessing game with what we saw. Still numb with culture shock, I remember vividly the lunatic newspapers and sprawling, garish, advertisement-ridden towns. The shopping centres were filled with pasty-faced, tense-looking whites and morose-looking negroes who appeared to suffer from malnutrition as much as the Brazilian poor. Most depressing of all were the journeys through the countryside, where we passed decrepit, wooden cabins with melancholy negroes sitting on rocking chairs and staring, with glazed, unseeing eyes, at nothing; The air of decay and the sadness were powerful in both town and country. Conversations with white and black people

in motels, garages, shops and restaurants were artificial, constrained and highly unsatisfactory. I remember everywhere the automatic, forced smiles and sensed a great deal of mistrust. Nowhere was there a glimmer of warmth or humour of any kind. The contrast with Brazil made this particularly frightening, so that the area seemed to me the nearest approximation to a man-made hell that I have ever seen. I should like to go back a second time to see if these early impressions are justified.

Because, by the time we reached Virginia, my sense of shock and alienation had diminished, most of the comments below refer to impressions gathered during the remainder of the visit.

One of the most attractive elements of American life, to me, is its brio. Although this observation has been frequently made before, this was the primary characteristic that I found peculiar to the United States, and one that I have sensed in no other country with such force. The combination of energy, innocence (in a Jamesian sense), and enthusiasm was, moreover, particularly vivid after England and Brazil. Americans, not so much as individuals but collectively, present an optimism which I suspect continues to stimulate most Europeans. Nevertheless, the confidence exuded in the powers of man over nature and the feeling that know-how can solve any problem put the sceptic in a dilemma. On the one hand, this on-going problem-solving optimism is infectious and exhilarating: on the other, part of one's mind feels it to be tiring and "unspiritual" (a charge commonly made against Americans by Latin Americans), and therefore obscurely mistaken.

Although the bounce is especially obvious in the field of technological innovation, an open-mindedness to new departures, and in the ramping progress of capitalism, it was also brought home to me by the way in which Americans displayed intellectual curiosity. About Brazil, for example, which inevitably came up many times as a topic of conversation, Americans did not seem at all reluctant to admit their ignorance or to ask basic questions; they appeared to want to know more about the subject. Without my wanting in any way to be an Ancient Mariner, the reaction of the English man in the street presented a strong contrast to the American. He would ask politely whether I had enjoyed living in Brazil, make some facetious remark about coffee, Indians or revolutions, or immediately change the subject. The uninhibited directness and curiosity of Americans, a quality often dismissed by people in England as lack of subtlety, I found most attractive.

While in the United States, I was often told by American friends that the Vietnam war and their racial problems hang so heavily on people's minds that the resulting self-questioning will "mature" the country enormously. Although doubts leading to greater circumspection are probably always salutary, it would at the same time be a pity if every aspect of America's self-confidence as a nation were to be undermined. Surely recent British foreign policy has hardly proved lack of confidence to be beneficial in decision making?

I liked the flexibility in the attitude of professionals to their jobs. Unlike the English who, starting at the bottom, are all too often

content to crawl slowly up the ranks of one organization, Americans seemed to be much more aware of the possibilities of diagonal promotion. This manoeuvrability was also strongly reflected in the academic career structure. In this country, standardized salaries and early security lead all too often to a leisurely approach. In America, the pressure to publish, the insecurity in the initial stages of the university job market, and the relatively free salary structure, undoubtedly act as effective spurs. It is often maintained in England that much of what appears in print in America is not worth publishing. Although this may be justified in certain disciplines, it seems to me a small price to pay for the advantages of increased productivity.

From what I saw of the class system in America, it appeared to be a good deal less oppressive than those of England and Brazil. Class ranking in the United States doubtless has many of its own pernicious side effects, but I did sense a refreshing lack of the divine order which continues to permeate British society. On the assumption that one of the primary criteria in distinguishing class in America is wealth, this did not appear to affect face to face relationships to the extent that the complex English system does. It seemed to me that rich and poor Americans confronted each other as individuals rather than stereotyped products of their class. This, moreover, even applied to people of different colour.

