
A German Tocqueville? *The Unrecognized Importance of* *Francis Lieber's Letters to a Gentleman in* *Germany, or The Stranger in America*

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Introduction: A German Tocqueville?

"No German I know could have analyzed public life as I have done, having had the advantage of a practical citizen's life for many years, in a vast republic."¹ Francis Lieber, the stocky, thick-accented German to whom this bold statement belonged, was basking in the positive reception of his recently published *Manual of Political Ethics*. He considered himself—along with his friend Alexis de Tocqueville—as one of a select few gifted with special insight into a nation's political life. Joseph Story praised Lieber as even greater than Tocqueville, saying "'You know ten times as much as he does of the actual workings of our system and of its true theory.'"² Samuel Taylor agreed and, in an article comparing both men side by side, argued that, while Tocqueville was the better writer, Lieber surpassed him "as a political philosopher, comprehensive in his knowledge of the literatures of history and of politics, and of the practices of government; and profound in understanding the guaranties of

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¹ Francis Lieber to J. B. Boyd, March 29, 1840, quoted in Frank Freidel, *Francis Lieber: Nineteenth Century Liberal* (1947; repr., Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1968), 149.

² Quoted in George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 731.

liberty, and the institutions and arrangements of governments for their protection.”³ Given this high praise, one might well ask whether Tocqueville was a “French Lieber.” However, given Tocqueville’s modern fame, perhaps it is better to ask whether Lieber should be understood as a kind of “German Tocqueville,” especially regarding his observations about the fledgling United States. In order to assess the significance of Lieber’s understanding of American political institutions for his own political thought, we need to begin with his 1834 travel journal about a trip to Niagara Falls.

Since the German-American’s death in 1872, *Letters to a Gentleman in Germany*—or, as it was renamed by its English publisher, *The Stranger in America*—has received little more than passing acknowledgement from historians and political scientists.⁴ More often, the book is simply ignored, chalked up as one indistinguishable product among many in the avalanche that was Lieber’s academic output. This is a mistake. *The Stranger in America* was Lieber’s first book published in the United States, and he wrote it because, in his words, “the great interest of this country lies in its institutions . . . the United States form a republic of thirteen millions of inhabitants, founded on broader principles of liberty, than any former political society. This is a fact, and is it not interesting to study how so great a fact came to pass?”⁵ Though much of Lieber’s account of his journey from Philadelphia to Niagara is filled with autobiographical accounts of his early life and tangential discourses on a staggering range of topics, *The Stranger in America* contains within it piercing

³ Samuel Taylor, “De Tocqueville and Lieber as Writers on Political Science,” *Princeton Review* 30 (October 1858): 627.

⁴ Francis Lieber, *The Stranger in America: Comprising Sketches of the Manners, Society, and National Peculiarities of the United States, in a Series of Letters to a Friend in Europe*, 2 vols. (1835; repr., Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009). For expeditiousness, the rest of this essay will refer to *Letters to a Gentleman in Germany* by its more laconic title, *The Stranger in America*. Daniel Gilman, Thomas Perry, George Pierson, Frank Freidel, Michael O’Brien, and James Farr are the only scholars whom I have found mention *The Stranger in America* in their work on Lieber. Of these, Freidel gives it the most attention, and even he considered *The Stranger in America* unimportant, calling it a “book of light chatter.” Francis Lieber, *The Miscellaneous Writings of Francis Lieber*, ed. Daniel Gilman, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1881), 17, 78. Thomas Sergeant Perry, *Life and Letters of Francis Lieber* (Boston: J.R. Osgood & Co., 1882), 7, Google Book. Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*. 373-390. Freidel, *Francis Lieber: Nineteenth Century Liberal*, 110-112. Michael O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 454. James Farr, “Francis Lieber and the Interpretation of American Political Science,” *Journal of Politics* 52, no. 4 (November 1990): 1028-1029. Citations of their works would be helpful here—all are in the bibliography but should be cited here with specific page numbers.

⁵ Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 1:16-17.

commentaries on the governing institutions of the United States, along with America's material and scientific progress.⁶ He combined these observations into a broader assessment of the character of the American people, and in so doing, revealed some of the ideas which later served as keystones for his system of historical and political thought.

Despite his several years of residence in the United States, Lieber did not consider himself assimilated, and thus possessed a proper distance from his subject of study. As he explained to his fictional German correspondent at the beginning of the *Stranger in America*,

My habits and occupations have afforded me the opportunity of collecting more materials in regard to the United States than, perhaps, ever a native of a foreign country had either the disposition or opportunity to collect, whilst my long residence here, together with some additional causes, have rendered me intimately acquainted with the whole social life of the Americans.⁷

His familiarity with, yet alienation from, American society was only partly by his own choice. By 1834, he was well-acquainted with the social circles of the North. He had many prominent friends, among them Joseph Story, James Kent, John James Audubon, George Ticknor, and Edward Everett. The remarkable ease with which the Prussian immigrant moved among the New England intellectual elite led Henry Pochmann to later claim that "not since Tom Paine's day had an immigrant to these shores succeeded so promptly in winning the favor of influential Americans."⁸ Many of these influential Americans promised him a job, but whether because of bad luck, his German accent, or, as Matthew Mancini argues, "his complaisance and bonhomie," Lieber was unable to assimilate fully into American academia and society.⁹ As late as 1851, he would complain to George Hillard, "if I am not an American, what am I? German not—a sort of cosmopolitan dog."¹⁰ It was during Lieber's early years as a stranger in America that he met two fellow observers of American institutions with whom he could share his outsider's perspective.

