# Weber, Pynchon and the American Prospect

## Ralph Schroeder

**Abstract**

Weber's sociology and the novels of Thomas Pynchon share many themes. In this essay I will focus on Pynchon's two recent novels, *Vineland*, about contemporary America, and *Mason&Dixon*, about its origins. *Vineland* is about the 'counter-culture' of the 1960s and poses questions about how this episode of 're-enchant-ment' in American history should be remembered. *Mason&Dixon* deals in large part with the conquest by the two surveyors of the American landmass, with its overtones of scientific mastery overreaching itself. These themes can be compared with Weber's view of America; how he regarded some aspects of American social life as illustrating the furthest extensions of the rationalization process, and at the same time thought that American invidualism, shaped by the religious sects, was potentially robust enough to withstand this process. The comparison between Weber's and Pynchon's views of America will lead to a discussion of the 'social construction' of the exceptional concern with American culture and its travails at the turn of the millenium.

**Keywords** Weber, Pynchon, America, disenchantment, science, politics

> Permit me to take you once more to America, because there one can
> often observe such matters in their most massive and original shape
> (Weber 1948: 149).

## Introduction

Thomas Pynchon's novels are clearly influenced by Max Weber's soci-ology, and the two share a number of common themes.[1] In this essay,

---

1.   Pynchon's view of history in his three novels up to *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) was much influenced by Weber's ideas about history, as I have shown in an earlier essay (Schroeder 1990). In this essay, however, I want to focus on America and on *Vineland* and *Mason&Dixon*.

It should be mentioned that Weber's influence on Pynchon is both direct and indirect. It is direct in the sense that a number of Weber's concepts—'charisma', 'bureaucracy', and 'routinization'—can be found in the novels. I have discussed some of these direct references in the pre-*Vineland* novels in my earlier essay

I would like to explore their ideas about America, and especially their views of its distinctive culture. This exploration will lead, in turn, to a presentation of some Weberian perspectives on contemporary America, or more specifically how a Weberian view compares with other views of America in contemporary sociology and cultural criticism. The essay must therefore be prefaced by a confession: the essay falls into two parts, the first dealing with Weber and Pynchon, and the second with some Weberian perspectives on contemporary American society. The only link between these two parts, which I hope justifies putting them together, is that both the sociologist and the novelist share an interest in the direction and significance of modern American culture, an interest which makes their prognoses, as I hope to show, relevant to the discussion of America's future.

To begin with it may be useful to mention some of the themes that Pynchon takes from Weber, especially since it is likely that readers of this journal will be familiar with Weber but not necessarily with Pynchon. I focus in this essay on Pynchon's two recent novels, *Vineland* and *Mason&Dixon*.

The main topic in *Mason&Dixon* is the scientific conquest of the American landmass, and here Pynchon is strongly influenced by Weber's view of science. Pynchon regards this process very much as a 'disenchantment of the world', and he sees it as integral to the shaping of America. And although Weber's perspective on science is world-historical rather than specifically focused on America – the exception are some comments about the American research university, which can be found in the essay 'Science as a Vocation' – there are nevertheless interesting affinities, as we shall see shortly.

*Vineland* is mostly about American politics in the 1960s and how

(1990). Direct influences can also be found in *Vineland*; for example, the reference to 'charisma'(Pynchon 1990: 205) and the subsequent pages about how this charisma is routinized (as well as a not-so-subtle allusion on the same page, where the action takes in the place in the 'Dewey-Weber plaza' of a college campus). In my view Weber's indirect influence on Pynchon is at least equally important, whereby Weber informs the novelist's overall worldview (without being able to document this in the form of textual 'smoking guns'), and in this essay I concentrate on these indirect influences.

It is also worth noting that Pynchon's use of Weber is quite different from the use that contemporary Weberians make of him: Pynchon uses Weber as the analyst of cultural change, especially in relation to science, rationalization and disenchantment on the larger scale of Western culture as a whole. Contemporary Weberians, on the other hand, tend to be more interested in his political sociology, and also to use his concepts in relation to more specific historical processes.

this period should be seen from a present-day perspective. It is worth pointing out immediately that it is probably stretching the link between the two to think that Pynchon is familiar enough with Weber's writings to make use specifically of his ideas about America. These ideas, as Weber scholars will know, can only be teased out of his writings by pulling together what he says in a number of different places. And Weber's ideas about American politics, mainly around how the distinctive associationalism in America makes this an important option for the future of liberal democracy, are, as we shall see, clearly removed from Pynchon's 'anti-establishment' and almost paranoid political views. Nevertheless, counterposing their views will provide a basis for the discussion of the relation between American culture and politics that follows in the second part of the essay.