It was pleasing to see small incidents like that of a white man cleaning the shoes of a black, and to watch the way in which a rich man talked to his gardener. On a bus in Washington, we overheard an animated debate between a white and a coloured man where the quality of the discussion, though heated, was again open and uninhibited. It is difficult to imagine a similar scene taking place in England at the present moment. The negroes that we met in the United States did not have the defensive servility shown by so many English immigrants in their behaviour to whites, nor did whites display the over-compensatory solicitude typical of many white English "liberals". If confrontations between Americans of different colour, such as those mentioned above, are commonplace, there seems to be hope yet.

After Brazil, the technology of American communications, distribution, and general gadgetry amazed me. Although the impersonality was distressing, the efficiency of machinery sometimes made up for my feeling of alienation. With the extremes of Brazil and America in my mind, the former with its warmth and confusion in everyday life and its absence of cold logic, and the latter with its clinical, cool efficiency, I found England on my return infuriating. By offering neither the attractions of the Brazilian methods, nor the advantages of the American, we seem to lose out both ways.

England has, for example, large impersonal supermarkets, but yet has neither the car parks nor deep-freezes to make rational use of them. In Brazil, to make a telephone call in a shop one would probably be taken to the manager's office to use his private telephone, and then be told that there was no charge. In America, public telephones were everywhere within easy reach. But in England a shopkeeper, even when he had a telephone visible, would give instructions on how to find one ten minutes' walk away, and explain firmly that his was not for the use of customers.

These two examples, though trivial in themselves, are nevertheless significant for they serve to illustrate the half-realized state of technology in England at the moment. We have introduced impersonality without efficiency, and, to this unhappy compromise, I would prefer, despite its obvious defects, the Brazilian state of affairs.

I much appreciated the lack of car cult in America. Motorists seemed to have got beyond the stage of being obsessed by their vehicles, but instead treated them as functional objects. They did not appear to feel the need to show off by overtaking, accelerating or speeding for its own sake. Much to my relief, newspapers and magazines were not filled, as they are here, with tedious articles on driving techniques, car polishes, and engine specifications. These observations might, with time, have proved unfounded, but certainly the universality of the motor car seemed to have created a healthier attitude towards it than is to be found in those countries where it is still a semi-luxury.

The motor car in America did, however, seem to have disfigured the countryside directly and indirectly more than in any other country that I know. I disliked the public squalor evident throughout much of the urban and rural parts of America that I saw. A general lack of landscaping was shown in the dreary, sprawling cities and endless ribbon development with its brassy motels, network of overhead wires, cracked road surfaces, and old car dumps. I was also unimpressed by the middle class suburbs with their smug, ordered atmosphere, and unfenced gardens; too many of them reminded me of Surrey and the South London suburbs in their slavish adherence to conformity.

Although I had hoped that wealth might have led to experimentation in domestic architecture, I saw disappointingly little sign of this being so. The area around Charlottesville was especially memorable in this respect; I had never imagined that it would be possible to become thoroughly fed up with elegant colonial and neo-colonial architecture, and to long for any sort of relief. The construction of further colonial facsimiles was dull, and must be extremely expensive.

The deadness of town centres in all but the largest cities was sad, and the hotch-potch destruction of natural features in some areas along the Eastern seaboard most alarming. I have never seen a country that was more in need of macro-planning. Nevertheless, it was easy to see how, at an earlier period, the apparently unlimited space could provide a justification for ad hoc expansion and an excuse for deferring any effective control over development.

I found extremely disturbing an almost universal American obsession with physical and material comfort. It seemed that technology relating to housing and communications was directed at eliminating physical discomfort at all costs, and, in doing so, had seriously affected the priorities and values of people themselves. Physical sensation had already been reduced to an alarming degree, with little sign of protest. I was, perhaps, the more impressed by this phenomenon after living in Brazil where the natural world is still very real, close, and undominated.