⁶ Freidel says of the book: "Many [topics] were frivolously entertaining; others foreshadowed his serious work." However, he goes no further in his analysis. This thesis intends—in part—to rectify Freidel's omission. Freidel, *Francis Lieber*, 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Henry Pochmann, *German Culture in America: 1600-1900* (1957; repr., Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), 125.

⁹ Matthew Mancini, *Alexis de Tocqueville and American Intellectuals: From His Times to Ours* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 31.

¹⁰ O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South*, 1:74.

The French Connection: Tocqueville Meets Lieber

In 1831, Lieber was engrossed in publishing the *Encyclopedia Americana*. When he was not working, he was a regular member of Boston's vibrant social scene. As he later recorded in his diary and in the second letter of *The Stranger in America*, "I was once with Messrs. — sent by their government to this country, to inquire into our —, in a Boston party."¹¹ These two unnamed gentlemen were Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont. The meeting made a memorable impression upon the Frenchmen as well. In his own diary entry, Beaumont wrote, "We have found here some men truly distinguished by their knowledge, among others a German, Mr. Lieber."¹² Tocqueville and Beaumont called upon Lieber at his home later that same evening. They met often over the course of subsequent weeks, with Lieber recording in his diary that "we see a great deal of De Beaumont and De Tocqueville."¹³ Historian George Pierson says it was clear that "the three young men were delighted with each other. The enthusiastic German, whose proudest boast in later years was to be that he was the American 'de Tocqueville,' found himself particularly attracted by Beaumont's generous and easy-going disposition."¹⁴ A small European enclave in the midst of an alien land, the Frenchmen and the German discussed a great variety of topics, including the possibility of transplanting American ideals to Europe and the difficulty of making Germany into a unified political entity.¹⁵ But it is significant that in Tocqueville's diary and in *The Stranger in America*, both the Frenchman and the German chose to record their conversations about the character of the American regime.

The records of the conversations between the three men demonstrate that Lieber had been thinking seriously about the uniqueness of the United States for some time. Over the course of their roughly two weeks together, Tocqueville, Beaumont, and Lieber shared their observations about America, discussing everything from American morals and mastery over the passions to the character of American women. On September 22, while out on a walk, Tocqueville recorded Lieber telling them about the contrast between Europe and his adopted America,

We Europeans, we think to create republics by organizing a great political assembly. The Republic, on the contrary, is of all the governments the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:45. As was often the custom among published memoirs at the time, Lieber purposely omitted the names of Tocqueville and Beaumont.

¹² Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 375.

¹³ Perry, *Life and Letters of Francis Lieber*, 91, Google Book.

¹⁴ Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 377.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 378-380.

one that depends most on every part of society. Look at this country! The Republic is everywhere, in the streets as in Congress. If an obstacle embarrasses the public way, the neighbours will at once constitute themselves a deliberative body; they will name a commission and will remedy the evil by their collective force, wisely directed. . . . The people have the Republic to the marrow of the bones.¹⁶

Later, during the same conversation, Tocqueville noticed a well-dressed man of clear social standing, and was shocked when Lieber revealed him to be an executioner. “*Ma foi*, that is rather too much!” Tocqueville exclaimed, horrified that a profession which had such a low reputation in France would be accorded honor in America.¹⁷ Lieber later recounted Tocqueville’s reaction in *The Stranger in America* as proof that the greater respect paid to the rule of law, “the fewer the prejudices against professions and classes.”¹⁸ Lieber’s assertions about the self-governing, law-abiding republicanism of the Americans could well have come straight out of *Democracy in America*.

Lieber came to see himself and Tocqueville as men set apart for their ability to peel back the layers of a society and observe the character beneath. Lieber would later tell a correspondent, “There is a peculiar class of political philosophers or publicists, which might be called historico-philosophical publicists, the three most prominent of which, so far as I know, are Montesquieu, De Tocqueville, and Lieber.”¹⁹ All three tried to understand and explain a new type of regime, the commercial republic. Montesquieu’s case study was England, while the latter two studied the United States. Because of Tocqueville’s enduring fame and Lieber’s modern anonymity, it is easy for a student of nineteenth-century American political thought to understand Lieber as merely mimicking his friend and trying to set himself up as a “German Tocqueville.” But viewing Lieber only through a Tocquevillian lens distorts their relationship and the value of Lieber’s own socio-political observations. It was Lieber who, during those September days in Boston, was the first to make observations about the American character, and he was also the first one to express cogently those observations in *The Stranger in America*, which appeared a year prior to the first volume of *Democracy in America*. It is clear that Lieber was developing his ideas about the United States concur-

¹⁶ Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 377-378.