The second part of the essay will go on to analyse how America is currently treated in sociological theory, and I will argue that Weberian sociology offers a more penetrating analysis of the American social landscape than some rival accounts. I will conclude with remarks about how Weber's and Pynchon's outlook on American society and on science are still relevant today. First, though, we need to examine their respective ideas about America, and I will do this by examining first Pynchon's and Weber's views of American politics and society, and then describe some of Pynchon's ideas about science and disenchantment (Weber's ideas about science are too well-known to recapitulate in this context; see Schroeder 1995).

## Pynchon's America

*Mason&Dixon* is the story of two astronomer-surveyors and their project – between 1763 and 1767 – of laying down what would later become known as the Mason-Dixon line. The novel also has a number of other elements: a frame for the novel by means of which the astronomer's tale is narrated by the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke some years later (in 1786); Mason's and Dixon's trip to southern Africa to observe the transit of Venus; and their later return to England and America. But the major portion of the novel is devoted to their astronomical and surveying project. This project can be seen as one of the most important steps in the scientific penetration of the American landmass, especially as it took place roughly at the same time as the birth of the nation. (The reverberations of the Mason-Dixon line during the Civil War are conspicuous in the book by their absence, but the novel points obliquely to them). The novel can be seen as a meditation on how America was literally shaped by this

scientific endeavour—through the eyes of two of the main protagonists.

*Vineland* is set in the 1960s and 1980s. The main figures are Zoyd Wheeler, an ex-hippie living in Northern California during the Reagan years, and his teenage daughter Prarie, who goes on a search for her long-lost mother Frenesi. This search takes her into her parents' past during the cultural revolution of the 1960s (and beyond into the McCarthyite 1950s of her grandparents). But the main plot revolves around Zoyd's and Prarie's engagement with the evil designs of Brock Vond, a renegade agent of the United States government who is keeping Frenesi captive—though Frenesi also colludes with him—and who is still waging an authoritarian war on America's subversive counterculture in the 1980s. Again, there are several subplots, but the book is mainly about the 1960s and how they should be seen from the vantage-point of the post-Reagan era.

Both novels are centrally concerned with history, with the implications of science and technology, and with American politics—all topics that can also be found in Pynchon's earlier works. Among the main differences are that *Mason&Dixon* is written in eighteenth-century English, recreating the period's atmosphere, and that *Vineland* also introduces a theme that is new for Pynchon: the role of the family. Both novels also have a more 'coherent' plot than his earlier writings, though in Pynchon's case 'coherence' is bound to be an exaggeration. It is therefore possible to say that 'America' is the central theme of both novels, and that the themes of the disenchantment of America by science and how the American prospect is affected by its history are interwoven in both.

### Weber's America

Weber's comments about America are scattered throughout his writings, and are based on his visit in 1904 (see Scaff 1998) and on extensive readings about American society. Despite being difficult to piece together, these comments add up to a distinctive view of American culture and institutions. Weber's central concern, as in the other areas of his sociology, is with the cultural significance—from a comparative-historical perspective—of American society (for 'cultural significance', see Schroeder 1992: 131-37). His main point, as we shall see, is that American society is distinctive because of its—in contemporary parlance—'civil society', and that it therefore represents one, possibly unique, pattern in the development of industrial capitalism. To see how he arrived at this view it will be necessary to touch briefly

upon three areas: the importance of the 'open' conditions in the emergence of America, the religion of the sects and the resulting forms of association, and the combined influence of 'openness' and associationalism on American politics.

On his trip to America in 1904 Weber was able to make a lot of first-hand observations, especially in relation to religion. These observations became incorporated in the essays on the 'Protestant Ethic' which he wrote the following year. But apart from the anecdotes that he was to use in writing about the role of the sects for the forms of association, his strongest impressions related to how rapidly capital-ism was transforming culture—'with almost lightning speed every-thing that stands in the way of capitalistic culture is crushed'—and its ethnic diversity—'only the Negro question and the terrible immigra-tion constitute the big black clouds' (Max Weber quoted by Marianne Weber 1975: 293, 302).