This struck me vividly when, shortly after arriving in the States, we were travelling, in magnificent weather, on a Greyhound bus. The windows were airtight and tinted bright green, the springing was whooshy, and the airconditioning kept one's flesh permanently goose-pimpled. This totally man-made environment, far from being reassuring, I found acutely claustrophobic. I longed, at the very least, to open a window, and was surprised that no other passengers appeared to feel the same.

The bus is a petty example, but I hope it helps to put across what I mean. Too often air-conditioning or central heating was turned on when it was clearly not needed. Cars were oversprung, and chairs and beds gave me an unpleasant feeling of floating. Even mosquito netting seemed, in some cases, to have been put up not so much for physical protection but as a psychological defence against the outside world, to keep res naturae at a respectable distance.

After seeing Americans' preoccupation with physical comfort and protection at home, their concern with them abroad became much more understandable. Since, in the United States, the natural world is so often excluded from everyday life, the inevitable contact with it in less developed countries must be both worrying and frightening. Moreover, this protection at home has resulted in a vicious circle, so that fears become more and more justified. As resistance to disease is lowered by not even occasional contact with germs and insects, the need to eliminate them increases.

As an extension of the striving for comfort, the demand for physical effort appeared to be decreasing. Even walking a few hundred yards seemed to be considered a bore by some. On Long Island we saw a large black saloon car pull out of a drive, cross to the other side of the road, and draw up in front of the house immediately opposite. The American friends with us only saw the funny side of this when I explained why we were laughing. Motorized golf caddies (could anything be more paradoxical?) and other paraphernalia designed to eliminate physical effort prevented the appreciation of countless natural pleasures. Surely warmth after cold, rest after physical exertion, and even respite from the wind on one's face help to make everyday life enjoyable? It is a pity to remove them.

Childbirth might be a possible illustration of the desire to eliminate unpleasant physical effort or sensation. I would guess that, not all, but the great majority of American women would, if asked, choose to be totally anaesthetized during labour rather than risk suffering even a minimal amount of pain. It is obvious, however, that much can be said for retaining consciousness if possible, and there is, moreover, the distinct possibility that in retrospect it may seem to have been a worthwhile, pleasurable experience. For the hypothetical American mother the process would be at best and worst simply a non-experience.

It is not at all easy to describe my impressions of social manners in America, but I did find a bewildering divorce between business and social behaviour. Although business relationships seemed to be brisk, practical, and highly effective, in purely social confrontations, I felt the situation was very different. In these, I sensed that a host of mechanisms were used to counteract the latent competition and even hostility

between individuals. Self-conscious back-slapping and banter among men, and a blanket of politeness and tact all too often characterized face-to-face relationships. Yet, beneath this veneer, it seemed to me that there was frequently a lack of warmth, so that figures remained remote from each other; I remember much play-acting while innermost thoughts and emotions remained concealed.

I had the impression that people tended to protect their innermost personalities from the exterior social world, and that social life was seen as an arena with strictly formulated conventions of its own. Thus, displays of rather sickening sentimentality and superficially heightened emotion were to be read as shorthand symbols rather than demonstrations of real feeling. This is generalization on an absurd scale, but were it possible, which I doubt, to talk of a characteristic social situation in America, it would for me have a bland, smooth, slightly unreal quality about it.

The acting-out in social life seemed to me a natural response to the impersonality of the wider social environment. The competitive element, the side effects of Republican values (the lone pioneer, self-enterprise and so on), and the complex pressures generated by a super-capitalist society, put the individual in a very uneasy situation. I had the feeling that a common solution of Americans was to depend upon a coterie of kinsmen and close friends, but to extend their concern and social conscience little beyond this. This lack of genuine concern for others made a deeper impression on me than the oft-reported violence and brutality of American life.