¹⁷ Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 1:45; Tocqueville himself gives a less excitable account of his reaction in his diary. Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 379.

¹⁸ Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 1:46.

¹⁹ Francis Lieber to S. B. Ruggles, October 23, 1856, Lieber Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

rently with Tocqueville, and his *Stranger in America*, therefore, deserves to be considered on its own merits as a series of reflections independent from—if not unrelated to—Tocqueville’s own ideas.

The Writing of The Stranger in America

A lull in Lieber’s frantic work schedule created the circumstances which allowed him to put his observations about America on paper. Beginning in June 1834, he was a man in between jobs. Less than a year after his arrival in America in June 1827, Lieber had begun a translation of *Brockhaus’ Conversations-Lexikon*. As he solicited articles on American topics from his many acquaintances and added plenty of his own, the work eventually grew into the *Encyclopedia Americana*. Published in installments, the compendium sold phenomenally well. However, Lieber did not see nearly any of the profits from his mammoth exertion, as his contract with the publishers guaranteed only a set salary. Once he finished the *Americana*, the money quickly ran out. By the summer of 1834, he was entertaining a variety of schemes to keep himself financially soluble, one of which was for him to enter the highly lucrative business of publishing a travel journal.

Foreign accounts of the United States were published regularly from the 1790s onwards. The majority of these originated from the United Kingdom. Henry Tuckerman, in *America and Her Commentators*, counted over two dozen English travel journals about America published between 1790 and 1834.²⁰ These diaries were almost uniformly critical of American politics and culture, and were as popular among Americans as they were hated. According to Freidel, “Americans frothed violently against these ‘libels,’ but just as strenuously hastened to buy them.”²¹ Lieber was well-aware of how fashionable these biting accounts were with British and American audiences alike, remarking in his own travel diary that “it is certainly a fact worth notice, that the severest books against the United States sell rapidly, and often run through several editions.”²² However, rather than do the obviously profitable thing and join his own voice to the chorus of denunciations against the United States for the pleasure of European readers, Lieber instead praised the American

²⁰ Henry Tuckerman, *America and Her Commentators, With a Critical Sketch of Travel in the United States* (New York: Scribner, 1864), 156-251. See also *Abroad in America: visitors to the new nation, 1776-1914*, ed. Marc Pachter and Frances Wein (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1976).

²¹ Freidel, *Francis Lieber*, 110-111.

²² Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 2:78.

way of life and wrote for an American audience. There had been prior accounts published by American authors for their countrymen, but they either avoided the topic of American institutions altogether, or focused solely on regional characteristics.²³ Lieber, by writing for an American audience under the guise of corresponding with a foreigner, was doing something unique.

The Stranger in America is a work of political science concealed beneath the veneer of a travelogue. This is not immediately obvious at first glance. Some of Lieber's contemporaries, however, recognized the seriousness of the work. In a letter thanking Lieber for dedicating the book to him, Washington Irving declared, "I put the more gratitude by this mark of your esteemed pen in the nature of the work itself, treating with such a liberal and enlightened spirit, of my country, its people and its institutions."²⁴ Likewise, the *American Quarterly Review* recognized *The Stranger in America* was different in kind from the myriad travel diaries published by Englishmen, arguing "that the remarks upon our country by the German gentleman ... are of a very different character from those furnished by British tourists."²⁵ Lieber's remarks were different because he saw in America not a curious carnival attraction full of bad manners and dangerous radicalism, but rather a vision of modern progress.

Although Lieber's entire journey from Philadelphia to the then-frontier town of Niagara lasted only eleven days, he returned home convinced that the characteristics evinced by Americans in their drive for westward expansion defined their national spirit. Although he cautioned that his reader "must not then expect me to give [him] a connected account, claiming to show the United States like a well-dried plant laid out on the blotting-paper of an herbarium," he was, nevertheless, eager to analyze the component parts of the American experiment.²⁶ As a liberal optimist, Lieber believed the United States heralded a new world order based on freedom, the rule of law, and free markets. "It is my full conviction," he wrote, "that there never was a nation so fitted for [a government of law], in ancient or modern times, so calculated to solve a number of difficult political problems, as the Americans."²⁷ In his views on American government, material and scientific progress, and religion, he

²³ Tuckerman, *America and Her Commentators*, 371-437.

²⁴ Washington Irving to Francis Lieber, November 15, 1834, Lieber Collection, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.

²⁵ Review of *Letters to a Gentleman in Germany* by Francis Lieber, *American Quarterly Review* 16, no. 32 (December 1834): 285.

