The Reform Frontier and the American Character*

Robert H. Walker**

If you study American society for very long, you will encounter a number of theories as to why the United States has produced a civilization that is different from some others. You will learn from Alexis de Tocqueville that America was distinctive because people believed in equality, and you will find in this oft-quoted book a lot of perceptions about the American character that seem quite good even today in spite of the absence of social equality in Tocqueville's America.

The second most popular explanation of American character is probably that of Frederick Jackson Turner. His book is based on an essay called *The Significance of the Frontier in American History.* Turner expounded on the idea that America had acquired its distinctive traits by importing institutions and ideas from Europe, testing them along the line where civilization met the wilderness. In the testing process, European ideas were retained, rejected and modified. Turner stressed self-reliant individualism.

Variation on the Turner thesis is represented by the work of David Potter, which I would submit as one of the leading interpretations of the American character. Potter wrote a book called *People of Plenty.* His thesis is that, although America had no richer resources than any other nation, it developed an attitude toward its natural resources that was distinctive. Americans came to believe that these resources should be not only used but, in a sense, used up. We became the people who attacked our natural resources rather than preserving them. We invented disposable products, preferring to surround ourselves with man-made objects than to confront nature face to face.

All these are very well-respected and familiar theories about

---

* This is a lecture delivered at Sophia University on June 12, 1987.

** Professor, American Studies Program, George Washington University.

American society. The neglected portrait of America was drawn by a poet, Walt Whitman, not only in his famous poem *Leaves of Grass* but particularly in the essay he wrote and kept rewriting until his death, *Democratic Vistas,* published in 1873.

What is so wonderful about Whitman's poems and essays is that he sees the characteristics that are associated with American uniqueness balanced by characteristics that are not so well recognized. My esteem for *Democratic Vistas* arises from my own work.

In the past 20 years, I have been trying to understand social change in the United States. In so doing, I have compiled a large documentary history. This book is called *The Reform Spirit in America.* It is a documentation of the pattern of reform in the American republic from 1776 until 1976.

To explain what this document collection adds up to, I spent another 10 years. In a book that was released last year, called *Reform in America: the Continuing Frontier,* I commented on the meaning of reformism. The cartoon on the dust jacket illustrates the main story of American reform, the use of political power in order to approach economic equity.

In the study of social change, I come to emphasize the equation put forth most eloquently by Whitman. And I come to the conclusion that reform is a neglected frontier. We should study all those frontiers identified by Tocqueville, Turner, and Potter, but we should not neglect an equally important and perhaps much larger frontier—managed social change.

Perhaps a story is a good way to gain an understanding of this overlooked frontier of directed social reform. There was a woman who lived in Indiana in a small town. It had a pretty well-known college, Wabash College. She finished her own education, as far as women usually went in the 1860s, and received permission to enter a men's college to take a few courses, though not for credits. Then she and some friends of hers got permission to enroll for a degree and went on and took several courses and did very well. However, the president of the college who had given the permission died, and the new president said that this was a men's college and that these girls should go away. They objected. Elizabeth Boynton Harbert, who was at the center of these

protests, never lost her anger at being told that she could not continue in this men's college. She later became one of the leaders of the women's rights movement and succeeded in getting a national party to adopt a Woman's Suffrage Amendment.

A very interesting story: A woman who would have been an educated mother and leader in cultural affairs turned into a political leader. Her story illustrates the transition from the old role of women to the new role of women very early in the history of the new equal rights movement, that is, in the 1870s and 1880s.

Yet, she is overlooked. That woman, as important as she is, is not mentioned in any of the encyclopedias, including *Notable American Women.* She is one example of crucial people in the area of reform who would be famous had they operated in the fields of technology or as Western pioneers. But because they ran on the frontier of social change, they are neglected.

Why is this so? One reason is, because people are unaware of the pervasiveness of reform. There is a need to help people recognize the many forms that reform takes. I begin by indicating the larger categories of reform: politico-economic change; reform on behalf of special groups (women, minorities, the disadvantaged); and finally, one of the most interesting categories of reform, the creation of an alternative models. These are the communes in the wilderness, the Utopian romances, the plans for world government. Today this kind of reform exists in visionary architecture and some urban and regional planning. But it is a continuous dream, starting with the idea that the whole of the United States would be a model society and, when that idea broke down, continuing through a succession of different experiments aimed at showing the society where it should go.

