



Knut Hamsun
Remembers America

ESSAYS AND STORIES
1885-1949



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

Richard Nelson Current

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Chicago, 1886. From Einar Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun*
(Oslo: Gyldendal, 1929), 113.

*To the memory of my mother
née Anna Christiansen (1889-1986)
a daughter of Norway*

The American Character

Hamsun expressed his disillusionment with the United States in an article that was published in Aftenposten (Christiania) on January 21, 1885, a few months after returning to Norway from his first American visit. In this essay he foreshadowed the strictures on American culture that he was later to develop much more fully, especially in On the Cultural Life of Modern America (1889).

On the other side of the ocean lies a country as big as twenty kingdoms and incomparably rich—America, the Millionaires' Republic. People here in Norway are acquainted with it from geography lessons, America letters, and published lectures. I have been over there and have just come back. I went as a young man full of enthusiasm for the world's freest country and people, abounding in confidence that its society was sound. By the time I left, a few years later, my enthusiasm and my faith had been badly shaken. The same thing will happen to others. We live up here in the hills that rise like a second story above other European lands. Now and then the din carries up from down below, from the noisy, lively, lusty world. We feel the impact of the storm's exhilarating gust, and we are excitedly drawn along with it. This is the result of the America letters and the lectures. So we leave home—with preconceived notions and great expectations.

And we are often disappointed. Not in our hope of making money, for anybody can do that over there, nor in our appetite for a lot of food. No, our disappointment is strictly a matter of morality; it comes when our eyes are opened to the base, disreputable ways, the terrible abuse of what is legally permissible. We then get a sense of the danger that arises from the mixing of different kinds of people in a free, uncontrolled, capricious environment. The danger is all the greater in America, where shiploads of

immigrants—diseased and degenerate human raw material—stream in every day from all over the world.

America's *principles* do not disappoint but are to be admired. Consider the idea that America should take the dregs of the European population and turn them into decent human beings. That in itself is not disappointing—that principle of humanity and freedom, the great and glorious sentiment that America can teach the rest of the world. The Declaration of Independence, upon which the laws and institutions of the United States rest, is one of the noblest documents of all history. It is the more remarkable in being the first of its kind, the first declaration in accordance with which a group of people has actually tried to *practice* independence, not only with respect to other countries but also among themselves. Public trust and equal rights—that is the basis on which America brings up its sons and daughters.

Such are the principles.

But the practice must here be emphasized. Life in America pulsates with greater emotional force and a more intensive use of power and means than elsewhere. When you have believed firmly in the ideal of an American social order and have expected happiness and well-being and contentment as a consequence, then—yes, that is when you are disappointed. The principles do not deliver what they promise.

The principles do not deliver what they promise! No, they remain, as ideals, too far from the reality of daily practice. I think there is a place for more real *living* humanity and conformity in a country based on American principles. But I think it takes a people more highly developed morally than the Americans to endure such free institutions and such immense wealth as theirs. And there is the especially frightful danger looming for the wide, magnificent West and for those who settle there. The time will come when they can no longer tolerate their freedom, and then America must restrain its people, thus altering its principles. Otherwise, if the flood of mean and sickly European immigrants persists, the nation must go to wrack and ruin. That is how it looks to me. Things cannot go on for very long the way they are now going. It is a historic impossibility for America, *with the same kind of citizens*, to survive as long as other nations.

Consider what *elections* are now like. I know what I have read in certain Norwegian newspapers about elections over there, but I also know how

they operate in fact. Millions are spent on them, and that is why I call America the "Millionaires' Republic." Not only are individual votes bought but vote *buyers* are bought. These take on a particular job as a matter of business and receive their pay in cash. They buy posters to put up on walls and wagons on which the candidate's name is paraded in large letters. They even buy photographers, saloonkeepers, housewives, fathers and sons—and newspapers. Enormous sums are distributed to the newspapers before every election of any significance. They are paid to expand and to work in such-and-such a direction. And how do they work, these papers that live exclusively on this election money? They go to extremes that in any other country, with normal press freedom, would be considered criminal. Let us recall, as an example, what we have seen in the American press during the latest presidential election [between Grover Cleveland and James G. Blaine, 1884].

The Americans have *not* grown up and emerged safely from their country's history of freedom. For they are constantly being uprooted and broken up and mixed with the flood of European raw material and criminal elements. Who, among these fifty million, are really "Americans" and who are Irishmen, Scandinavians, Germans, Austrians? If Americans were today a single people who had been familiar with freedom and human rights from the beginning, and not a mixture of the most heterogeneous elements from all over the world, America would actually be what we ideally expect before we go there; it would be socially and morally as far ahead of other countries as it now is behind them. Though I believe it will take many years' development before any country can long endure with such free institutions, I nevertheless am confident that America can keep going for a while yet, especially if it puts a timely stop to immigration, or at least puts some *restrictions* on it.

I do not think liberty should be *liberties*, or well-being the only measure of success in life, but that is about what the Americans believe. It has been said that "as soon as you land in America you realize you are in a free country." This is said in praise of America, but what I saw was people taking *liberties*!

From the harbor I made my way up one of the busiest streets in New York. I was not used to such terrible traffic, which is due to the population density and the high cost of land, where there are buildings of sixteen sto-

ries, four of which lie below ground. Now, I saw one driver leave his wagon crosswise so as to unload into a warehouse, and another driver did the same on the other side of the street. These two blocked the passageway so completely that other drivers could not get by, and nine of them had to wait until one of the first two deigned to move.

