

Anti-Americanism in its Cultural Context: The United States and Europe and the Cultural Ties That Bind Them

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For this reflection on anti-Americanism I have taken my cue from the first amendment to the American Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of speech and expression. I have chosen to look at anti-Americanism as a cultural form of speech and expression for the venting of critical views of America as they are historically grounded in people's experiences of American power. They may lay dormant for extended periods of time or may be triggered by specific historical conjunctions. As cultural forms they take their place in larger patterns of culturally styled views of the world and of America's place in it. My analysis of anti-Americanism thus is subsumed into a wider exploration of the ways in which America and Europe have been historically imbricated.

1. Culture in Europe and the United States: Rival Models

It has been said, in jest, that the only culture that Europeans have in common is American popular culture. As such quips go, it might be said with equal glibness that the only culture shared on both sides of the Atlantic is European culture. And tongue in cheek it may be added that there is much truth to either of these sayings. Much of course depends on what we understand by the word culture when we ask ourselves the question of whether Europe and the United States have been united or rather divided by culture. If we think of culture in terms that go back to Clifford Geertz's work,¹⁾ culture then presents itself for our present purpose as consisting of symbolic systems, language prominently among them, that allow people to make sense of the world and the otherworldly, of their own place in both, and to share such constructed meanings with others through forms of communication. This is a view of culture that emphasizes its implied semantics, looking at human beings as sense-making animals. Such a view has the advantage of suggesting continuities between the concept of culture and the concept of ideology. Ideology then is that form of culture that organizes cultural world views into guidelines for purposeful collective action in the world. Thus, for instance, from their early universalist call for independence Americans saw themselves as acting on behalf of universal human rights and freedoms, instilling among themselves a sense of being a "redeemer nation," providing a safe haven to the high hopes of all of mankind, while at the same time it provided them with a national

¹⁾ Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter, (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 47-77.

ideology. From the Declaration of Independence on to Wilsonian enthusiasms, and Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, to be protected "anywhere in the world," through the Cold War and on to Bush's view that in Iraq "freedom is on the march" thanks to the American intervention, we can recognize this strange blend of nationalism and cultural universalism as an inspiration for America's foreign policy views.

If the issue in the following exploration is how people in Europe and the United States have meaningfully constructed their sense of collective self, as well as their sense of the difference in cultural identity on both sides of the Atlantic, we'll have to confront the inherent dialectics in these constructional conventions. Historically both Europe and the United States have functioned as each other's "significant Other," as a helpful counterpoint in the construction of collective selves. From the early days of American settlement, of course, culture migrated from Europe along with the colonists. Even today, in many areas, ranging from language to religion, continuities can clearly be discerned. Yet, over the centuries, a sense of American identity as distinct from its European sources has pushed to the surface. "From British subjects to American citizens" (playing on the well-known book title of *Peasants Into Frenchmen*²⁾) would be a good way of summarizing this long, secular process of cultural (in addition to political) emancipation, away from European cultural tutelage to the point of becoming the leading light across the full range of cultural endeavor, in fulfillment of Bishop Berkeley's, or for that matter Crèvecoeur's, anticipation of the westward course of empire finding its closure on the Western shores of the Atlantic. Europeans may have begrudged America's cultural ascendance, particularly in the years following World War II,³⁾ and Americans at the time may not quite have recognized themselves in avant-garde forms of American art. Yet contested as they may have been domestically, in Congress and in public opinion,⁴⁾ America's cutting-edge art was sent abroad precisely as a vibrant expression of American individualism and American freedom. Ironically, the impact of such artistic developments played itself out in the traditional European mold of cultural reception and consumption, at the high end of public appreciation, among elites and leading cultural critics.

Of arguably greater impact on the minds and hearts of European publics were the many forms of American popular culture as they had emerged since the late 19th century. The story that I will look at more closely here, is of the exposure to and reception of American mass culture in Europe, of the many ironic ways in which it

²⁾ Eugen Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

³⁾ A good example is, Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁴⁾ For the full ironic story of the political uses made of America's cutting-edge art, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