You can already see that just by defining the three large categories of reform, the task becomes enormous. One of the greatest achievements of the reform movement was the Federal Reserve System. It was the climax in the long debate over who should determine policy in money, credit, and banking. This elaborate system, very much in the news these days, is the most direct answer to the riddle: How do you tame the monster? How do you keep the giant of economic privilege from overcoming a political democracy? The Federal Reserve Boards are

supposed to represent the citizens and the consumers, and not just the bankers.

Secondly, historians often pay less attention to reform than they ought to, because they do not recognize that it exists in several stages. I am not going to take the time to explain the stages in detail, but they are: Random Negative, Structured Negative, Random Positive, Structured Positive and Institutionalization.

Reform begins with protest, random protest: you do not like something, and you say so; you do not know what to do about it; and you are of all different opinions. Secondly, you organize the protest, citizens against smog, or anti-slavery societies. Many reforms get no further than this. But, if they are important, they usually get into a positive stage. So if we want to wipe out smog, we may propose solar heat, or if the objective is the abolishment of slavery, emancipation and civil rights are suggested. Often there are many solutions that are condensed into one — Structured Positive — and finally something happens that institutionalizes the reform. You get an act, you get a commission, or you get a Supreme Court ruling. It is not over, but it begins again as institutional history. Once the reform becomes law, then you have to create a watchdog because laws are not always fully and fairly enforced.

The third reason why reform is often overlooked is because it takes so many shapes and guises. Reform is when housekeepers refuse to buy from a certain store, or protest or boycott. Reform begins with a demonstration on the streets.

In the history of American reform, we are famous for journalism. The newspapers were supposed to be crusading. Without the pressure of the press, we probably would never have learned of Watergate, which made reporters Woodward and Bernstein so famous. If you go back in history, exposes have been started by the press so often that we have a special word for it—"muckraking," which was coined by Theodore Roosevelt to describe the journalism of his era.

The other thing which stands out in American reform is the way we use literature. Many American literary classics are famous not only because they were popular or skillfully written, but because they called attention to a social problem. Most people would say Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast,* which called attention to the

problems of merchant seamen, was one of the first of this genre. Herman Melville's early novels also dealt with the same theme. The most famous of all time is *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Abraham Lincoln is supposed to have said, when introduced to Stowe, "I am so pleased to meet the lady who caused the Civil War." (Actually he is supposed to have said "the little lady," but you are not supposed to say that anymore.)

The artist knows how to get you excited. Journalists may make you angry, but a novelist or a painter is also very skilled at making your emotions rise. Stowe was very skillful. From her time on we have many, many more examples of the use of creative literature to promote social change.

The 20th century is abundant with reform literature. *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair caused the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in America; John Steinbeck's works that depicted the Great Depression, the most famous of which were *Grapes of Wrath, Of Mice and Men* and *In Dubious Battle,* are well-known. The list is very long. American writers are known for engagement with social problems, even Henry James, particularly in *The Princess Casamassima,* and Hawthorne in *Blithedale Romance.* Throughout our literary history, an enormous number of creative talents have engaged in social commentary.

In reform process, there is something called social actors. They are individuals; they are groups; they are governments. Today, the prime social actor in reform is the federal government of the United States, which may be good and may not be good.

The distinctively American social actor, from the day of Tocqueville, is the voluntary association. We seem to achieve a lot of our social change through informal and formal organizations. There would be little climate for social change in America today if it were not for such organizations as the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, the National Organization of Women, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, and Ralph Nader-type consumer groups, of which there are many. These are all people who organize in order to argue for some kind of social change without serving their own self-interest. The people who wanted Prohibition in America did not own Coca Cola. The people who wanted to end slavery were not running automobile

factories in Detroit. The history of voluntarism is the history of advocacy of social change by organized citizens indifferent to immediate self-interest.

Reform can be ignored because people—even historians—may not recognize that the reform process goes through several stages. Also, all kinds of social actors confuse the issue.

If you recognize the full sweep of reform, what is the prize? Where is the payoff? Will you get some special seat in the heaven of students of civilization who understand better than others? Well, I think you will. And in getting there, you will gain a new perception of the things that make a culture tick.