²⁶ Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 1:20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:38.

was continually struck by the individualism, ingenuity, and restlessness of the American people. He began his account by examining America's political inheritance from Great Britain and her geographic location, both of which were responsible for the United States being uniquely fitted for self-government and for developing political ideas that will "have a decided effect on the whole European race, and, for aught I know, upon other races."²⁸

Anglican Liberty: Lieber on American Government

The location of the United States was of primary importance to its political development. Americans were situated

in a boundless country, allowing scope to the boldest enterprise without causing discontent and political friction . . . at a great distance from Europe and all her intricate questions and diplomatic influences, yet blessed with the civilization of that part of the world by means of the all-uniting sea. . . . a thousand favorable circumstances occur in America, to make it possible that a far greater amount of liberty can be introduced into all the concerns of her political society than ever was possible before with any other nation.²⁹

Lieber accepted Publius' argument for the benefits of an extended republic as a greater guarantor of liberty, and acknowledged that a transplanted European culture, combined with a great physical distance from Europe, made America the most perfectly placed of all Western nations for the flourishing of self-government.

These United States were also fortunate enough to have begun as British colonies. A lifelong Anglophile, Lieber considered Britain to be "that great nation, which alone sends along with its colonies a germ of independent life and principle of self-action."³⁰ The uniqueness of British political culture made American political institutions possible. He claimed

It was necessary for the Americans, in order to make them fit to solve certain political problems . . . that they should descend from the English, should begin as persecuted colonists, severed from the mother country, and yet loving it with all their heart and all their soul . . . to be mostly Protestants, and to settle in colonies with different charters, so that, when royal authority was put down, they were as so many independent States, and yet to be all of one metal, so that they never ceased morally to form one nation, nor to feel as such.³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 1:41.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 1:39.

³¹ Ibid., 1:43.

Thus, for Lieber, American exceptionalism could not be understood apart from the British exceptionalism which gave birth to it. Like Tocqueville, he ignored the American Founding, indicating instead that everything necessary to American independence existed by virtue of the American colonies' unique position within the British Empire. It was Britain that first developed

the leading and characteristic political features of the present age—namely, elective representation, two houses, an independent judiciary, liberty of the press, responsibility of ministers, a law standing above the highest ruler, even if a monarch, and a proper independence of the minor communities in the state . . . and above all, that nation which first of all elevated itself to the great idea of a lawful opposition.³²

Lieber, probably because he experienced political persecution while a graduate student in Prussia, was particularly attached to this last idea, adding in a lengthy footnote, "Opposition is an ingredient part of a free government . . . if the future historian knew nothing of the English but that they first elevated themselves to this idea, he would conclude that it must have been a nation in a very high stage of political advancement."³³ The combination of these factors—the rule of law, separation of powers, federalism, free elections, and lawful opposition—formed the genesis for what Lieber would later come to call "Anglican" liberty.

Anglican liberty, according to political scientist Bradley Watson, "is a liberty of decentralization, pluralism, self-reliance, and voluntary association, wherein the government does not act as a leader of men."³⁴ This kind of liberty originated in England, where it developed for hundreds of years, before migrating across the Atlantic to the American colonies. Historian Dorothy Ross writes that Lieber's account of the development of American liberty in his 1853 *Civil Liberty and Self-Government* concluded that "the popular governments of England and America, with their interconnected system of institutions and their 'articulated liberty,' were the highest forms achieved by history."³⁵ He distinguished these forms from "Gallican" liberty, which Lieber—a veteran of Waterloo and admirer of Edmund Burke—considered the offspring of the detestable French Revolution. Lieber and Tocqueville agreed that the main distinguishing factor between Anglo-American and French systems of government was the latter's utter lack of intermediary institutions. The Anglo-American

³² *Ibid.*, 1:39.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:39n.

³⁴ Bradley Watson, "Who Was Francis Lieber?" *Modern Age* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 309.

³⁵ Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41.

idea of representative government—supported by intermediary institutions that protected a particular understanding of liberty—completed a long process of historical evolution. For Lieber, America’s greatness consisted in her role as the perfecter and completer of Anglican liberty.

Elections were the one aspect of American politics Lieber thought most aptly demonstrated the self-governing character of the Americans. On the surface, elections in the United States were ugly. He described them as akin to great storms. Brought to life in a whirlwind of passion, “a noise is made before every election, proportionate (or rather disproportionate) to its importance. . . . Sometimes the uninitiated would think the whole country in a dangerous fever.”³⁶ Papers and pamphlets swelled forth and circulated widely, political committees surfaced seemingly out of nowhere, and the sounds of inflamed rhetoric crashed against the ears of near-manic audiences. However, what made these scenes most remarkable was how Americans moved on from them so quickly to return to a state of contented peace. As quickly as the morning after the election, he observed, “the rains of heaven wash down these traces of man’s passion.”³⁷