was appropriated (to use a term common in Cultural Studies circles) and turned into an adopted cultural vernacular in Europe. Once adopted and adapted it could then serve as a marker of either a public affiliation with things American, or be turned against its source in displays of anti-American protest. It may have taken the continued exposure of generations of younger Europeans to forms of American mass culture⁵⁾ for them to acquire their transnational cultural appetites. More often than not, as I shall argue below, the reception of forms of American mass culture in Europe provided younger Europeans with the repertoires of opposition to cultural standards jealously guarded by cultural elites in their various countries. Why, particularly in the second half of the 20th century, American mass culture played this role more successfully than any varieties produced in Europe, in its various national settings, is a question that will lead us to consider and discuss the larger theme of Americanization. As for the flip side of this theme, the Europeanization of the United States, we shall have to explore the ways in which European cultural standards have been received and made to work in an American setting, providing Americans in their quest for a truly American culture with the benchmarks for defining their cultural specificity and difference. If from this perspective Europe and the United States can be said to have been equally involved in cultural contests about the definition of national identities, these culture wars have not proceeded in tandem. The United States has had to reach a cultural consensus on these matters, defining itself as distinct from Europe while developing forms of cultural practice to Americanize the nation, particularly the hordes of immigrants arriving on its shores. Only then could it successfully use these tools of Americanization for export abroad. And only then, when confronted with this cultural challenge from America arising in the early 20th century, could groups in Europe, vying for cultural hegemony in the debates about their own national identities, begin to use forms of American mass culture, and the meanings and messages it carried, as a tertium comparationis. In a process of cultural triangulation American mass culture served as a yardstick for taking the measure of cultural trends and evaluating them as either positive or negative.

Usually studies of the impact of American mass culture abroad, of the Americanization of Europe if you wish, set their time frame as truly beginning in the post-World War II era, in what is otherwise known as “the American Century.” Yet one has to go back in time to fathom the rise of an American mass culture and the early European response to it. In a recent book, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The*

⁵⁾ For a neutral, value-free definition may I propose that mass culture as a term comprises all those forms of culture that for their production, dissemination, and even consumption crucially depend on technological innovation, from the early industrial revolution to the current revolution in global communications. Mass, in this context, is used solely as a quantitative category, implying large numbers of commodities produced, of messages disseminated, and of customers/users reached.

Americanization of the World, 1869-1922, two cultural historians, one from the United States, the other from Europe, explore this early period.⁶⁾ It is no secret that, by the early 1920s, American culture had dimensions that were so arresting that they were becoming the subject of an intense debate among European and American intellectuals concerned about the implications of these novel cultural forms for modern societies. But as early as 1901 an English journalist, W.T. Stead, had already written a book entitled *The Americanization of the World*, in which he shrewdly argued that American economic organization had reached such an advanced stage of development that England, and eventually the rest of the world would be swamped by American products and American cultural values.⁷⁾ Whether or not he was right about its effects, it is clear that at the beginning of the twentieth century American mass culture, blooming in the United States, was already pollinating shores on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, creating some interesting cultural hybrids in the process.

Putting the rise of American mass culture in a transatlantic setting is illuminating for a number of reasons. American innovations in mass culture certainly had their counterparts in Europe (think, for instance, of the film industry or the production and marketing of stereographs). So why did American mass culture make such inroads in Europe? The Americanness of American cultural products is at the core of an answer to this question. By the end of the nineteenth century more than a few Americans had begun to embrace vernacular cultural forms as self-conscious alternatives to elitist cultural formations. Ragtime music and jazz, not classical music, vernacular forms of spoken American—in the writing of Mark Twain and others—not literary language in the transatlantic Victorian fashion, railway stations and movie theaters, not private mansions, articulated an expressive individualism that challenged existing cultural hierarchies and created cultural tensions that receptive Europeans could deploy in their own struggles against hierarchical social structures and established hierarchies of taste. In all this, the United States formed the first arena for these cultural clashes to work themselves out.

While American mass culture developed its early forms and audiences, in opposition to it the accepted canon of “high” culture, as defined by the likes of Matthew Arnold, and redolent of European views of culture, was upheld by bourgeois elites across the United States. They shared in what may be termed a civilizing offensive that proceeded apace on both sides of the Atlantic and left a marked

⁶⁾ Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁷⁾ W.T. Stead, *The Americanization of the World; or, The Trend of the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Horace Markley, 1901).

bourgeois imprint on American and European cities alike.⁸⁾ In America, though, the bourgeois offensive pursued a different agenda than its equivalent in Europe. It wished to project a view of American high culture as basically cast in a European mold. Palatial mansions duplicating European models were filled with private collections of European art. As museums and concert halls went up in American cities, the paintings shown and the music played were all European. In the public display of cultural taste and cultural standards America's elites chose to emphasize the continuity with Europe's cultural heritage—the European roots of America's genteel culture.

