

Jørgen Holmgaard. *Americana*. København: Medusa. 255 Dkr.

Jørgen Holmgaard, professor at Aalborg University Center, Denmark, has long been an America watcher. He had visited the United States several times, starting in the early 1980s, before he was invited to spend a year as a visiting scholar at Johns Hopkins University in the late 1980's. In his new book, *Americana*, which is written in Danish, he brings together his myriad observations and reflections from trips to thirty-five states and all major cities. His meditations are organized thematically in fourteen interlaced chapters with titles like "The Work Ethic," "Angst," "Consumption," "Culture," "Universities," "Economy," "Decline," "Shift," and "Dreamland." While the emphasis of each piece rightly lies squarely in the zone staked out by its title, the chapters also fold out into a unified whole, and certain patterns and preoccupations emerge in the author's perspectives and conclusions. Like any serious observer of American society, native or foreign, Holmgaard modulates his often lavish praise and admiration with words of concern and tempers his reproofs with expressions of fascination. His Danish perspective is at once the source of many of the numerous rewarding insights the book provides and the root of the occasionally perturbing tendencies it exhibits toward European myopia.

Drawing on his extensive reading in the wealth of critical insider periodicals that he has clearly devoured with zest, Holmgaard is eminently well equipped to decode his innumerable personal encounters as an outsider. His United States is a bonanza of paradoxes and seeming contradictions. While America's workaholics toil away, the country's productivity continues to flag, the result, of course, of the shift to a service economy. The author brings the point home by taking us to the post office, and he masterfully describes the two-day ordeal of buying a car. Time- and speed-driven Americans are more patient than most Europeans when it comes to waiting in lines and negotiating heavy traffic. The more citizens spend on security, the less secure they feel. While the themes are familiar to observers of U.S. society, Holmgaard's anecdotes are well chosen to inform his less well-traveled compatriots and to entertain any reader.

When it comes to certain social questions—health care, for one—the author voices the opinion shared by most Europeans and Canadians, as well as by many Americans, that the U.S. could use an injection of government involvement in order to look after basic needs. But in two cultural fields, universities and symphony orchestras, Holmgaard comes down strongly, although not uncritically, in favor of the prominence of private funding. In a word, he admires the earnest professionalism fostered by a university system that rewards creativity and productivity (although he relates the notorious case of Stanley Fish and Duke University as a sobering anti-

dote). European universities come across as somnolent institutions, although the author clearly savors the irony in the fact that, in the field of literary theory at any rate, individual European scholars have recently provided the bulk of the theoretical grist for America's pragmatic academic mills. Reflecting upon the many superb symphony orchestras in the U.S., Holmgaard doubts that any provincial European orchestra would be able to pull itself up by its bootstraps as the Baltimore Symphony is now consciously doing. The incentives are simply not in place in Denmark, for example. Here, too, the author pulls his punch, however, reminding us that the musical grist is still European, the milling American. Holmgaard should in turn be reminded that in fact only a handful of European countries have produced the truly classic works of "art" music in the past and that contemporary production is equally anemic or brilliant, depending on the listener's tastes, on both sides of the Atlantic. The torch of serious music has largely been handed to jazz, a field in which excellent European practitioners have been quick to follow the American lead.

There is a tugging undercurrent to some of Jørgen Holmgaard's reflections on things American, namely, that these things get better, by definition, as they approach things European. Holmgaard seems at times to labor under the common European delusion that Americans popped up out of the soil of their continent a few centuries ago; these spontaneously generated *tabulae rasae* have been endeavoring ever since to emulate an essentially foreign European model, where several-millennia-old nations have long been busy fine-tuning their advanced cultures. This epigonic view of Americans shows through in statements like "Americans are becoming more European than Europeans themselves" and "300-400 years is no time to speak of in terms of culture. In the European landscape the paths have been beaten for millennia." Leaving aside the fact that the professor's claims are inflated when it comes to the "age" of the northern European nations that dominated colonization efforts, it is important to point out that those very same millennia (centuries, rather) crucially shaped the mentality of America's early and subsequent European settlers, just as even more millennia of "civilization" forged the mind-sets of more recent immigrants from Asia and Arab countries. The cultures of the Americas (and Australia) are an incredibly intricate web of ancient and modern thinking as well as of old and new institutions, just as the cultures of Europe, Asia, and Africa are. Any true understanding of these overlapping continua is ill served by the patronizing oversimplifications Holmgaard occasionally indulges in. Reading his book in Danish, I wondered at times whether the author would feel entirely comfortable making some of his statements in a language his former colleagues at Johns Hopkins could read.

These shortcomings will probably not bother most Scandinavian readers, and in fact they should not be allowed to detract more than marginally from the book's overall excellence, regardless, I feel, of who might be reading it. Professor Holmgaard writes entertainingly and elegantly: his mild, understated humor glows in meticulously crafted sentences gathered in exemplary paragraphs. His insights—into what ails, delights, and defines an America that may or may not be on the verge of decline are almost without exception salutary and thought-provoking. *Americana* deserves to be remolded—I hesitate to say simply "translated"—into an English-language version so it can reach a wider audience.