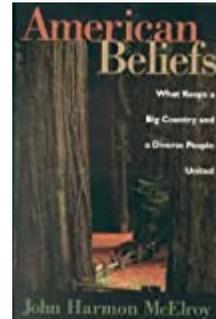


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John Harmon McElroy. *American Beliefs: What Keeps a Big Country and a Diverse People United.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999. xii + 259 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-231-7.



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Puzzling out the essentials of the American character is one of the great games of our literature, historical, sociological, and otherwise, moving all the way from Crevecoeur, Bartram, Byrd, Cooper and Tocqueville to Alan Wolfe's recent temperature-taking of the American middle-class in *One Nation, After All* (1998). Partly, this is because Americans bulk so large in their influence around the world that analyses of the American character are simply prudential; partly, this is because Europe has always seen America as an exotic extension of its own radicalisms, and has been curious, in a self-interested way, to see what the result might be if those radicalisms were turned loose; and partly, because Americans dangle their official identity solely from their political structure, thus defying the ethnic, linguistic or religious gravity that virtually every other human society has seemed to obey. John Harmon McElroy enters the American analysis game for yet another reason, and that is anxiety, since his principal concern is to chart the constants of American culture now, before they are lost, as lost they almost seem to be. He is not, in other words, curious about discovering what those constants are – he is quite confident that they can be known, and without tremendous difficulty – but about how they are disappearing. In that respect, McElroy is really writing a jeremiad, based like the jeremiad on the culture we once were and which he would like us to continue to be, with the historical pre-

lude that began every jeremiad distended to book-length, but with the uses and applications sharp, pungent, short and, ultimately, useless.

The literature of American analysis embraces one understood commonality, the exceptionalism of America (if we were not exceptional, there would be little need to find out what distinguishes Americans and America from others), and then divides rather generally into those who see the controlling factor in the developing of American character or culture being the American environment or American ideas. McElroy is an unexamined exceptionalist, but he wanders unsteadily from the very beginning as to whether it is American culture, or American society, or America itself which he wishes to focus upon, and even more unsteadily on whether it is American ideas or the American environment which explains their salience. At the very outset of *American Beliefs* McElroy makes it clear that he will discuss (departing from the title at once) American culture, and a reasonably good first chapter on the definition of 'culture' opens the book. From that point on, however, we hear nothing more about culture – nothing, that is, about the variety of American cultures, mass culture, popular culture, religious culture, or culture at all. Instead we turn in the second chapter to the exfoliation of "beliefs" from culture, so that the ground shifts at once from the importance of culture to the im-

portance of ideas. (In fact, McElroy is categorical on how American culture turned out “radically different” from the cultural origins of the British north American settlers). But no: McElroy moves yet again to insisting that these beliefs were shaped by the encounter with the American environment, and from that point on, the balance of the book tips unsteadily towards an environmental explanation of American “beliefs.” This plants him on the side of Crevecoeur rather than Tocqueville, and, not surprisingly, it is Crevecoeur’s images which predominate through the balance of the book.

Yet the environmental focus of the book is an uneven one. For one thing, it turns out that it’s not exactly environment that produces American beliefs. Sidney Mead, an apostle of environmental explanations, liked to insist that it was the lack of time and the availability of space “organic, pragmatic space – the space of action” which “made the real difference in the formation of this new man.” But McElroy believes it was the early settlers’ work in transforming this environment which provided the real shaping, thus re-opening the question of what ideas it was inclined these settlers to chop away at the environment rather than packing up for home. For another, it is a very peculiar environment which McElroy describes. American beliefs begin with non-Americans, in this case, white European settlers from the 1600s on, who encounter what he repeatedly describes as a “Stone Age wilderness.” Since wildernesses are not “Stone Age” – wildernesses do not know what the “Stone Age” was; they are not even aware they are a wilderness – one presumes this refers to the sociological environment. Which indeed it does: McElroy sees nothing in the American Indian encounter except the need to acknowledge it and get on with the transformation. He discounts the existing American Indian population of north America to about 250,000 people (other estimates place the number between 7 and 18 million; the Powhatans of the Chesapeake alone numbered 40,000, and the Cherokee of northern Georgia numbered some 16,000), and for all practical purposes writes them out of the story of American beliefs. These are going to be, then, *white* American beliefs. Above all, it turns out that there were a series of limiting factors which had nothing to do with environment: the permissiveness of English colonial policies, the opportunity for broad-based land-ownership, the self-selection of the immigrants, the mix of Christian denominations represented in the settlements. Unconsciously, McElroy introduces with each of those factors a non-environmental consideration to the mix: English colonial policies were an imposition (or lack of imposition) by colonial planners

in London, whose principal environmental consideration was the Atlantic Ocean, not north America; ideas of land-ownership were, as Richard Pipes is saying in his new *Property and Freedom* (1999), the direct inheritance of English patterns of land and property law; while the majority of immigrants to the American colonies looked like anything but self-selectors. To the contrary, they were mostly selected by European authorities, for removal.