For Weber, America is a potential model for the future of industrial capitalism in relation to how it provides a possible solution of the 'atomization' of society: 'Democracy in America is not a sand pile, but a mixture of exclusive sects, associations, and clubs'(Weber 1988: 443, see also Kalberg 1998: 97-101). It needs to be noted immediately that this is a potential solution to the problem of social and political order—Weber's main question here is how the political wishes of the population can be expressed and recognized in a mass democracy without being a 'sand pile' of atomized individuals lacking in ordered and organized interests. The potential danger that Weber sees here in all advanced societies, and which his political sociology revolves around (for example Mommsen 1974: 60-71), is that an overbearing bureaucracy is increasingly dominant without being given leadership from above by charismatic politicians and direction from below via a more organized electorate.

The fact that America is furthest along the path of rationalization and thus of atomization in many respects makes the idea that this is 'not a sand pile' so important for Weber. Thus the strength of Amer-ican 'civil society' could organize American political interests by means of its associationalism. This is not a solution to the more gen-eral problem in Weber's social thought (in other words, relating to all advanced societies, not just to America)—of 'personality', or how to preserve 'individuality' in a nivellating and ossifying modern *culture*. The latter is the problem for which Weber sought to enhance the role of 'charisma' and 'inner distance' in the face of the 'iron cage' of in-creasing rationalization (Schroeder 1991).

As some of Weber's remarks make clear, if the American 'solution'

is applied to the latter, more general 'individuality' problem, the result is that, yes, the individual gains an 'inward' dignity by means of belonging to exclusive associations, *but*, as he goes on to say, the worldview of the few (his Nietzschean side comes to the fore here) is bound to dominate over those of the majority within these associations—or, by extension, in society at large. He makes this point explicitly in the context of his discussion of American associationalism: 'Every association in which one is a member represents a relation of domination between human beings...[every form of association] in reality means domination by a minority, sometimes a dictatorship of individuals' (1988: 444). If we push this line of thought still further, then 'dignity' is valuable for the individual, but it cannot counteract the general 'nivellation' in society, which, for Weber, can only be surmounted by a few extraordinary individuals or a more thorough cultural rejuvenation—if at all. Therefore I agree here with Mommsen's argument that, for Weber, American associationalism offers only a 'partial solution' to the 'central dilemma' of 'reconciling individualism with an industrial mass society' (Mommsen 1974: 83).

In what sense, then, is America exemplary? There are two sides to Weber's prognosis. On one side, he sees America as a last chance to shape the culture of capitalism under relatively favourable, 'open' conditions: 'it is...the last time, as long as the history of mankind shall last, that such conditions for a free and great development will be given' (Weber 1948: 385). (The other 'open' opportunity, lost, in Weber's view, after the revolution of 1905, was Russia. See on this point Mommsen 1974: 87.) On the other, America was a country that was rapidly advancing on the course of rationalization in its various facets. This most advanced form of rationalization of politics in America, for Weber, took the form of 'plebiscitary democracy plus "machine"' (by 'machine' he means party machine), from the powerful presidency right down to the 'plebiscitary municipal dictators' (Weber 1980: 544, my translation; cf. 1948: 113-14).

I would thus like to take issue with Kalberg's argument (see 1998, or his contribution to this issue) that the importance of Weber's view of American culture and politics is that there are benefits in the unique and continuing tension between world-mastery individualism and the impersonal but dense ties of the civic sphere. Such a positive view is at best partial and must be put in the context that even if Weber wanted to emphasize the role of culture and values (as Kalberg argues), then culture is nevertheless still subject to rationalization and disenchantment (and indeed to the universal processes whereby, in Weber's view, people dominate each other, in cultural associations or

elsewhere), and America is not exempt from these processes—if anything, it is the most advanced along these processes.

A similar criticism applies to Scaff's view that Weber's ideas about America are centrally concerned with ' "genuine" democracy' (1998: 64). As I have argued elsewhere, in the case of America, as in Weber's political sociology as a whole, the question of democracy is subordinate to his ideas about the changing nature of domination under conditions of advancing rationalization (1998: 81). Hence, too, his outlook for the possibilities offered by American 'openness' and its associationalism are aimed more at rejuvenating culture and counterbalancing the overbearing strength of the state, rather than at improving democracy or democratic participation.