Some societies have their history told in terms of cycles: things coming and going and returning. Some societies have their history told in terms of conflicts, as in the theories of Marx and Engels, for example. Of course, all societies have some cycles and some conflicts. But there are societies whose history is best seen as a continuum. I think the United States is one of these societies. Kenneth Boulding, whose judgment I take in these matters, says that Japan is another such society. Although other approaches to Japanese history are valid, the best approach to understanding Japan is that of cumulative history.

Certainly, you learn more about American society if you look at its continuity than if you try to break it up into little pieces. I was not always convinced of that, but I surely am now. A short example of this is the fact that the historians of reform, the social historians, will tell you there are only three reform periods, and that they should be dated roughly like this: 1830–60, 1885–1915, and 1930–40. Moreover, they will tell you that one was social reform, one was politico-economic reform, and the last was a response to the Great Depression. They generalize about each as though in isolation.

One of the most stupid things about this periodization is, you may notice, that they all end in a war: the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. War is a very good time for reformers. War always helps working people. It creates a manpower shortage, and the conditions of labor are always improved. War always helps the cause of women's rights, because women are given new and different responsibilities in war, and afterward they are inclined to go on. No one would ask for a

war just to accomplish these things, but if you study history, you have to admit that these things happen.

The American Civil War produced emancipation. World War I produced Prohibition and women's suffrage. These seem like true reform movements to me. If they are not, we have to redefine the subject. So there is something wrong with this periodization—what is really wrong is that it should not exist at all. The whole history of the American republic is the continuity of social crusades, most of which never end.

We are coming to something else that is very important. That is the paramount American value, the value that is almost never mentioned even though it is crucial. It is, in fact, the center of our only native philosophy, and that value is "process." The idea of "process" is the center of pragmatism and instrumentalism. "Process" in America is not simply a way of doing things. It is an end in itself. I quoted John Dewey in my book, and I could have quoted William James to the same effect.

Anybody who studies social change in America realizes that you cannot look at it as having fixed goals. The early labor movement wanted a 10-hour day. They got the 10-hour day. Did they quit? No, they went to the 9-hour day. And after getting the 8-hour day, then they wanted flex-time, and so forth. There is no end to these things. There should not be. Once you realize that, you realize that social change is not a matter of aiming for some goal and stopping. It is a matter of going on. Sometimes you make it, sometimes there are setbacks. But it is a continuity and a flow.

An enormous effort, social change; I do not know anything the society does more of in America than agitate. Aside from eating or sleeping, or even bowling, fishing or watching television, I think collectively we spend more time on agitating for social change than on any other activity.

Therefore, the values implicit in social change ought to be taken as an important measure of the American character. Furthermore, they contradict or, if you will, balance the more commonly held attributes of American society.

These commonly held American traits begin with individualism. America is supposed to be oriented toward "kojinshugi" and "minshushugi" (individualism and democracy); Japan is supposed to be "kazo-

kushugi" (family-oriented). Americans are supposed to have a lot of self-reliance. We are supposed to like competition. This is what Turner says and Tocqueville as well.

Potter adds that material abundance is very important to Americans and has become one of our values. So whether you are reading about Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, Daniel Boone, John Rockefeller or John Wesley Powell, you are looking at people who symbolize American values.

I put this down at the bottom of the list, and if I walk in front of it, that is good because you do not need to see these values. They are all too familiar. They have been pointed out too often. They are too famous. On the other side, much less famous, is a concern with the common good.

As Whitman said, the price of individual freedom is social justice. In his essays, he made this very clear. Social conscience is necessary in order to afford individual freedom.

People in America are little ashamed of this. They apologize if they are seen as reformers. To call somebody a do-gooder suggests they are unrealistic, or living in a make-believe world. Yet, we have been do-gooders ever since Thomas Jefferson and David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison. Reformers use well-recognized American values. They argue from a belief in a moral law that reason and practical experience can be a guide to social activity, and on the assumption that there should be a concern with the common good. Enough Americans hold these values dear so that there has been major success in the process of social change.

The value that transcends or supersedes all other American values exists here. The real neglected aspect of the American character is a commitment to process as a means to make a decision and also as an end in iteself.