The reasons for the American electors’ seeming schizophrenia were threefold. First, the rule of law and the frequency of elections made each individual election less consequential, thereby lowering tensions. In America, despite changes in party and heated rhetoric, the people knew that “the broad principles of the whole system will be acted upon, the general laws will be observed.”³⁸ No one risked his life or property by supporting a losing party and “the successful party does not annihilate its opponents,” because the rule of law prevailed.³⁹ Second, the existence of more-or-less permanent political parties removed the stain of dishonor from losing candidates, moderating the behavior of ambitious men. Regular elections prevented the winners from becoming too powerful, and prevented the losers from taking extralegal measures to seize power.⁴⁰ Third, Americans did not conflate political ideas they abhorred with the politicians who espoused them. Lieber, who had visited the capital and met President Jackson, remarked, “You may see senators and representatives in Washington fighting deadly battles, and, an

³⁶ Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 1:29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:26.

⁴⁰ “An American, as a member of a party, may be defeated; he is never conquered.” *Ibid.*, 2:26.

hour later, walking and joking together.”⁴¹ This seeming contradiction was not because politicians staged insincere arguments for the benefit of their constituents and the newspaper reporters. Rather, “it is because people here have always been accustomed to acknowledge in every one the right politically to act as he thinks best.”⁴² This kind of political trust came from, among other things, the jealously guarded right to free speech. It was a strange fact, observed Lieber, that free speech, which fanned the flames of hysteria during elections, was otherwise used in a purely sober fashion.

Despite his unabashed admiration for representative government, the rule of law, separation of powers, and federalism—all of which he termed the “civil architecture” of American politics—he considered them praiseworthy only as means, rather than ends.⁴³ At the time of the *Stranger in America’s* writing, Northern abolitionists and Southerners who viewed slavery as a “positive good” were growing in strength and numbers. Both groups believed the Constitution did not provide adequate means for allowing the United States to satisfactorily resolve the issue of slavery. Lieber nevertheless maintained “that the Union, and our constitution, were a wise contrivance, and it seems to me, the only one which was capable of producing so rapid a progress, in so many respects, of this young nation, and that if tomorrow the whole should tumble to pieces, it was yet worth the while to have established it.”⁴⁴ Lieber’s utilitarian language showed him to be committed to progress above all else, which he identified as “the general endeavor to define more clearly, and extend more widely, human rights and civil liberty,” to the entire world.⁴⁵ The best way to accomplish this, he argued, was through the satisfaction of material wants and scientific advancement.

*Inventing the Empire of Liberty:
Lieber on Material and Scientific Progress in the U.S.*

In his journey across the mid-Atlantic states, Lieber used every mode of modern transportation available to the young republic, and he was astounded by how quickly the new country built up its infrastructure. The great public works projects of ancient Egypt and Rome took genera-

⁴¹ Ibid., 1:35.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 1:42.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2:212.

⁴⁵ Francis Lieber, *Manual of Political Ethics*, ed. Theodore Woolsey (1838; repr. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1881), 2:239.

tions to build, but Lieber thought the physical accomplishments of both empires paled in comparison to the United States, where “I believe, as long as history records the deeds of men, there has never been a territory equal in extent to Pennsylvania and the western part of New York, where human activity and ingenuity have done equally much in so short a time for internal communication.”⁴⁶ He noted how, even in the tiny state of Delaware, there had been a revolution in transportation since he arrived in the United States. In 1827, he crossed Delaware “in a confounded and confounding stagecoach.”⁴⁷ Several years later, he traveled across the state by canal. Only a year later, he crossed by railroad. In less than five years, he had witnessed the full transition from horsepower to steam, and he finished his anecdote with a prediction, saying, “I wait impatiently for a passage *over* the state, for aerial navigation is the next in order, all other means being exhausted.”⁴⁸ His interest in American technological advancement, particularly in the realm of transportation, wove together his account of his journey to Niagara.

The extraordinary American capacity to innovate, Lieber explained, resulted from their inventions being free products of the mind. He argued that—excepting the invention of the printing press—“most great discoveries [before American independence] have been made by chance or suffering.”⁴⁹ But the steamboat—the American invention which most captured Lieber’s imagination—did not result from the desire to tyrannize or from random accident. Rather, “it was the invention of a private individual, who foresaw the immense advantages which his country would derive from a navigation, able to brave wind, tide, and current.”⁵⁰ Lieber believed unfettered self-interest was the most effective engine for producing innovation in all fields, even art. He described the steamboats on which he traveled up and down the Hudson as floating grand hotels, the beauty of which “are the most striking objects which this country presents to a foreigner.”⁵¹ The Americans, which Lieber observed are otherwise “enthusiastic utilitarians,” would never indulge in such useless opulence as interior décor without “the powerful effect of competition.”⁵² When it came to the ability of free markets to produce social and material goods, Lieber was an unbounded optimist. His expla-

⁴⁶ Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 1:67.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:68.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:62.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:63.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1:259.

