One of the most interesting and least-examined episodes in the career of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), the influential Egyptian ideologue of Islamism, is his sojourn in the US from November 1944 to August 1950. Egypt’s Ministry of Education had sent the 42-year-old Qutb to the US to investigate American civilizational dynamics and curricula, a task for which his career as an educator in Egypt had well prepared him. A number of materials exists that allow the researcher to reconstruct the main lines of Qutb’s itinerary in the United States and to explicate his thoughts on the essential nature of American society and culture. These include articles, ‘letters home’ written by Qutb and published in periodicals like al-Kitab, and, and, interestingly, documentary materials available at the University of Northern Colorado, where Qutb studied in 1949.

What becomes evident upon examining these sources is that Qutb infused his reportages with a perspective on America, with commentaries and images designed to distance Egyptian culture conceptually from the civilizational West. Although Qutb revealed many features of modernizing the Egyptian nation-state, he also believed that history in general, and the Qur’an in particular, could not be severed from the anomalies that contradicted his view of America as the moral ‘Other’. Early in 1949, Qutb enrolled at the Wilson Teacher’s College, presently the University of the District of Columbia. His priority there was to improve his English language skills. In Washington, Qutb appears to have suffered his first real pang of homesickness. In a letter penned to the well-known Egyptian author Tawfiq al-Hakim, Qutb explained how he yearned for the ‘spirit of the East’ and for a friend with whom he could discuss literature and the world of ideas. As Qutb writes, ‘How much do I need someone to talk about topics other than money, movie stars and car models.’ Americans, Qutb opined, were ‘crass people, grossly disinterested in life’s aesthetic and spiritual dimensions’. As evidence, he painted for al-Hakim a vivid picture of an American youth seated at a nearby table whose torso, barely concealed by his sweater, was covered with the gaudily coloured tattoos of a leopard and an elephant. ‘Such’, says Qutb to his friend, ‘is the taste of Americans.’

**The taste of Americans**

Qutb’s first direct experience of America was in New York City, where he arrived by sea during the Thanksgiving and Christmas season of 1949, only months after the completion of his first explicit Islamic work, al-Adala al-lilm-niya fi al-Islam. Although Qutb had never before travelled to a Western country, his previous journalistic efforts to evoke, from afar, the essential characteristics of Western civilization provided him with a tempering with which to understand and assess what he was now seeing and experiencing first-hand. In a published letter, Qutb described New York as a ‘huge workshop’, ‘noisy’ and ‘clamouing’, and explained how he pitied the city’s pigeons which, like its people, were condemned to live their lives joyless, subject to the traffic and hustle of the urban landscape. In much the same way as many modern-era Europeans who travelled to and wrote about the ‘orient’, Qutb either purposefully ignored or simply did not see anomalies that contradicted his view of America as the moral ‘Other’. For Qutb, it was ‘logical’ that the one art form in which Americans excelled be the movies, combining, as they do, ‘craftsmanship and primitive emotions’. Qutb admitted that he was particularly charmed by such films as ‘Gone with the Wind’, ‘Wuthering Heights’, and ‘The Song of Bernadette’. Yet he derided that one art form that were the staple of the American movie industry. He condemned white America for its racist attitudes towards black Americans. He wrote about how he was astounded at the bright, vivid colours of American fashion, which ‘were more outrageous’ than any colorful array in the Orient. ‘I am afraid’, Qutb summarized, ‘that there is no correlation between the greatness of American civilization and the men who created it.’

It would be easy to dismiss Qutb’s characterizations of American society as simplistic and overly reductive, hyperbolic a form, some substantial facts. Following Eagleton, we may regard Qutb’s discussion of America as a utopian community in 1870, the city of Greeley. In his view, it was ‘logical’ that the one art form with global interests and reach. Qutb was particularly charmed by the Western orientation, which either enabled or unwilling to push effective for its full independence. Additionally, the group of Muslim and Arab intellectuals who emerged in the United States as a power with global interests and reach. Qutb was particularly charmed by the Western orientation, which either enabled or unwilling to push effective for its full independence. Additionally, the group of Muslim and Arab intellectuals who emerged in the United States as a power with global interests and reach. Qutb was particularly charmed by the Western orientation, which either enabled or unwilling to push effective for its full independence. Additionally, the group of Muslim and Arab intellectuals who emerged in the United States as a power with global interests and reach.