Last words about reform should be universal. We need to see reform as a major historical force, a force that helped settle the West, turned tenements into parks, split churches, amalgamated unions, badgered the privileged and attended to the dispossessed. The understanding of this force provides a strong antithesis to the power of competitive, acquisitive individualism, which we may have been asked

to see too much in isolation.

The opposite of individualism is neither mindless comformity nor philosophical collectivism, but a sustained series of altruistic acts and movements designed to preserve a balance between individual liberty and the good of the commonwealth.

Reform is omnipresent. It fails as often as it succeeds. Reform is a process. It is the way an open society has achieved a balance between individualism and democracy. Reform is a cumulative experience based upon the most fundamental of American values whose major contributions are in its continuity.

Works Cited (in order of appearance)

1 Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1835). Mayer, J. P. and A. P. Kerr, eds. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969).
岩永健吉郎・松本礼二訳『アメリカにおけるデモクラシー』(東京：研究社, 1972).
井伊玄太郎訳『アメリカの民主政治』(東京：講談社, 1972).
杉本謙三訳『アメリカの民主主義』(東京：朋友社, 1957).

2 Turner, Frederick Jackson, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1920).
松本政治・嶋忠正訳『アメリカにおける辺境』(東京：北星堂書店, 1973).

3 Potter, David M., *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).
渡辺徳郎訳『アメリカの富と国民性』(東京：国際文化研究所, 1957).

4 Whitman, Walt, *Democratic Vistas* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1871).
志賀勝訳『民主主義展望』(東京：岩波書店, 1953).
鍋島能弘訳「民主主義の予想」『世界の思想 7』(東京：河出書房, 1966).

5 Walker, Robert H., *The Reform Spirit in America* (New York: Putnam, 1976).

6 Walker, Robert H., *Reform in America: The Continuing Frontier* (Hagerstown: University Press of Kentucky, 1987).

7 Dana, Richard Henry, *Two Years Before the Mast* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1840).
千葉宗雄監訳『帆船航海記』(東京：海文堂出版, 1977).

8 Stowe, Harriet Beecher, *Uncle Tom's Cabin;* or, *Life among the Lowly,* 2 vols. (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852).
大橋吉之輔訳「アンクルトムの小屋」(東京：旺文社, 1967).
岡上鈴江訳「アンクル＝トムの小屋」『世界の名作 8』(東京：講談社, 1983).
宇野輝雄訳「アンクル・トムの小屋」『少年少女世界の名作 6』(東京：集英社, 1982).
中山知子訳「アンクル＝トムの小屋」『世界の名著 25』(東京：ポプラ社, 1968).
岸なみ訳「アンクル・トム物語」『世界少女名作全集 24』(東京：岩崎書店, 1973).

9 Sinclair, Upton, *The Jungle* (New York: Viking Press, 1906).
木村生死訳『ジャングル』(東京：三笠書房, 1950).

10 Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1939).
大橋健三郎訳『怒りの葡萄』全 3 巻 (東京：岩波文庫, 1961).

石一郎訳「怒りのぶどう」グリーン版『世界文学全集第二集 19』(東京：河出書房，1962).
谷口陸男訳「怒りのぶどう」『世界文学全集 91』(東京：講談社，1974).
大久保康雄訳『怒りの葡萄』全 2 巻 (東京：新潮社，1987).
Steinbeck, John, *Of Mice and Men* (New York: Viking Press, 1937).
大門一男訳『二十日鼠と人間』(東京：新潮社，1967).
石川信夫訳『二十日鼠と人間』(東京：河出書房，1955).
Steinbeck, John, *In Dubious Battle* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1936).
橋本福夫訳『疑わしい戦い』全 2 巻 (東京：ダビッド社，1954).
橋本福夫訳「天の牧場・疑わしい戦い」『現代世界文学全集 20』(東京：三笠書房，1955).

11 James, Henry, *The Princess Casamassima* (London: Macmillan, 1886).
大津栄一郎訳『カサマシマ公爵夫人』(東京：集英社，1981).

12 Hawthorne, Nathaniel, *The Blithedale Romance* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Field, 1852).
小山敏三郎編注『詳注　ホーソーン短編集』(東京：南雲堂，1973).