⁵² *Ibid.*

nation of America's rapid material progress in *The Stranger in America* is the first written instance of his thoughts on political economy, which he later expounded more fully in his *Essays on Property and Labour*.

Steamboats and canals were two American technological achievements in the realm of transportation that fascinated Lieber. The revolution steamboats created in moving goods and people made possible American economic prosperity and settlement of the West, and they were a poignant example of American sociality. The United States, Lieber thought, would have been unable to exist as an extended republic without the unifying effect of steamboats. Lieber praised steam power as

the handmaid of civilization. Steam has not only quickened the intercourse of men, but has united things which, without it, would have remained separate for ever. Steam, I do not hesitate to say, has cemented our Union. How would it have been possible for States, at such a distance from each other as Louisiana and Maine, Missouri and Delaware, to remain firmly united, had these distances continued to signify what they formerly did, had, in short, a mile remained a mile?⁵³

More than any of the United States' political institutions, the shrinking of distance occasioned by technological advances in transportation enabled American expansion and made possible a single government "from sea to shining sea."

Lieber compared steamboats to moving streets, where "people of all trades and classes meet," while still retaining their individuality.⁵⁴ It is unsurprising that he later used the image of a steamboat to demonstrate his theory about sociality and individuality as the two poles around which human life revolved. In *Manual of Political Ethics*, he asked the reader to "observe a steamboat full of passengers, all collected for one purpose, to reach a certain point as soon as possible, all in the same condition, having paid their fare, and equally interested in the safety of the vessel. Besides these points, every passenger forms an isolated individual."⁵⁵ The steamboat, in addition to having provided a faster method of transportation, also fostered social cohesion and provided a modern "ship of state" analogy by which one could understand the political relationship between the individual and the community.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1:59. In this vein, Lieber offered an inscription for his proposed statue of Robert Fulton, praising him as the man who "subdued the rivers and the lakes, and carried the plough to remote regions. He united the extreme parts of his country, and thus made firmer the sacred covenant of our Union." The political dimension of technological innovation was at the forefront of Lieber's mind. *Ibid.*, 1:61-62.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:59.

⁵⁵ Lieber, *Manual of Political Ethics*, 1:170.

Lieber was also highly impressed by the ingenuity and expanse of the Erie Canal, which he traveled from Schenectady to Utica and from Lockport to Niagara. He repeatedly referred to it as the “Grand Canal,” referencing the eponymous Grand Canal of China. Just as that waterway was a world wonder in the eastern hemisphere, the Erie Canal was “the greatest monument which this part of the world affords, of man’s conquering superiority over matter.”⁵⁶ For Lieber to say, “the study of this undertaking has been a source of deep interest to me,” was an understatement.⁵⁷ He filled *The Stranger in America* with detailed descriptions about the workings of weigh-locks, commentaries on the state laws governing the building and maintaining of canals, and a litany of the most recent works about canals. Curiously, he noted, Americans did not share his sense of awe. Not content with the Erie Canal itself, Lieber observed how “branch canals and rail-roads are continually adding . . . as if there were no end to American activity.”⁵⁸ For Lieber, the only thing more impressive than the technological achievements of the Americans was their drive to continually improve upon them.

After describing his trip up the Erie Canal to Utica, Lieber interrupted his narrative for an aside about the American standard of living. Even in a frontier town such as Utica, the size and number of shops proved “that the American consumes more than any other human being.”⁵⁹ In part, this was because Americans always preferred the new to the old, even when it came to household goods. General prosperity and the high rate of consumption combined to create a high standard of living across society, despite the fact the United States was still a frontier nation. This general “standard of comfort, which altogether is much higher in this country than any where else, if we speak of the industrial classes,” equalized American society, as it became more difficult to materially distinguish between rich and poor.⁶⁰

Lieber’s Characterization of the American Spirit

In analyzing some of the major institutions which defined their regime, Lieber revealed what he considered to be the three main characteristics of Americans as individuals. First, in his assessment of their government, Lieber found Americans animated by a fierce spirit of

⁵⁶ Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 2:32.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:138.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:139.

independence that made them jealously guard their liberty. Americans all knew their rights and allowed themselves to be ruled by the law alone. Pomp and circumstance—a bastion of support for governments of old—played no role in American political life. As Lieber explained, “here people think differently. The president signs himself in a letter to the butchers of New York, who had sent him a peculiarly fine piece of beef, or to a hat-maker, who presented him with some broad-brimmed beaver, ‘Your humble servant,’ and the law is yet observed.”⁶¹ This sense of equality was shared by everyone in society. As Lieber wryly noted, the wives of mechanics dressed as well as society’s dames.⁶² Because Americans believed their society lacked social classes, “the reasons why she should not dress as many do are often not taken into consideration by the wife of the mechanic.”⁶³ The spirit of independence gave birth to a spirit of equality which imbued every relation Americans had with one another. This, in turn, opened the door for every ambitious man to make his mark and produced a sense of restlessness within the whole society.