I cannot help reporting another typical, everyday occurrence. A monster of a man raped a little girl right on the street in one of the large cities out West, but the fellow had connections who were about to get him acquitted. The moral sense of the community was aroused, and one fine night a mob with the *mayor himself* at the head of it stormed the city hall, took the prisoner out of his cell, and hanged him on a tree. See, when you have been in America for a while, you realize you are in a land of *liberties!* Such an evasion of law and order—when the imposition of justice seems so absolutely necessary—indicates a loose sense of law and morality. Here liberties were taken both by those who evaded the law and by those who ought to have enforced it. Even in cases where the law appears to have been properly enforced, a supplementary lynching often occurs, to demonstrate that you live in a free country.

No, I do not think that liberty consists of *liberties* or that well-being is the only measure of success in life. As soon as you land in America, you are put under strain at finding the rules of conduct so bewilderingly broad and people in such a nervous hurry. There are no limits to this eternal pursuit, from the time you are big enough to start work until the time you have to stop and no limits to this nervousness about getting ahead as fast and as far as possible. The Americans are a restless, ambitious people. It is as if gigantic wheels were driving their whole existence with roaring speed. Once they hit upon an idea for getting ahead, they pursue it compulsively, working as hard as a slave, with boundless hope and great leaps of faith. People in other countries may be said to be engaged in a struggle for existence; here it must be called a struggle for *well-being*—for a kind of carnivorous, satiating existence, with the ability to afford intense sensual pleasures along with fat horses and rich food. The typical American has no real artistic sense or substantial literary, religious, political, or social interests. Consequently, when he is forty or fifty and has accumulated enough to be free from care for the rest of his life, he no longer craves so much what used to seem like necessities, and his zest for life is satiated—if not vitiated. So

overworked as he is, the American can hold out only so long and then must stop.

Yet, in sheer material terms, the Americans are livelier than any other people, as is shown by their powers of invention, boldness of enterprise, and rage for speculation—what might be called their *machinelust*. This results from the *positive* side of the population mixture, besides the country's natural conditions. From the beginning the people have been surrounded by machines, ingenious contrivances to lighten their toil and yield them the greatest possible profit. From childhood they have been familiar with railroad trains roaring by, as well as machines that mow, trim, rake, wash, knit, dry, hoist, plane, etc.

And with machines they manufacture the largest, the smallest, the most amazing things. I have eaten a hen's egg from a Brooklyn *egg factory*, where not only the yolk but even the thin membrane between the white and the shell were placed where they belong. Nothing was lacking. In some of the large Eastern cities I have seen jugglers' machines with which they swindle people who take a chance on a number. These machines, nicely made of polished steel, contain whirring little wheels, weblike strings, and hidden works. It must be added that America also provides Europe with its best instruments for dentists, midwives, and hospitals. Indeed, when it comes to applied science or technology, the United States is ahead of all other countries, even those where fine mechanisms are a specialty—Switzerland, for example.

But this special distinction of the Americans is marred by their propensity for boundless speculation. With their technical ability they are insatiable in their craving for newer, always newer things. They plan, make rough estimates, fool with tremendous projects, get excited about the wildest impossibilities—and often ruin themselves in the process. But they do not give up. They suffer from a national mania, an incurable disease, one that keeps on spreading. Onward, onward! is the eternal cry, and onward they go eagerly, greedily.

An example: In New York City, where there is neither coal gas nor petroleum gas, a practical American—and all Americans are "practical"—recently made an interesting experiment to produce gas from street refuse. The attempt succeeded brilliantly, seventeen ounces of trash yielding twenty-two cubic feet of gas at little cost. Formerly the city's ashes and gar-

bage were transported several miles out to sea, but the incoming tide carried rotten eggs, cabbages, and dead cats back to the beaches, thus driving hotel owners crazy. Now their torment was over. Now the dead cats would be converted into gas!

Hardly had this experiment been reported in the *New York Herald* when another practical American conceived an even more original plan: He was going to make gas out of the city's *corpses*. New York having a population of 1.5 million, he could count on sixty to seventy thousand deaths per year. Just think of the gas from all these! It would double the city's "well-being." Seventy thousand corpses—how delightful such statistics! That is the way the Americans' brains operate.

Their brains keep going tirelessly and with the passion of a serious gambler. Many of the Americans "work their way up," as they say over there, from tenant farmer's son to property owner; from riverboat oarsman to the country's highest honor, the presidency; from a little warehouse job to railroad king; from selling matches on the street to millionaire. Jay Gould, the great railroad prince of the East, told a U.S. Senate committee that, when he was fourteen years old, he had to leave home without a cent. Two years after that he had \$500; soon, with a successful speculation in map-making, \$5,000; and a few years later, with the purchase and sale of a mill, \$50,000. Then he became the owner of the Rutland & Washington line and, not long after that, the Cleveland & Pittsburgh, while borrowing money and buying stocks at low prices. Next, he invested \$5 million in the Union Pacific, bought and sold other railroads, developed coal mines, and made enormous amounts of money. Now, after forty years, he is one of the four men in the United States whose millions secretly run the country.

Such are American captains of industry, but some exhibit even more boldness and energy. Enterprises do not always depend on careful planning and calculating, but quite often are merely the result of a brilliant flash of madness. A [Wisconsin] acquaintance told me: "I bet on trotting horses; that's my profession. I have bet and made a bundle one day and lost everything the next. One year I went down to Chicago with \$10,000; when I came home I was so completely wiped out that I had to work in a mill all the following summer. The next winter I went back and won \$35,000 on five bets. I'll never be broke again; nowadays I only risk half of what I own—that's enough." An American can stand to lose his money. He does

not get sick, nor does he poison or shoot himself, like the more delicate European. A New Yorker is still alive who last winter lost his immense fortune speculating in railroad lands. At present he has a job as a clerk in a branch office, but he will try again! If you think he is going to give up, you are mistaken. An American is not cut out that way.