Yet, while fully engaged in their quest for domestic cultural hegemony, the attitude of America's leading bourgeois elites toward Europe's cultural heritage was always one of ambivalence, rift by dialectical tensions. Even cultural nationalists among their number, in their quest for a purely American cultural expression, held up European standards of excellence for American artists to emulate. The ultimate version of this high-brow pursuit of cultural emancipation from Europe's tutelage could assume the contours of an act of exorcism, as in the case of the Randolph Bourne. His was one of the leading voices among a generation of young cultural critics who at the time of World War I set out to storm the stuffy bastions of a reigning genteel culture in the United States. As they saw it, America's high culture was derivative. In Bourne's words: "New England was Old England transplanted, and weakened in the transplant ... We must overcome that which is England in us."⁹⁾ Yet, at later historical junctures, particularly in the post-World War II era, America's cultural elites shared the self-assured view of America as fully partaking of the civilizational matrix and heritage of the West, broadly conceived, a view of America as the last safe haven of Western civilization, as the guarantor and protector of a vibrant trans-Atlantic cultural life, where in many areas it was second to none. It had world-class conductors, orchestras, and performing artists. In its top universities a cosmopolitan life of the mind was preserved and scholarship ranged across the full realm of the humanities to the point where leading authorities in the study of Europe, or of antiquity for that matter, are

⁸⁾ The metaphor of a "civilizing offensive" was first used, in Dutch, by Bernard Kruithof (cf. "De deugdzaam natie: Het burgerlijk beschavingsoffensief van de Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen van 1784 tot plm. 1860," *Symposion* 2, 1, 1980, pp. 22-37, repr. in Bernard Kruithof, Jan Noordman & Piet de Rooy, eds., *Geschiedenis van opvoeding en onderwijs: Inleiding, bronnen, onderzoek*. Nijmegen, 1994 (1982), 371-85. The leading authority on the international experience and the historical role of the bourgeoisie is Peter Gay. See his *The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud*, volume I, *Education of the Senses*, and volume II, *The Tender Passion* (New York & Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984, 1986) as well as *Schnitzlere's Century: The Making of Middle Class Culture 1815-1914* (New York: Norton, 2001). See also, Jan Bank and Maarten van Buuren, *1900: The Age of Bourgeois Culture* (Assen: Van Gorcum/Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2004).

⁹⁾ "American Independence and the War," *The Seven Arts*, supplement to the April issue (May 16, 1917). Although unsigned the article was authored by Randolph Bourne.

often American. This sense of rightful cultural place was at the basis of the post-World War II idea of the Atlantic World. It was an idea actively disseminated through America's cultural diplomacy and reflected, for instance, in a leading trans-Atlantic intellectual journal like *Encounter*. Yet, even without efforts in the area of cultural diplomacy, America's cultural and intellectual pre-eminence is evident in the pages of a truly cosmopolitan magazine like *the New York Review of Books*, with its range of discussion and conversation that effortlessly spans the range from classical antiquity, world literature, European cultural history, to American political trends and developments. It sets a tone that resonates among a truly international intelligentsia. It, and the America for which it speaks, has forever left behind the qualms and ambivalences of Randolph Bourne's generation of cultural nationalists.

Yet, if we look back at the cultural ferment of Bourne's times, in the United States bourgeois cultural visions never quite gained the commanding, if not hegemonic, place they did in Europe in the late 19th century. In the U.S. such visions had to contend with alternative views of culture and of the role it could play in its demotic, vernacular forms in reaching and guiding, yes even educating, the masses. The urgent quest here was for the creation of mass cultural forms that would unite people across the continent. The agency and auspices behind these cultural productions could differ. They could be strictly entrepreneurial, pure business ventures going for the public's money, as in the case of P.T. Barnum and many others. They could also proceed under the auspices of civic leadership circles, as in the design of World's Fairs in American cities. Yet whatever the explicit auspices, recent scholarly revisits make clear that in addition to entertainment these forms of mass culture also offered ideologically structured readings of the contemporary world to its audiences, in terms of its structures of inclusion and exclusion, of superiority and inferiority, along lines of race, class, and gender. From Worlds Fairs to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* audiences were exposed to the anthropological ideal of what American historian Alexander Saxton has called the "White Republic."¹⁰ Ever since, American mass culture has presented this outward face of entertainment while purveying at the same time ideological constructions of the world to its audiences.