The second major characteristic of Americans was this restlessness. Americans were most comfortable when on the move. This pioneer spirit drove them to settle the West and constantly innovate. As Lieber said, “an American distinguishes himself from the inhabitants of all other countries by a restlessness, a striving and driving onward, without which this country would never have shot up in such an unexampled growth, and which opens to thousands of men, possessed of nothing but their energy, a successful career.”⁶⁴ Americans moved with an urgency in everything. In manufacturing, “an American cannot make a piece of machinery, twice, precisely the same; he endeavours always to improve, sometimes merely to change.”⁶⁵ Americans seemed to take no account of the length of time required for the nations of Europe to build Western civilization. They were governed only by an insatiable need to catch up to Europe, and were therefore not content with waiting for anything. The American, Lieber observed, “wants to perform within a year what others do within a much longer period. Ten years in America are like a century in Spain.”⁶⁶ The near-constant change that resulted from this impatience affected every aspect of American society. Especially in the realm of material advancement, restlessness produced the rapid development of

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1:255.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1:103.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:68.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:70.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:187.

technology and wealth that Lieber described throughout *The Stranger in America*.

A spirit of enterprise—the third main characteristic of Americans—arose out of the pioneer spirit and the physical situation of the United States. A fiercely independent and restless people possess a great capacity for destruction. But in America, these characteristics were a boon because Americans had before them a vast, empty, and untamed continent, “which calls continually for the application of new forces, and which leads them to look upon changes and novelties in a totally different light from that in which they would appear to the inhabitants of an old European state.”⁶⁷ Their independent mind made them bold and self-confident, which drove them to take risks. Lieber observed that “an American doubts of nothing; sometimes owing to enterprising boldness, sometimes to want of knowledge or to self-confidence, always, in a measure, to the fact, that want of success in an enterprise is not followed in the United States by obloquy or ridicule, even though the undertaking may have been injudicious.”⁶⁸ Entirely absent from *The Stranger in America* was Tocqueville’s fear that the democratic mass, out of an overriding desire for equality in all things, would blunt the ambitions of exceptional men. Lieber thought American society incredibly supportive of enterprising individuals, and even though the confidence such support instilled led to many failures, it prevented entrepreneurs from becoming discouraged. In fact, Lieber seemed to think that the confidence Americans had in their own chance for success was the noble lie which sustained the regime.

American self-confidence, together with the three characteristics of independence, restlessness, and enterprise, were best embodied in the American farmer. Lieber rejected the idea that America was a commercial republic in the Hamiltonian sense, arguing “it is necessary to travel but a short distance to the west, in order to be convinced how erroneous the frequent assertion is, that the Americans are more a commercial nation than any thing else; they are, on the contrary, thus far essentially agricultural, that not only the vastly greater part of them are farmers, but also that their disposition is fitted for the farmer life. Every American loves farming.”⁶⁹ He told the story of a former congressman who, having been born to affluence and bred in a large East Coast city, “broke up

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:71.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:184.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:162.

his establishment, and set off with his whole family to Illinois.”⁷⁰ Lieber concluded, “It is an instance which could not possibly happen anywhere but in America.”⁷¹ The agricultural settlement of the West was the quint-essentially American adventure. Also, the fact that the United States lacked a peasant class, and instead was dominated by yeoman farmers who worked and owned their own land, explained the American’s love of freedom.⁷² “The condition of a cultivator of the soil will always afford one of the standards by which to estimate the general amount of liberty enjoyed by a nation,” because, as Lieber later expounded in *Political Ethics*, the right to private property was the key prerequisite for any free society.⁷³ The American farmer’s independence, restlessness, and enterprise made him the bedrock of American institutions.

A Nation on the Move: Lieber’s Philosophy of History

Americans’ restlessness and enterprising spirit, which did them so much good in the realm of material advancement, presented a serious obstacle to the development of the fine arts and literature. This was, in part, because “the same disposition which, in this country, renders the word *enterprising* a most popular and laudatory epithet. . . . makes the American little satisfied with what he *has*, and therefore little fit for the calm enjoyment of any thing.”⁷⁴ Lieber also believed the United States had not yet reached the point of historical development where high culture could easily develop. As a young country, the United States “has to direct at once its attention to a thousand things more directly connected with the well-being of society, than polite literature, or the fine arts. The United States have, in some respects, to introduce, sow, plant, and raise what other nations gained slowly in the course of centuries.”⁷⁵ Thus, unlike Tocqueville, who believed the Americans’ Puritan origins and their cultural proximity to England prevented them from developing their own literature, Lieber did not necessarily think Americans were innately less likely to produce fine literature and art.⁷⁶ They were simply in an earlier stage of historical development.

Lieber explained his preoccupation with the pace of life in America

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:69n.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1:69.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2:165.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2:157.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:277.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:282-283.