All in all then, Weber's outlook on America is of a piece with his sociology as a whole; ranging the possibilities for 'individuality' against the constraints of the iron cage, and of cultural dynamism against ossification. We need only to add that America, with a potentially uniquely 'open' solution to advancing rationalization, was sure to be among the dominant influences on the rest of the world because of its pre-eminent place in the rivalry among 'Kulturnationen' (which can be translated as nations as bearers of culture), which is how Weber characterized how nation-states or civilizations vie for their cultural significance on the larger stage of world-history (see Schroeder 1998: 79).

### Pynchon and the Disenchantment and Re-enchantment of America

As Pyenson and Sheets-Pyenson point out (1999: 351), the American Philosophical Society was the first voluntary association outside Europe for the promotion of science, and the American observations of the transits of Venus and explorations into the continent were among its first important undertakings and publications. Mason's and Dixon's scientific project can therefore be interpreted not only as having had a formative impact on the American continent, but also as being the first foothold of the Old World's science in the New World—and thus a precursor to the more widespread or global influence of science to come.

Pynchon's central concern in *Mason&Dixon*, like Weber's, is with how to live in the midst of an increasingly rationalized culture. As Mason and Dixon literally blaze their trail into the American frontier, it becomes increasingly clear to the reader (and to the protagonists themselves)—that their project has all the hallmarks of 'disenchantment', or of the domination of the natural and social worlds on the

one hand and the attendant loss of meaning on the other. Or, as Menand puts it, Mason and Dixon 'play their tiny and unwitting role...[in] the standardization of time and space', and thus, he continues, 'the settling of America is an allegory for the way getting people to think alike depletes the world' (1997: 25).

Here Pynchon is drawing directly on Weber's ideas: the 'conquest of life by science', according to Weber, leads to an 'external uniformity of life-style' (Weber 1980: 64). Or again, 'culture's every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness...under the technical and social conditions of rational culture' (1948: 357). Compare Pynchon's, or rather the Reverend Cherrycoke's, summary of Mason's and Dixon's project: 'We were putting a straight line through the heart of the Wilderness... What we were doing out in that country was brave, scientifick beyond my understanding, and ultimately meaningless' (1997: 8).

As we know, Weber's response to 'disenchantment' was a sober and realistic assessment of its consequences and resigned recommendations for how to face up to them: 'the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations' (Weber 1948: 155). Pynchon, on the other hand, as a novelist, has the creative freedom to counterpose cultural forces against this trend. His main response to rationalization and disenchantment is to re-enchant places and things. Literally so, in the sense that in *Mason&Dixon*, the mechanical duck of Vaucanson, a creature that accompanies the protagonists on a part of their trail-blazing adventure, for example, develops human-like characteristics and has a love affair; or, to take an example from *Vineland*, that the spirits of the Native American Yuroks who used to inhabit the area of northern California where Zoyd Wheeler now lives still play an active and ghostly part in the novel's present-day ongoings.

Many other examples of supernatural powers, living myths and fantastical interventions could be given. But this re-enchantment goes much further; Pynchon does more than simply give a prominent role to characters or objects with charismatic or 'supernatural' powers. He also endows landscapes, places, peoples, historical figures and events – in short, whole worlds – with non-everyday meaning and magic. (It can be mentioned here in passing that Pynchon is often placed in the genre of 'magical realism'.) For example, in the case of the Native Americans in both novels, this re-enchantment is also evident in how the identity of these groups is intertwined with their habitat. Or we can think of how Mason's professional identity as an

astronomer, and his reflections upon his role as a scientist, are closely bound up with feelings for — and paranormal communications with — his deceased wife Rebekah, which are central to his character's development. Again, many more examples could be given; the essential point is that Pynchon wants to re-endow the world with meaning by allowing the 'ultimate and most sublime values' to suffuse public life.

One could go so far as to say that Pynchon wants to counter disenchantment by re-connecting ways of knowing with the places and cultural environments he describes — in the face of their being torn asunder by the line that Mason and Dixon are drawing. This is a central theme in *Mason&Dixon*, but it can also be seen as the reason for writing the novel in the language and style of a bygone time and place. What Pynchon is trying to do is to recreate the whole 'feel' of this historical episode in its own terms. This point is worth underlining: other novels dealing with history also try to convey a sense of the period that they cover. But *Mason&Dixon* is different from these and from Pynchon's earlier novels in immersing us in the participant's world in both the content *and* the form of the novel. (The exceptions to this immersion are occasional and very oblique allusions to late twentieth-century concerns, but these are more for comic effect than anything else.) As Mattessich puts it, if Mason's and Dixon's project is to extend the British empire's and the American settlers' control of space by mapping it, then 'Pynchon's diction takes the reader back to a state of "unmapped" disorientation and ambiguity' (1997: 9).