With the massive increase in immigration in the last half of the nineteenth century, the American population as a whole trebled, while the industrial labor force doubled. In the middle of the nineteenth century the average work week was about sixty to

¹⁰ Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1997). More generally, on the importance of ideology, see John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in an Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). Also the chapter on "Ideology: Black Box or the Logic of our Ideas?" in my *Them and Us: Questions of Citizenship in a Globalizing World* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

seventy hours and encompassed six full days of labor. By the end of the First World War the direction of American society was clearly set toward the forty-hour week and growing parity between work and leisure. In this social context, new technologies of production (especially Henry Ford's perfection of mass production techniques), and new institutions of distribution and consumption (especially department stores, World's Fairs, advertising agencies, and installment buying) reconfigured American culture around values associated with leisure and amusement. Market forces played an important role in the emergence of an American mass culture but so did the cultural designs and visions of social elites. The new mass cultural forms were hardly value-free or neutral. As already pointed out, they often expressed and conveyed ideologies of race, gender, empire, and consumption and played a pivotal role in the process of reconstructing the American national identity after the Civil War. Millions—indeed, tens of millions—of people “took in” movies, fairs, circuses, amusement parks, and dime novels. But in the course of “taking in” these mass cultural forms, were they “taken in” by their ideological messages? Were the so-called culture industries all-powerful and their audiences passive sponges? Or were audiences more resilient and creative than we often think? Many recent scholars, and I include myself among them, tend toward the latter view, emphasizing aspects of freedom in cultural reception and consumption, of selective appropriation and the refashioning of meaning. Yet debates in cultural studies circles continue. Nagging questions remain. If the market, say, through advertising, shapes people's desires, is it right to speak of free choice without some measure of qualification? If the logic of industrialism, of mass production and standardization, was an industrial necessity, had it not also, in its American guise, become “an ideal of civilization?” Such were the concerns among European cultural conservatives, once Europe had begun to feel the full blast of American mass culture in the 1920s. Others, though, Antonio Gramsci and others on the European political left among them, had to admit that what they admired about American society was its industrial efficiency and modernity, both of which, Gramsci believed, “will compel or (are) already compelling Europe to overturn its excessively antiquated economic and social basis.”¹¹⁾

Much of the story of the advent and conquest of Europe's cultural space by American mass culture in the later 20th century is at the same time the story of Europe successfully “overturning itself,” following in America's footsteps but, whenever possible, on its own conditions. Part of this story is the highly inventive way in which American public diplomacy availed itself of the appeal of its mass culture as a form of soft power. Through the Marshall Plan first, under the auspices of the United States Information Agency (USIA) later, America advertised itself with full mastery of

¹¹⁾ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 317.

mass culture techniques.

It was not the first time this happened. America had learned the ropes during its brief, but decisive, intervention in World War I. On April 14, 1917, within hours of asking the U.S. Congress to declare war on Germany, Wilson moved to issue an Executive Order creating the Committee on Public Information (CPI). Headed by George Creel the CPI set out to mobilize and coordinate already existing forms of American mass culture into weapons of war and vehicles of U.S. government propaganda. Through its two major divisions, domestic and foreign, the CPI globalized American culture on an unprecedented scale as part of the “fight for the mind of mankind.”¹²⁾ This first instance of the harnessing of mass cultural techniques and appeals for political purposes would later on serve as a model for the Office of War Information (OWI) during World War II, and American cultural diplomacy during the years of the Cold War. World War I added a government hand to the process of “spreading the American Dream,” as Emily Rosenberg has called it,¹³⁾ a process already under way since at least the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. It was an American dream of high technology and mass consumption both promoted and accompanied by an ideology of free-market, level-playing field, liberal developmentalism. That this American ideology was mostly self-serving, and the playing field never quite level, was the stuff that later European and American *Ideologiekritik* would feed on.

2. American Mass Culture: Its Rules of Transformation

Ever since its formative years, American culture has known no borders. It has spread from its home base to encompass the globe, it penetrates our everyday environment, it invades our phantasy worlds, if it has not actually, as German filmmaker Wim Wenders once ruefully put it, colonized our subconscious. It has instilled in us needs, dreams, and longings that may drive us in directions we might not have gone without our exposure to America. Yet for many at the receiving end America has become a provider of ingredients for repertoires of cultural self-expression. It is only one among many sources, of course. It adds to more traditional repertoires as these have established themselves in the course of long-ranging historical processes of state formation and nation-building. Yet it does so in strangely dialectical ways. America has never merely added to these repertoires of cultural affiliation and expression of collective identities, in the sense of widening a range of equivalent options. More often than not, the American option served as a counterpoint to established repertoires, providing groups with the expressive means for cultural

¹²⁾ George Creel, *Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 2.

¹³⁾ Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

opposition and revolt against a prescribed mold of cultural affiliation.

One crucial element in American culture that has always perplexed foreign critics, while at the same time appealing to those who welcomed American culture, was its aspect of a successful mass culture. More radically so than any other culture, American culture took its central cues, in the ways it was produced, disseminated and received, from the secular process of democratisation. From the early days of republican enthusiasm, cultural nationalists agreed that American culture, in order to be American, must needs be democratic culture. The mission for America's cultural production was to appeal to the many, not the few, and to reflect the lives of the citizenry at large rather than of elite groups in its midst, setting standards for others to follow.