An incident on my second day in the country has remained vivid in my memory. When we were travelling by car in New Orleans, two cars crashed into each other at high speed at a cross-roads. Numerous cars and pedestrians were passing. We stopped to see whether the victims needed any help; as it happened, they were already engaged in a swearing match and were well able to cope. Yet not a single car apart from ours even pulled up, and not one pedestrian displayed any interest whatsoever in the affair.

This event and others less violent gave me an inexplicable feeling of being alone. Although for much of the time the sensation was neither worrying nor unpleasant, I occasionally felt totally isolated, and was convinced that if I did not look after myself, nobody else would bother.

It seemed to me that American society not only expected a high degree of self-dependence, but also regarded it as a positive value. If the impression has any foundation, this may serve to further fragment society.

Automation has also undoubtedly helped to make individuals less dependent upon others, and therefore to make some aspects of life unpleasantly impersonal. Motels are perhaps, an extreme example of this; they made me feel like the victim of an isolation experiment, sensationless in a bath of glycerine. It is not pure coincidence that I can remember every night spent in hotels in Brazil, yet not one of those spent in American motels. The standardization and lack of human contact in the latter were terrifying, and I much preferred the chaos and discomfort of a primitive hotel in the Brazilian interior to their clinical efficiency.

Technology and marketing techniques have done disastrous things to food. Milk had almost ceased to bear any resemblance to the liquid produced by a cow, and bread defied description. Moreover, although my mouth hung open at scientists' ingenuity in removing the carbohydrates from beer and the caffeine from coffee, the great variety of nominally different foods tasted depressingly alike. This became less surprising as I noted that an enormous range had one basic common ingredient, corn oil. Two favourite adjectives were used to describe these foods, wholesome and pure. Wholesome and pure what? Alas, it turned out all too often to be corn oil. I did, however, appreciate the wide choice of food available if one searched hard for it, and the custom of serving salads with meals.

The general subject of food and diet was discussed in America at the same length as the weather is discussed in England. I found the American variant quite as tedious as the English, if not more so. With, however, the common lack of exercise and maximum exploitation by food manufacturers, the widespread interest in carbohydrate consumption was understandable.

In very broad terms, I found the domestic role of the sexes disturbing. Although the contrast between North East Brazil and the United States is extreme, in both, the roles in their different ways seemed uneasy. In North East Brazil, wives are still little more than chattels in the eyes of their husbands; in America, husbands seemed in danger of becoming chattels in the eyes of their wives. I was impressed, not so much by the dominance of women in the home, as by the passivity of men.

The premiss popularly ascribed to Americans that apart from physiological differences the sexes are alike, appeared to have led to a great deal of uncertainty, which in turn had resulted in unnecessary tension and conflict. I subscribe strongly to the view that women are in fundamental ways different psychologically from men; it therefore seemed to me unsubtle for society to allocate them identical functions within the home and elsewhere. Emancipation need not mean wholesale simulation of the traditional male role, and if there is any country in the world where battle between the sexes has some meaning, I should have thought it would be the United States.

The size and complexity of America makes valid generalization difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, it is peculiarly hard, since it has so many features in common with England, not to make continuous comparisons between the two countries; it would be easier to tackle a wholly alien culture.

I doubt whether it is possible to set down general feelings about America which do not smack of fragmentary experience and unwitting prejudice. Certainly, impressions reflect one's own make-up, and I suspect that many of the observations here tell more of my character than describe things as they are.

I should very much like to return for a longer stay, which would, I am sure, modify many of these impressions and value judgements. I did feel after a mere six weeks in America that it was the most exciting country that I have ever visited. Yet it is difficult not to see its culture as a giant laboratory giving the world a hint of the future, and laboratories, though exciting, are not the most sympathetic of places.

Yours sincerely,
Fanny Mitchell.
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Received in New York May 29, 1968.