*Vineland* is mainly a novel about politics and about re-enchanting a politically bleak period by reclaiming the cultural possibilities of the past. In *Mason&Dixon*, on the other hand, Pynchon is trying to recover possibilities that we have lost through disenchantment, reinserting magic into the places where magic has been eliminated or showing alternative ways of life that have been lost in the homogenization of the modern world. Weber does this too, of course, except that as a sociologist he recognizes the inescapability of the ongoing rationalization process, and can only counterpose the recesses of private life and 'charisma' as countervailing possibilities. In this respect, finally, it is necessary to ask whether Weber's pessimistic stance vis-à-vis disenchantment was exaggerated: as Gellner has pointed out, in late industrial societies our private inter-personal lives can remain relatively isolated and re-enchanted — a 'rubber cage' — as long as the growth of impersonal knowledge and expanding economic production — the 'iron cage' — continues to provide the (disenchanted) conditions of affluence, thus making a (non-impersonal) sphere of consumption

and of culturally diverse life-styles possible (1987; cf. Schroeder 1995: 236-40).

## America's Cultural Significance in World-Historical Perspective

In order to argue that Weber's sociology and Pynchon's vision of America are still relevant today, it will be necessary briefly to outline a contempary Weberian perspective on today's American society.

Cultural commentators and social thinkers alike continue to be fascinated by America as a model and by its decisive role in the world. Even when they point to a possible eclipse of 'the American century', their implicit starting point is nevertheless either American hegemony, or that America is a strong rival model among the futures of advanced societies. One indication of this is that the debate on globalization, if we subtract some ideas about greater global integration, tends to be about Americanization.

There are things to be said for and against this idea of (what can, for the sake of shorthand, be called) American hegemony. Against, one can marshall the end of the Cold War and with it the end of ideological polarization, as well as the decline of America to its 'normal' place in the world's economic and scientific/technological pecking order. On the 'for' side, it remains the case that America has a unique and unrivalled geopolitical position, and that America is dominant in the popular culture industries and their technological bases.

It is inevitable in the longer term that there will be a shift away from the disproportionate attention to the United States because America's geopolitical position is bound to decline in importance in an era of 'soft geopolitics'(Mann 1999: 259), and because ideology tends to follow geopolitics (Collins 1986: 209). Furthermore, the popular culture industries are at best a weak and diffuse source of social power. Eventually, America-centrism is thus bound to be eclipsed, even though there is likely to be a lag in this respect in the academic world in the shorter term: since the vast majority of social scientists and cultural theorists will continue to be based at American universities, they will continue to be preoccupied with American issues even when their 'real' significance has declined.

We can nevertheless already put this America-centeredness into a longer-term perspective. Social thinkers a generation ago were almost completely preoccupied with the agenda of 'classical' *European* social thought. A telling episode in the shift to America-centrism is Anthony Giddens's move to the University of California at Los Angeles, where—as summarized by a commentator—he had the following

'relevation' (perhaps, in the context of an essay partly dealing with literature, we should say 'epiphany'):

> old European structural sociologies of class and authority shed little light on the revolution of everyday life associated with the hippies and with new social movements including the student and anti-Vietnam movements. [Giddens] recounts how a trip to a beach populated with large numbers of people in strange garb brought home to him that European social thought...had [its] limitations (Bryant and Jary 1991: 5).

Whether Giddens properly inhaled and analyzed the hippie atmosphere or not, the agenda in sociological theory has since shifted decisively towards the new American social movements.[2] Nowadays there is an abundant concern in theoretical sociology with American multiculturalism, or with cultural politics at the expense of the wider issues of social thought, economics, politics and science. As Kuper points out, 'in the 1990s, culture theory in America could hardly be distinguished from cultural politics' (1999: 228). Nevertheless, this is a recent, local, and possibly short-lived phenomenon: 'Multiculturalism is not a coherent social movement...despite the fact its influence has spread across the Atlantic, particularly to Britain, the underlying assumptions of multiculturalism are distinctively American' (1999: 232-33).