In their critique of American culture, many cultural and political conservatives in Europe may have grudgingly paid tribute to the democratic aspirations of American culture. What perplexed them, however, was that more often than not culture as they observed it in America appeared as not only democratic, but also and unashamedly commercial. If the American mode of cultural production and reproduction was geared to the many, it implied that it was also geared to the market. The public for cultural consumption had to be reached in much the same way as consumers in the economic sense: through the market. It implied that Americans were less reluctant than many Europeans in adopting techniques of mass production through mechanical reproduction, and of cultural dissemination through mass marketing, implying advertising techniques, and the use of technical breakthroughs in mass communication. They were less in thrall of a European, Benjaminian sense of the aura surrounding culture, of a deference that is by its very nature at odds with the vulgarity of the market. European critics, whether on the left or the right of the political spectrum, chose to look at this potent brew of democratic and commercial instincts as a clear case of the commodification of culture. Others in Europe, though, welcomed American culture precisely for its blithe irreverence toward standards that cultural gatekeepers in Europe rallied to defend.

Many are the explanations of the worldwide dissemination of American mass culture. There are those who see it as a case of cultural imperialism, as a consequence of America's worldwide projection of political, economic and military power. Others, broadly within the same critical frame of mind, see it as a tool rather than a consequence of this imperial expansion. Behind the globalization of American culture they see an orchestrating hand, whetting foreign appetites for the pleasures of a culture of consumption. Undeniably, though, part of the explanation of the worldwide appeal of American mass culture will have to be sought in its intrinsic qualities, in its blend of democratic and commercial vigor. The particular mix of these two elements may differ. At one extreme the commercial component may be well-nigh absent, as in the worldwide dissemination of jazz and blues music. At the other extreme the commercial rationale may be the central carrying force, as in American advertisements.

While trying to make a sales pitch for particular products, advertising envelops these in cultural messages that draw on repertoires of American myths and symbols that find recognition across the globe. Thus, the Marlboro Man could come to stand for a particular brand of cigarette while representing a mythical reading of the American West. In the process, both the West and the cigarette got branded; as commodities they both received their aura from the mother of all brands: America. Publics on either side of the Atlantic have become equally adept at reading such tangled messages, but it is the outcome of a learning process that dates back to the late nineteenth century. The European encounter with American mass culture after the Second World War needs to be understood as part of a cumulative and complex history of American cultural transmissions and European cultural receptions that occurred as part of the ongoing nation-building processes that gave form to the modern world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This is not to deny, of course, the significance of the Marshall Plan or U.S. government cultural diplomacy agencies for transmitting American mass culture to Europe in the post-World War II years. Through exhibitions of American consumer products (most famously at American trade shows that featured American consumer products), American movies (by 1951, well over half the movies playing in Europe were produced by Hollywood), and American music (notably through Willis Conover's radio program *Music U.S.A.*, with tens of millions of listeners), all sponsored by the U.S. government, postwar planners sought to win the hearts and minds of Europeans and to create a bulwark against Soviet Communism. Nor should this diminish the impact of forms of American mass culture as they traveled under their own commercial auspices, free from government backing, to reach European audiences. But it is important to understand that mass culture served as an instrument for promoting American values well before the *First* World War. That those who planned the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War looked to American mass cultural forms to further their cause should not be surprising. Since the Civil War, mass culture had been vital to efforts to rebuild the American nation and to "Americanize" millions of immigrants. During the First World War, the U.S. government's Creel Committee made American mass culture the centerpiece of its efforts to construct a world that would be safe for democracy and American exports. Little wonder, given the devastation of Europe during the Second World War and given their knowledge of the capacity of American mass cultural forms to influence public opinion, that planners seeking to reconstruct postwar Europe would give their work a cultural turn and regard American mass culture as vital to their efforts.