⁷⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 516-517.

by grouping all nations into two types. The first type, “moving” nations, included the United States and Great Britain. Their natural state was to progress in material well-being and knowledge. Nations of this type “would be utterly ruined, were they to counteract their own impetus.”⁷⁷ Not only was this progression their natural state; it was also their duty. The movement towards scientific advancement and the general diffusion of knowledge “has become with them one of the ‘historical tasks’ which they have to perform.”⁷⁸ Thus, he insisted, Americans “must have steamboats, though a sailing boat may grace the landscape a thousand times more: they must have rail-roads, though travelling on them be a dull thing.”⁷⁹ Lieber understood “moving” nations as working in a dialectic with the “stationary” nations. The relationship between these two types drove human development. Given his praise of Great Britain and the United States, it was clear Lieber preferred “moving” nations. This was consistent with his later understanding of man’s nature as expressed in a constant, upward push towards greater civilization.⁸⁰

Lieber’s description of the United States as a “moving” nation is particularly appropriate because he believed “the history of civilization runs parallel to the history of communication, both physical and intellectual, as roads, canals, steamboats, printing-presses, newspapers.”⁸¹ This belief explained why Lieber was so fascinated by the Americans’ methods of transportation and their restless need for movement. It was for opening the West and revolutionizing enterprise that Lieber praised Robert Fulton as “a true benefactor of this Union and the liberty of the American people.”⁸² He continued to develop the idea of a link between liberty and civilization in his later writings. Political scientist Steven Samson claims Lieber arrived at the conclusion that “institutional liberty, then, is the highest means of assuring the continued progress of that experience of civilization and cultural maturity which Lieber believed, teleologically, to be the natural state of man.”⁸³ Understood from this perspective, Lieber’s philosophy of history may have been dialectical in its operation, but was not technologically deterministic. In fact, liberty was the opera-

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:187.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:187-188.

⁸⁰ Lieber, *Political Ethics*, 1:120.

⁸¹ Lieber, *The Stranger in America*, 1:60.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1:61.

⁸³ Steven Samson, “Francis Lieber: Transatlantic Cultural Missionary,” in *Francis Lieber and the Culture of the Mind*, ed. Charles Mack and Henry Lesesne (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 133.

tive force that allowed for technological progress to take place. This was why Lieber's assessment of the American government concluded that its *raison d'être* was not simply to widen the general sphere of liberty, but more importantly, to safeguard the advancement of civilization. But liberty could not be secured—and civilizational progress achieved—without “a vast system of institutions, whose number supports the whole, as the many pillars support the rotunda of our capitol.”⁸⁴ Herein lay the real reason why Lieber believed “the great interest of this country lies in its institutions.” To study American institutions was to study their ability to safeguard liberty, which, in turn, was to study the engine which propelled the advance of civilization. *The Stranger in America* thus reveals itself as a working out of Lieber's own historical thought.

Conclusion: A German Tocqueville?

Tocqueville commented on the American characteristics of equality, democracy, individualism, restlessness, and enterprise, but he was not the first foreigner to do so. A year before *Democracy in America* was published, Lieber presented an American audience with his outsider [foreign? European?] observations of almost everything that is now considered characteristically “Tocquevillian.” However, although he identified and discussed classic Tocquevillian themes, he did so discursively, not in the systematic manner that earned Tocqueville his lasting fame. Furthermore, he drew blanket conclusions about America after observing only a narrow slice of the young republic.⁸⁵ Finally, his unbounded optimism blinded him to potentially fatal flaws in the American regime. Taken together, these shortcomings make it difficult to grant Lieber the title of a “German Tocqueville.” *Democracy in America* rightfully eclipsed all other American travel journals in its enduring assessment of American democracy and the strengths and foibles of the American character. In the words of historian Daniel Boorstin, other foreign observers “tell us about those curious earlier Americans, but Tocqueville tells us about ourselves. He speaks to us every day . . . Tocqueville, like other classics of political thought, has the ring of prophecy.”⁸⁶ But concluding that *The Stranger in America* does not measure up to *Democracy in America* does

⁸⁴ Francis Lieber, *Civil Liberty and Self-Government*, ed. Theodore Woolsey. (1853, repr. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1883), 300.

⁸⁵ Although he would soon spend the better part of twenty years living and teaching in South Carolina, he had yet to cross the Mason-Dixon Line in 1834.

⁸⁶ Daniel Boorstin, “Introduction,” in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. Philips Bradley (1945; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1990), vii.

not render Lieber's study insignificant. To understand his work as a strictly external account of the United States—as contemporary reviewers did—mistakes Lieber's real accomplishment, whether or not he, himself, realized it. At its core, *The Stranger in America* provides a valuable, unvarnished glimpse into the early historical and political thought of a key nineteenth-century American intellectual figure. In it, Lieber tells us about those curious earlier Americans. But, more importantly, he tells us about himself.