All this can be put differently: American economic, political and scientific-technological institutions have been regarded world-wide as signposts or as models to be emulated. Yet in fact, from a comparative-historical perspective, America's social achievements are rather profane. The US has a distinctive political system, but from the perspective of political sociology, there is little more to this than divergent paths of state-formation (Mann 1999). The difference in terms of political culture is that America (and England) has laid claim to the symbolic goods of 'freedom' and 'democracy' (Collins 1998: 16-18). Similar things could be said about its economic and scientific/technological systems: as regards economic growth, America has waxed and waned like other economies and undergone relative decline in

---

2.    Rational choice, the—again, America-dominated—seeming exception and perhaps now the main alternative in the social sciences, can be seen as the flipside of this; an attempt to scientize and do away with sociological theory altogether, either by eschewing theory in favour of quantification and mathematical modelling, or, in some versions, in order to give precedence to political science or economics as academic disciplines. Again, the strength of an economistic approach in the social sciences is scarcely surprising in a society in which concerns with economic growth often outweigh political concerns more than elsewhere.

the post-war period (Kennedy 1987: 514-35), but again, in terms of economic ideas, there has been a period of (only slightly wobbly in the 1980s) *symbolic* American economic leadership. Similarly with science and technology, or with the R&D system: 'big science' may be an American invention, and in certain sectors America continues to be a powerhouse of innovation — but leadership has been, if not 'lost to Japan' (Inkster 1991), then at least in relative decline towards a *primus inter pares* position.[3]

What we are therefore left with — the remaining balance once the American social system has been put into its comparative-historical context — is the enormous cultural fascination that American institutions have exerted during this century. What then of American culture?

Here we must immediately make a distinction between culture in the broad and narrow senses: in the broad sense, culture often becomes indistinguishable from the concept of 'civil society'. This concept, in turn, has been interpreted at its widest as consisting of all the social relations outside and counterbalancing the power of the state (here, the main distinction is between those who do and those who don't include the 'market' in 'civil society'; see Schroeder 1998: 90), and at the more narrow end — where the market and all other formal institutions are excluded and culture consists of all the norms in between these institutions on one side and the private households on the other — as civil religion or simply culture generally.

If we take the broader perspective, then Weber's view that America is not a sandheap has recently been restated in a more forceful and detailed way by Hall and Lindholm (1999). Their position, like Weber's, is that the main function of this way of embedding the individual in a network of social relations is to strengthen the social order or give stability to American society. (Hall and Lindholm also agree with Weber, incidentally, that race is the single biggest 'black cloud' — but minus the 'immigration' issue, which commentators agree has been a positive influence on the US, whereas Weber's view was coloured by his attitude towards Polish immigration to Prussia.)

But is this way of counteracting 'atomization', or balancing 'civil

3.    To argue that American technological leadership is undergoing relative decline may be surprising at a time when there seems to be a recent technology-led boom in the American economy. But we should remember, as Kennedy (1987) and, in a more Weberian vein, Collins (1986) have argued, that technological leadership is closely tied to geopolitical advantage. If we adopt this longer-term perspective, then it is difficult to see how America could surpass the position that it occupied at the end of and immediately following the Second World War.

society' against an overbearing state unique to America? Arguably this view of 'civil society' or of a cohesive culture only makes sense from a comparative-historical perspective, vis-à-vis the authoritarian regimes where civil society has either been prevented from emerging or where it has been underdeveloped. Other advanced societies, where 'civil society' has been not underdeveloped but perhaps developed differently, have different mechanisms for integrating individuals which may nevertheless be of similar strength. The only gain from highlighting the supposedly unique strength of American civil society or culture in the broad sense can therefore be to identify the cultural distinctiveness of the American way of life from a cultural-anthropological perspective. But the main reason this uniqueness is nevertheless often discussed is because debates about the decline of 'civil society' or the breakdown of cultural norms are themselves a constant and unique feature of American society. As Hall and Lindholm put it, 'Americans are exceptional in their concern with their own exceptionalism' (1999: 3). Despite the agonizing over American culture (or 'ideology', if we can shift to this term for a moment), it is not clear to what extent ideological/cultural elite or non-elite cohesion is essential to the cohesion or stability of American—or other advanced—societies (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1980).