Over the course of the "American Century" the United States has undeniably assumed a centrality in world affairs that can rightly be called imperial. Like Rome in the days of the Roman empire, the United States has become the center of webs of control and communication that span the world. Its cultural products reach the far

corners of the world, communicating American ways and views to people elsewhere, while America itself remains relatively unaware of cultural products originating outside its national borders. If for such reasons we might call the United States imperial, it is so in a number of ways. It is imperial in the economic sphere, in the political sphere, and in the cultural sphere. Indeed, these forms of imperial reach—through which America, literally, holds empire over others¹⁴⁾—overlap to a considerable extent. For instance, America, in its role as the new political hegemon after the Second World War, could restructure markets and patterns of trade through the Marshall Plan, which guaranteed American firms access to European markets. Political empire, in short, could promote economic empire. At the same time, opening European markets for American commerce also meant preserving access for American *cultural* exports, such as Hollywood movies. Conversely, as carriers of an American version of the “good life,” American cultural products, from cars to movies, from clothing styles to kitchen appliances, all actively doubled as agents of American cultural diplomacy. Trade, in short, translated back into political empire. And so on, in endless feedback loops. Positive feedback loops, we might add, resulting in a virtuous circle of self-reinforcing power.

This is, of course, every diplomat’s dream, the dream of the Americanization of the world. It is a dream where the exercise of power is really a matter of the uses of soft power. In the past half century, American companies marketed their products abroad taking advantage of their Americanness as an asset to boost sales. Buying a Ford, a pair of Levis, or Nikes; drinking a Coke, devouring a Big Mac; or smoking a Marlboro offered a chance, however fleetingly, to partake of the American Dream. These and dozens of other American brands capitalized on the appeal of their home country to sell their wares to international consumers.

In the real world things hardly ever proceed so smoothly. Imperial ambitions do not always result in imperial successes. As they have tried to accommodate themselves to their diminished role and place in the world, European countries have at times opted to resist particular forms of America’s imperial presence. France is arguably the most telling case. It chose to resist America’s political empire by ordering NATO out of the country; it warned against America’s economic empire through Jean Jacques Servan-Schreiber’s *Le défi américain*; and it briefly tried to prevent *Jurassic Park* from being released in France. Some French critics tried to prevent EuroDisney from opening on the outskirts of Paris, seeing both Jurassic Park and EuroDisney as

¹⁴⁾ It is good to remind the reader of this specific use of the word empire. I was reminded of it when reading James Joyce’s adulatory letter which as a young man he addressed to Henrik Ibsen, “It must be questioned whether any man has held so firm an empire over the thinking world in modern times,” quoted in Lars Roar Langset, *Ibsen: The Father of Modern Drama*, trans. Pat Shaw (Oslo: Aventura Forlag A.S., 1995), 5.

American cultural imperialism threatening France's cultural identity. More recently, in the context of war on the Balkans or in Iraq, acts of violent protest have been directed against emblems of American mass culture like McDonald's restaurants. If there is no American embassy nearby to have its windows smashed, there is always a McDonald's. This suggests a circle of a different sort, vicious this time, not virtuous. The visceral dislike of one manifestation of American empire may then begin negatively to affect the other forms. Negative feed-back loops are being triggered setting in motion a downward spiral that is commonly studied under the label of anti-Americanism. Clearly not every demonstration protesting specific American policies or practices is a sign of anti-Americanism. But when people translate their outrage at one manifestation of American empire onto others—when, say, the war in Iraq inspires people to boycott American consumer products—then a process is underway that one might meaningfully label anti-Americanism. And something along these lines may be happening today.

The steep drop in America's symbolic capital (which, as Pierre Bourdieu would have reminded us, is one important mainstay of power), as measured by international opinion polls during the Bush Jr presidency, may have begun to translate into a rejection of America's economic empire. There may be a potential relationship between the downturn in global attitudes toward the United States and the shift now under way in global market choices. In a survey of 8,000 consumers in eight countries, fully 20% of Europeans and Canadians said their objections to U.S. foreign policy would prevent them from buying American brands. The brands most closely associated with America, Marlboro and Coca Cola, have lost market share in Germany and France.¹⁵⁾ We should also remind ourselves that, long before global opinion of the United States declined in 2002, anti-globalization protesters routinely launched boycotts against American icons such as Burger King, McDonald's, and Citibank.¹⁶⁾ But, as Julia Sweig reminds us, "After all, anti-American and anti-globalization protesters in capitals around the world can be seen on television running from the cops in their Nikes."¹⁷⁾

¹⁵⁾ In an excellent recent discussion of anti-Americanism in various regions of the world Julia Sweig looks at these recent trends. Julia Sweig, *Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 87 ff. She convincingly shows how regions of the world, like Latin America, Europe or the Middle East, have had critically divergent historical experiences of American empire and American power, experiences that have led to markedly different histories of anti-Americanism.

¹⁶⁾ On this see my "There Are No Borders: American Studies in the Netherlands, America in the World," in *Through the Cultural Looking Glass: American Studies in Transcultural Perspective*, ed. H.J. Krabbendam, J. Verheul (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999). Also, Rob Kroes, "Studying America in Europe: Four Vignettes and a Program," *The Journal of American Culture* 20, no.4 (Winter 1997): 63-71.

