The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective

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The First New Nation (Basic Books, New York, 1963. 384 pp. $5.95) is an attempt by an eminent American sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset, to explain the character of the United States by means of sociological analysis.

Lipset's method of approach is comparative, in the sense that he refers to other cultures, and analytical, in the sense that he applies sociological concepts to particular institutions. Strictly speaking, therefore, *The First New Nation* is a hybrid, at least among the established social sciences. It is neither history, nor political science, nor sociology (because it deals mainly with *historical* matters), nor economics, but it contains elements of all of these sciences. This is the book's strength and its weakness. It appeals because of its lively observations; it jars because of its muddied method.

Lipset is refreshing in his emphasis on ideas as the main force in history. Ideas are translated as "values," which shape both the institutions and the character of a nation. Of America Lipset writes:

> My thesis is that it is the basic value system, as solidified in the early days of the new nation, which can account for the kind of changes that have taken place in the American character and in American institutions as these faced the need to adjust to the requirements of an urban, industrial, and bureaucratic society.

America's distinctive value system —or, in sociological terms, its "structured predispositions"—has affected its basic social contrivances, among them the democratic polity, the status system, the religious patterns, and the trade unions. Lipset examines these in some detail and makes illuminating comments about them.

He stresses that the core ideas in America, as they have permeated the whole society, are those of personal equality and individual achievement. The notion of equality, first fully developed in this connection by de Tocqueville more than 130 years ago, does not revolve around talents or possessions, but around political (and, by extension, social) rights—a point that Abraham Lincoln, too, used to make repeatedly. The idea of achievement, derived from the Calvinist tradition and Protestant ethic, leads to a demand for opportunity and respect for success. Americans have always esteemed success, regardless of the arena of its operations or the origins of its practitioners.

In the political sphere, the value system operates to make the polity democratic in a special American way. Lipset defines democracy as a system in which the political elite engages in a competitive struggle for the votes of a "mainly passive electorate." The deep-rooted American emphasis on equality makes the democratic polity here different from that of other countries.

The same is true of religion and the trade unions. The institutionalized (in this instance, one may say, Constitutionalized) separation of Church and State has divorced religion from political power and has resulted in both a democratization and secularization of religious life in America. The proliferating American religions preach ethics, but are mainly "Sunday" institutions. They have, Lipset writes, but "a limited influence on their members' lives." Religion being democratic, that is to say, diffused (in contrast to the old Calvinist idea of "the elect"), ambitious individuals do not find it an appropriate place in which to achieve the great national goal of success, particularly as it is measured by material standards. The same, however, is not true of the labor movement, which, like the churches, is characteristically American, but with a difference:

> Trade unions deal with money and power, both of which provide very tangible evidence of where one stands in relation to others. In a sense, trade unions represent an organized attempt to achieve individual equality and as such are permeated by the peculiarly American characteristic, the pressure to succeed.

Is the American experience applicable to the new or underdeveloped nations? In essence, Lipset doubts whether the American system, or democracy in general, has much future in the emerging states. The reasons for this lie in the latter's lack of effective government ("legitimacy") and national cohesion. In sociological language, Lipset concludes:

> Communism and other forms of totalitarian rule apart, the general alternatives available are either particularistic appeals to the existing ascriptive solidarities—family, village, tribe, religion, linguistic unit, or caste—an approach which is obviously dysfunctional from the standpoint of developing a consensus in new territorial political systems, or charismatic domination by party or leader, as pursued in such countries as Mexico, Ghana, or Tunisia.

In my view, Lipset is open to two methodological criticisms. One is his use of materials, the other is his comparative approach. He relies so heavily on other writers' opinions and quotations that his chapters are, in effect, hardly more than extensive bibliographic articles. Quoting colleagues and contemporaries is, of course, a time-hallowed academic routine, but a scholar of Lipset's erudition and acuity could surely range on his own. A piling up of secondary sources—essentially opinions *about* opinions—is unlikely to enrich science. Similarly, the sociological mode of seeing human experience in terms of "systems" and the search for a "comparison" of "systems," even when they are uniquely incomparable, do not necessarily result in a deepening of knowledge. Lipset, aware of some of the pitfalls involved in his method, is inclined to defend it as a "scientific verification of hypotheses" for the "replication and the growth" of social science.

The reviewer, a member of the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science, New School for Social Research, has served as a visiting professor in Japan and Malaya and as an assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Interior. He is the author of numerous books, among them *The Mind of Alexander Hamilton; Foreign Policy and Public Opinion; The Genius of America; and The Living U.S. Constitution.*