A more balanced view of the American experience might instead focus not on the positive or negative role of American culture (or 'civil society') but on the distinctive role of its culture from a comparative-historical (as opposed to cultural-anthropological) perspective. In this case an obvious feature is the American cultural pluralism that is different from the Old World's 'high culture' (Gans 1974; 53 and *passim*). Thus we can speak, following Collins, of a 'dispersion of class and other cultural communities' (1975: 214); or, according to Hall and Lindholm, of a 'cultural frame that privileges accommodation rather than conflict' (1999: 145).

But if we take this approach, then the role or function of American culture is that this pluralism lends stability to American society, regardless of whether we adopt a functionalist or conflict perspective. This is because the most important effect of cultural fragmentation or the fragmentation of social conflict may be to block fundamental social or political change. In contrast to those who study culture and who wish to celebrate cultural pluralism as a progressive social force, a more realistic and Weberian sociological assessment is that pluralism blocks socio-political change—'social integration by gridlock' says Collins as a conflict theorist (1992: 302); a 'stability that has… diffused social conflicts throughout society…making it very difficult

indeed for the society to concentrate on a single set of issues for any extended period of time' say Hall and Lindholm in a Durkheimian vein (1999: 76, cf. Mann 1993: 736).

### Conclusion: America — The Prospect Before Her

An interesting divergence between Weber and Pynchon is that whereas Weber saw the empty American space as a unique opportunity to shape a new culture, Pynchon identifies precisely the opposite effect; that the process of the conquest of this empty space obliterates cultural possibilities. In another sense, too, Weber's and Pynchon's ideas could not be more different: Weber is most well-known for his thesis about the Protestant work ethic and about the disenchantment of the world by science, while Pynchon's two most recent non-fiction essays are in praise of sloth (1993) and in defense of Luddism (1984). In his pro-Luddite and pro-sloth stance, Pynchon is trying deliberately to go against the American grain. The two are even linked, as is made clear at the end of the sloth essay, called 'Nearer, My Couch, to Thee':

> Perhaps the future of sloth will lie in sinning against what now seems increasingly to define us—technology. Persisting in Luddite sorrow, despite technology's good intentions, there we'll sit with our heads in virtual reality, glumly refusing to be absorbed in its idle, disposable fantasies (1993: 57).

A final difference in relation to the themes discussed in this essay has already been mentioned; Pynchon's 'paranoid' politics. This political attitude is more in evidence in *Vineland*, where a shadowy 'system' runs America and seeks to extinguish the internal enemy—in this case, the remnants of the 1960s counterculture. Hence Pynchon's turn to the family—the equivalent to Weber's 'brotherliness of direct and personal human relations' (1948: 155)—as the site of possible redemption from the overbearing 'system'. As Hayles puts it, 'if salvation comes, it will arrive by cherishing the small and everyday acts of kindness that flourish in networks of kinship and friendship' (1994: 28).

Yet, as Hall and Lindholm point out, both paranoid politics and the family as the site of political communion are typically American phenomena which can, moreover, be regarded as flipsides of each other. They deserve to be quoted at length on this point:

> The tension between 'idealized' us and 'demonized' them manifests itself at every level of American culture...all...disagree about who *really*

has influence: none see themselves as having power, all see power as being unfairly grabbed by others... In politics [this] leads to further cynicism about and withdrawal from political action, back to the realm of one's own personal 'everybody' — that is, back to family and friends gathered together solely because they like one another. This attitude also fuels the characteristic American anxiety about conspiracies. If one's friends and colleagues are morally good and support America, then countergroups of evildoers must be working to undermine the nation... This paranoia is exacerbated by the decentralization of the political system, which means that much of importance is actually taken out of the public eye, in informal meetings of the influential and powerful (1999: 126-27).

At this point, we can conclude by taking a step back to recall the points made in previous sections of the essay: that Weber's ideas about cultural pessimism and possible cultural renewal are always located in the larger context of the structural constraints and opportunities of the rationalization of the cultural, political, and economic spheres. And here, as I have argued earlier (in agreement with Mommsen 1974: esp. p. 84), Weber thought that an anti-authoritarian attitude towards the state — and not culture or 'ethic' *per se* — was potentially America's most important contribution to world-history and thus constituted America's cultural significance. Yet, as we have seen, the pluralism in American culture which balances against the state can be seen as a weakness — political sclerosis — as much as a strength. Which? is beyond Weber's analysis and Pynchon's hopes for America, and beyond our scope.