¹⁷⁾ Sweig, *Friendly Fire*, 89.

They do it in much the same way that in the late 1960s anti-Vietnam War demonstrators, in both the United States and Europe, could be chanting the anti-American slogans of the day, while wearing the full regalia of an American youth culture that had already developed into an international youth culture.

There are many ironies here. Not only do political or economic anti-Americanism go together well with cultural appetites clearly derived from America, at times a further twist is given to such combinations. In such cases, the very ingredients of a mass culture that had received its American imprint before it conquered the world and turned global are being re-arranged to produce a message whose thrust is anti-American. In other words, an American mass cultural idiom acquired by outsiders is then being turned against its source. How does that work?

In Europe's lasting encounter with American mass culture, many have been the voices expressing a concern about its negative impact. Cultural guardians in Europe saw European standards of taste and cultural appreciation eroded by an American way that aimed at a mass market, elevating the lowest common denominator of mass preferences to the main vector of cultural production. This history of cultural anti-Americanism in Europe has a long pedigree. In its earlier manifestations, from the late 19th century through the 1950s, the critique of American mass culture was highly explicit and had to be. Many ominous trends of an evolving mass culture in Europe had to be shown to have originated in America, reaching Europe under clear American agency. An intellectual repertoire of Americanism and Americanization evolved (as in Germany's *Amerikanismusdebatte* during the 1920s) in a continuing attempt at cultural resistance against the lures of a culture of consumption. Never mind that such cultural forms might have come to Europe autonomously, even in the absence of an American model. America served to give a name and a face to forces of cultural change that would otherwise have been anonymous and seemingly beyond control.

This European repertoire is alive and kicking. Yet, ironically, as a repertoire that has become common currency to the point of being an intellectual stereotype rather than an informed opinion, America nowadays is often a subtext, unspoken in European forms of cultural resistance. I have two examples to illustrate this. A 1996 political poster for the Socialist Party in Salzburg, during the run-up to municipal elections, showed us the determined face and the clenched fist of the party's candidate. He asked the voting public whether the younger generation would not be losers, and called on the electorate to "fight, fight, and fight." What for? "In order to avoid that young people get fed up with the future." (*Damit unsere Jugend die Zukunft nicht satt hat*). In a visual pun, at the poster's dead center, the getting fed up is illustrated by the blurred image of a hamburger flying by at high speed. Fast food indeed. The call for action is now clear. Austrians should try and fend off a future cast in an American vein. American culture is condensed into the single image of the hamburger. It is enough to trigger the larger repertoire of cultural anti-Americanism without mentioning America

once.

We may choose to see this poster as only a recent version of cultural guardianship that has always looked at the younger generation as a stalking horse, if not a Trojan horse, for American culture. In fact, historically, it has always been younger generations who, in rebellion against parental authority and cultural imposition, opted for the liberating potential of American mass culture. Yet interesting changes may have occurred in this pattern. Today young people as well, in their concern about forces of globalization, may target America as the central agency behind these global trends. And they may do it in the vernacular language of a mass culture that was American before it went global.

My second example will serve to illustrate this. I have a music video, a few years old, of a Basque group.¹⁸⁾ The video, in its own right, is an act of cultural emancipation. The lyrics are in the Basque language and the station broadcasting the video has all-Basque programming. This may suggest localism, if not cultural provincialism. Nothing would be farther from the truth. What we have here is a perfect example of glocalisation, to use Roland Robertson's neologism.¹⁹⁾ The music used is "world music," hailing from the Caribbean and popularized through the British music industry. The format of the music video itself is part of global musical entertainment. Yet the message is local. What the video shows is a confusing blend of the traditional and the modern. The opening shot—nostalgically arcadian—is of a man using a scythe to cut grass. Then the camera moves up and shows a modern, international style, office block. A mobile phone rings, and the grass cutter answers the call. More images show modern life. We see an old man talking into a microphone strapped to his head, as if he is talking to himself. We see a group of young men with bar codes on their heads working out in tandem, yet in complete isolation, as if in a transported glimpse of an American gym. Then the protagonists of the video appear, with a rickety van, getting ready to sell the local variety of Basque fast food, a sausage on a roll. The very smell breaks the isolation of people caught in the alienating life of modernity. They all flock to the sausage stand. There they come to life, stirred into celebratory action by the sight and smell of what purportedly represents a taste of true Basqueness. The lyrics repeat the refrain: "Down with MacDonald's, Long live Big Benat" (the name of the Basque delicacy).

