

Americans and Their Myths

BY JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

EVERYTHING has been said about the United States. But a person who has once crossed the Atlantic can no longer be satisfied with even the most penetrating books; not that he does not believe what they say, but that his agreement remains abstract.

When a friend tries to explain our character and unravel our motives, when he relates all our acts to principles, prejudices, beliefs, and a conception of the world which he thinks to find in us, we listen uneasily, unable either to deny what he says or entirely accept it. Perhaps the interpretation is true, but what is the truth that is being interpreted? We miss the intimate warmth, the life, the way one is always unpredictable to oneself and also tiresomely familiar, the decision to get along with oneself, the perpetual deliberations and perpetual inventions about what one is, and the vow to be "that" and nothing else—in short, the liberty. Similarly, when a careful arrangement of those melting-pot notions—puritanism, realism, optimism, and so on—which we have been told are the keys to the American character is presented to us in Europe, we experience a certain intellectual satisfaction and think that, in effect, it must be so. But when we walk about New York, on Third Avenue, or Sixth Avenue, or Tenth Avenue, at that evening hour which, for Da Vinci, lends softness to the faces of men, we see the most pathetic visages in the world, uncertain, searching, intent, full of astonished good faith, with appealing eyes, and we know that the most beautiful generalizations are of very little service: they permit us to understand the system but not the people.

The system is a great external apparatus, an implacable machine which one might call the objective spirit of the United States and which over there they call Americanism—a huge complex of myths, values, recipes, slogans, figures, and rites. But one must not think that it has been deposited in the head of each American just as the God of Descartes deposited the first notions in the mind of man; one must not think that it is "refracted" into brains and hearts and at each instant determines affections or thoughts that exactly express it. Actually, it is something outside of the people, something

presented to them; the most adroit propaganda does nothing else but present it to them continuously. It is not in them, they are in it; they struggle against it or they accept it, they stifle in it or go beyond it, they submit to it or reinvent it, they give themselves up to it or make furious efforts to escape from it; in any case it remains outside them, transcendent, because they are men and it is a thing.

There are the great myths, the myths of happiness, of progress, of liberty, of triumphant maternity; there is realism and optimism—and then there are the Americans, who, nothing at first, grow up among these colossal statues and find their way as best they can among them. There is this myth of happiness: black-magic slogans warn you to be happy at once; films that "end well" show a life of rosy ease to the exhausted crowds; the language is charged with optimistic and unrestrained expressions—"have a good time," "life is fun," and the like. But there are also these people, who, though conventionally happy, suffer from an obscure *malaise* to which no name can be given, who are tragic through fear of being so, through that total absence of the tragic in them and around them.

There is this collectivity which prides itself on being the least "historical" in the world, on never complicating its problems with inherited customs and acquired rights, on facing as a virgin a virgin future in which everything is possible—and there are these blind gropings of bewildered people who seek to lean on a tradition, on a folklore. There are the films that write American history for the masses and, unable to offer them a Kentucky Jeanne d'Arc or a Kansas Charlemagne, exalt them with the history of the jazz singer, Al Jolson, or the composer, Gershwin. Along with the Monroe doctrine, isolationism, scorn for Europe, there is the sentimental attachment of each American for his country of origin, the inferiority complex of the intellectuals before the culture of the old Continent, of the critics who say, "How can you admire our novelists, you who have Flaubert?" of the painters who say, "I shall never be able to paint as long as I stay in the United States"; and there is the obscure, slow effort of an entire nation to seize universal history and assimilate it as its patrimony.

There is the myth of equality—and there is the myth of segregation, with those big beach-front hotels that post signs reading "Jews and dogs not allowed," and those lakes in Connecticut where Jews may not bathe, and that racial *tchin*, in which the lowest degree is

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assigned to the Slavs, the highest to the Dutch immigrants of 1680. There is the myth of liberty—and the dictatorship of public opinion; the myth of economic liberalism—and the big companies extending over the whole country which, in the final analysis, belong to no one and in which the employees, from top to bottom, are like functionaries in a state industry. There is respect for science and industry, positivism, an insane love of "gadgets"—and there is the somber humor of the *New Yorker*, which pokes bitter fun at the mechanical civilization of America and the hundred million Americans who satisfy their craving for the marvelous by reading every day in the "comics" the incredible adventures of Superman, or Wonderman, or Mandrake the Magician.

There are the thousand taboos which proscribe love outside of marriage—and there is the litter of used contraceptives in the back yards of coeducational colleges; there are all those men and women who drink before making love in order to transgress in drunkenness and not remember. There are the neat, coquettish houses, the pure-white apartments with radio, armchair, pipe,

and stand—little paradises; and there are the tenants of those apartments who, after dinner, leave their chairs, radios, wives, pipes, and children, and go to the bar across the street to get drunk alone.

Perhaps nowhere else will you find such a discrepancy between people and myth, between life and the representation of life. An American said to me at Berne: "The trouble is that we are all eaten by the fear of being less American than our neighbor." I accept this explanation: it shows that Americanism is not merely a myth that clever propaganda stuffs into people's heads but something every American continually reinvents in his gropings. It is at one and the same time a great external reality rising up at the entrance to the port of New York across from the Statue of Liberty, and the daily product of anxious liberties. The anguish of the American confronted with Americanism is an ambivalent anguish, as if he were asking, "Am I American enough?" and at the same time, "How can I escape from Americanism?" In America a man's simultaneous answers to these two questions make him what he is, and each man must find his own answers.

Rice and Riots in India

BY ANDREW ROTH

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I DON'T know much about China, but it seems to me that here in South India the conflict between landlords and tenants is so sharp that it may grow into a civil war of Chinese proportions." An earnest young North Malabar lawyer was speaking to some thirty or forty people crowded around him on the verandah of his house, come to ask his aid against the landlords and the dread Malabar Special Police. I was told that he had a thriving commercial practice which brought him about 3,000 rupees a month, but that he was contributing more and more of his time and labor to defending peasants who had been evicted or arrested. The Malabar Special Police is a semi-military force formed in 1921 to suppress the Moplah peasant uprising. It is kept apart from the people and has as bad a name for brutality as the "Black and Tans" had in Ireland or the S. S. battalions in Europe.

North Malabar, more than any other area in India, has political and economic problems which remind one of China's. In many villages one sees the armed guards, the

terrorized faces, and the battered huts that the Chinese civil war has left in its train. There is no such communal conflict as has scarred northern India, but violent disputes over agrarian questions have broken out between an extremely conservative local branch of the Congress Party and a militant and strongly entrenched Communist Party. In the last election in the Chirakkal Division Congress got 22,000 votes and the Communists 17,000.

The rightward swing of the Congress Party is marked in North Malabar. The agrarian structure of the province is the most backward in all India, with three or four non-producing landlords and sub-landlords taking as much as 80 per cent of the crop without making any contribution. An official investigation in 1940 recommended reforms, but nothing was done. In the United Provinces and some other areas where Nehru still exerts strong influence in the local Congress organization, the big landlords remain outside of the organization and fight it, but in North Malabar, when they saw that India would achieve self-government and Congress would rule, the landlords moved in on the party and took it over. They have amassed tremendous wealth through the increase in rice prices and have been able not only to buy their way into the leadership of the local organization but to bribe local officials into submission. Within Congress they are supported by equally conservative manufacturers.

ANDREW ROTH has been in India for the past several months reporting for The Nation on conditions since independence.

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