## References

Abercrombie, N., S. Hill and B.S. Turner
    1980    *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: George Allen and Unwin).
Bryant, C.G.A. and D. Jary
    1991    'Introduction: coming to terms with Anthony Giddens', in C.G.A. Bryant and David Jary (eds.), *Giddens' Theory of Structuration: A critical appreciation* (London: Routledge): 1-31.
Collins, R.
    1975    *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science* (New York: Academic Press).
    1986    *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

| | |
|---|---|
| 1992 | 'What does Conflict Theory Predict about America's Future?', *Sociological Perspectives* 36(4): 289-313. |
| 1998 | 'Democratization in World-Historical Perspective', in R. Schroeder (ed.), *Max Weber, Democracy and Modernization* (London: Macmillan): 14-31. |

Gans, H.J.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1974 | *Popular Culture and High Culture; An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books). |

Gellner, E.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1987 | 'The Rubber Cage: Disenchantment with Disenchantment' in *idem*, *Culture, Identity, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 152-65. |

Hall, J.A. and C. Lindholm
| | |
|---|---|
| 1999 | *Is America Breaking Apart?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). |

Hayles, N.K.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1994 | ' "Who Was Saved?": Families, Snitches and Recuperation in Pynchon's Vineland', in G. Green, D. Greiner and L. McCaffery (eds.), *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press): 14-30. |

Inkster, I.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1991 | 'Made in America but Lost to Japan: Science, Technology, and Economic Performance in the Two Capitalist Superpowers', *Social Studies of Science* 21(1): 157-78. |

Kalberg, S.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1998 | 'Toqueville and Weber on the Sociological Origins of Citizenship: The Political Culture of American Democracy', in R. Schroeder (ed.), *Max Weber, Democracy and Modernization* (London: Macmillan): 93-112. |

Kennedy, P.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1987 | *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House). |

Kuper, A.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1999 | *Culture: The Anthropologist's Account* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). |

Mann, M.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1993 | *The Sources of Social Power. II. The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–191* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). |
| 1999 | 'Has Globalization Ended the Rise and Rise of the Nation-state?', in T.V. Paul and J.A. Hall (eds.), *International Order and the Future of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 237-61. |

Mattessisch, S.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1997 | 'Telluric Texts, Implicate Spaces', *Postmodern Culture: an electronic journal of interdisciplinary criticism* 8(1): 1-14 (available at http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.997/review-5.997). |

Menand, L.
| | |
|---|---|
| 1997 | 'Entropology', *The New York Review of Books*, 12 June: 22-25. |

Mommsen, W.
    1974      *Max Weber: Gesellschaft, Politik und Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Suhr-
              kamp).
Pyenson, L. and S. Sheets-Pyenson,
    1999      *Servants of Nature: A History of Scientific Institutions, Enterprises and
              Sensibilities* (New York: W.W. Norton).
Pynchon, T.
    1973      *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking).
    1984      'Is It OK to Be a Luddite?', *The New York Times Book Review,* 28
              October: 1, 40-41.
    1990      *Vineland* (New York: Little, Brown & Co.).
    1993      'Nearer, My Couch, to Thee', *The New York Times Book Review,* 6
              June: 3, 57.
    1997      *Mason&Dixon* (New York: Henry Holt & Co.).
Scaff, Lawrence A.
    1998      'The "cool objectivity of sociation": Max Weber and Marianne
              Weber in America', *History of the Human Sciences* 11(2): 61-82.
Schroeder, R.
    1990      'From Puritanism to Paranoia: Trajectories of History in Weber and
              Pynchon', *Pynchon Notes* 26-27: 69-80.
    1991      '"Personality" and "inner distance": the conception of the
              individual in Max Weber's sociology', *History of the Human Sciences*
              4(1): 61-78.
    1992      *Max Weber and the Sociology of Culture* (London: Sage).
    1995      'Disenchantment and its discontents: Weberian perspectives on
              science and technology', *The Sociological Review* 43(2): 227-50.
    1998      'From Weber's Political Sociology to Contemporary Liberal Democ-
              racy', in R. Schroeder (ed.), *Max Weber, Democracy and Moderniza-
              tion* (London: Macmillan): 79-92.
Weber, Marianne
    1975      *Max Weber: A Biography* (New York: John Wiley and Sons).
Weber, M.
    1948a     *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (eds. H. Gerth and C. Wright
              Mills; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
    1980      *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 4th edn).
    1988      *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen: J.C.B.
              Mohr, 2nd edn).