Notwithstanding, McElroy believes this encounter with the wilderness generated a series of “beliefs” – of propositions – which have remained with us ever since as our unique possessions as Americans. Some of these are “primary beliefs,” such as “Everyone Must Work” (as taught by the Jamestown experience) or “People Must Benefit from Their Work” (as taught by the Plymouth experience) or “Manual Labor is Respectable” (as taught by the availability of cheap land ownership). These are then succeeded by similar clusters of “Immigrant Beliefs” (three of them), “Frontier Beliefs” (in the environmental mode of Frederick Jackson Turner), “Religious and Moral Beliefs” (four of them, although it is hard to see where any of them are not European inheritances), “Social Beliefs” (three), “Political Beliefs” (five) and “Beliefs on Human Nature” (two), in which we are introduced to the suggestion that the United States is pretty much a raceless society, or at least raceless in the sense that we have only two races to account for, as opposed to the multi-racial nations elsewhere. All told, there are twenty-five of these “beliefs.” Some of them are mind-numbingly obvious (“Progress requires Organization”); others are convenient recitations of nineteenth-century filio pietyism (do Americans really work because of our collective memory of Jamestown; or is Jamestown a historical rationalization for our response to unemployment?); others draw attention, not to our encounter with the environment, but to our reliance on long-standing European intellectual structures (“God created a Law of Right and Wrong” is a logical conclusion from natural law theory and eighteenth-century common-sense realism, but not necessarily from an encounter with a “Stone Age” wilderness).

This is not to say that a number of these “beliefs” have not had long innings in American life. What McElroy presents, however, are constants, when in truth, the “beliefs” on this list which really have had those innings have had fiercely-contested histories. For instance: McElroy discovered under “Political Beliefs” the contention that “The People Are Sovereign.” Leave aside the point that this is not an environmental but an ideological statement: in just exactly what way, and with what limits,

that sovereignty is to be realized have been the stuff of national debate and even civil war. “The People are Sovereign” just might be a constant, in the sense that it is an idea Americans have always fought over; but apart from the interpretation, the fact of that belief means nothing, or else it reduces our struggles over that idea to irrelevance. For McElroy, his twenty-five “beliefs” are static: they do not generate disagreement, they do not change their configuration, they never lose equal applicability, they never conflict.

One reason why McElroy can indulge this stasis is because his focus is on the moment these “beliefs” appeared; once they materialize, they are simply stated, and we move onto a discussion of how the next “belief” materialized. This means that the narrative of the American character here is overwhelmingly an eighteenth-century one. Partly, this is because you cannot keep the story of American beliefs focussed on an encounter with a “Stone Age” environment if you wander much beyond the eighteenth century; partly this is because McElroy is genuinely enamoured with the founders of the Republic (Benjamin Franklin is the most-quoted figure in the book, despite his cheerful contradictions of a great many of the twenty-five “beliefs”, followed by Jefferson, Madison, and Washington).

The result is a terrifically lop-sided book, cemented firmly in the American colonial experience, as though the subsequent two centuries of the Republic were merely the acting-out of a script. But even that experience is static: he pays no attention to how the British north American colonies represented quite dramatically different cultures (especially in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake and Massachusetts) which evolved over time from a rough-and-ready uniqueness of the sort that would confirm McElroy’s pleasure in American exceptionalism to a homogenization which saw eighteenth-century Americans trying with almost embarrassing self-consciousness to assimilate themselves to the norms of Georgian society. This kind of dynamic movement, even within American colonial society, shows up nowhere in McElroy’s book. This, in turn, helps to explain why “culture” drops off the screen so quickly. There is no attention anywhere in the book to the kind of cultural shifting, and inter-layer cultural tension, which shows up so dra-

matically in Michael Kammen’s *American Culture, American Tastes* (1999); there is no sense even whether the shape of these beliefs varies across high-culture or low-culture, or whether they have been mediated, re-worked, or suppressed by popular culture and the advent of mass culture.

I suspect that this inattention to movement, shift and dynamism within American “beliefs” is no accident, since the point toward which the book is steering is an attack on dynamism. Having sketched out the anatomy of the twenty-five American “beliefs,” the final chapter (of not quite seven pages) is devoted to McElroy’s complaint about the “deformation” of these “beliefs,” and the suspects are almost predictable: divorce, abortion, disrespect to elders, self-esteem, welfare dependence, multiculturalism. How these possess a destructive power which events like the Civil War or the Great Depression didn’t is a question not considered, nor asked. The result is that McElroy has written, not so much an American analysis, as a conservative tract, but a tract such as would make any conservative worthy of the name blush. It has not occurred to McElroy, as it has to conservatives of real measure, that the deformations he complains about are devolutions out of the very cluster of ideas he thinks must be protected; that conservatism is not about pouring concrete around twenty-five or so constant pillars, but in tending the dynamism of the pillars so that the healthy tendencies can be developed and the destructive ones minimized.

If America has a core of beliefs at any point, it is an ideological, not an environmental one; and it concerns the ideology of the Enlightenment liberal state, not work or organizations or manual labor (we all know how much Jefferson admired manual labor, or how quickly Franklin retired so that he could lead the life of a Georgian gentleman). It is the failing of modern progressives of the sort McElroy deplores that they imagine the liberal state to be a machine whose direction needs no tending; it is the failing of *petit* conservatives like McElroy that they imagine exactly the same thing.

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