The claim made in this video is on behalf of the authenticity of regional cultures struggling to survive in a world threatened by the homogenizing forces of globalization. Yet the medium of communication, the format of the music video, testifies to the impact of precisely those forces that the video protests against. There is much irony in all

¹⁸⁾ Available now on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtUSaf62wO0>.

¹⁹⁾ Roland Robertson, "Globalisation or Glocalisation?" *The Journal of International Communication* I, 1 (1994).

this, but most important is the fact that what is shown as modernity truly revives a long repertoire of European cultural anti-Americanism. America stands for modernity and the long history of European resistance to America is truly a story of resisting the onslaught of modernity on Europe's chequered map of regional and/or national cultures. Yet no fingers are pointed. The anti-America/anti-modernity nexus is triggered, as in the Salzburg poster, by the single reference to the Big Mac. A further irony is that Europe's younger generations, while adopting forms of an international mass culture, now use them to voice protest precisely against forces of globalization.

Clearly, in view of all these recent trends and ironic twists, it is impossible to come up with a single diagnosis of how American mass culture will be doing in an age when patent, finger pointing, forms of anti-Americanism have so powerfully resurfaced. As I have argued in much of my work on American mass culture, there is an inherent anti-authoritarian if not rebellious streak in it that may well lend itself perfectly to its recent uses for the production and dissemination of statements against America's empire. Quite apart from its antinomian potential, though, there may also be an enduring entertainment power in America's mass culture, an enduring appeal of its Americanness even to the most unlikely publics. Thus American TV shows, usually in English with Arabic subtitles, are now hugely popular among Iraqis craving entertainment in the (admittedly, relative) safety of their homes. Entire box sets of shows such as *Seinfeld*, *Scrubs*, and *Friends* are finding their way into DVD players across Baghdad.²⁰⁾ The hatred of Americans as an occupying force in Iraq clearly has not made Iraqis immune to the pleasures offered by the American entertainment industry. What this tells us about the continuing potential of American mass culture as a tool of what Joseph Nye would call soft power, I am not sure. I do know for sure that mere public relations, aimed at "rebranding" America in the Madison Avenue manner, won't do. Yet this was how the State Department went about shoring up America's battered image in the Middle East in the aftermath of 9/11. It hired a star public relations veteran, Charlotte Beers, to overhaul U.S. public diplomacy. Her tenure was brief and much derided.

Much remains to be done, or should we say recovered, in the area of cultural diplomacy. American policy makers would do well to follow Machiavelli's advice to princes to go back to first principles and find inspiration there. Rather than subverting America's republican and democratic principles, as has consistently happened under the current Bush regime, people across Europe would happily welcome the return of an inspirational American voice that for so long sustained its empire as an empire by invitation, if not inspiration. And yes, there may be such voices that strike chords of memory for many in Europe. In that vein, this is what one presidential contender,

²⁰⁾ According to a report in *USA Today*, Friday March 2, 2007, 4A.

Senator Barack Obama, had to say recently:

Many around the world are disappointed with our actions. And many in our own country have come to doubt either our wisdom or our capacity to shape events beyond our borders. Some have even suggested that America's time has passed.

I still believe that America is the last, best hope of Earth. We just have to show the world why this is so. This President may occupy the White House, but for the last six years the position of leader of the free world has remained open. And it's time to fill that role once more.

The American moment has not passed. The American moment is here. And like generations before us, we will seize that moment, and begin the world anew.²¹⁾

There is a rich resonance to these words, reminding us that "to begin the world anew" may well be a special American dispensation. Seizing the moment, beginning anew, Americans more than others may refuse to see things coming to an end. It is for others to foretell the end of the American empire, or the loss of its cultural allure for the outside world.

Victoria de Grazia, for one, ends her book on America as an irresistible empire²²⁾ on a tone of the end of an era, not due to failure but precisely to the success of America's imperial venture in spreading its commercial culture. Increasingly ways of business that initially were seen as originating in America, and in many cases derived their appeal precisely from their American aura, now have assumed local colors and blend it with their various cultural settings. Things may indeed have come full circle and come to a close.

This may be true, but it is not the whole story. As the *Economist* reminds us, America is still a brand that sells well: "In Carrefour at Montesson, a giant out-of-town hypermarket west of Paris, the bakery shelves are stacked with 'Harry's American sandwich' bread, a sliced product that has taken the land of the baguette by storm." As the magazine sums up its point, "the more American brands flaunt their origins, the better they seem to do."²³⁾

There is a much broader issue to be raised at this point, in view of the current and future impact of forces of cultural globalization. For how much longer will terms like "American" or "European" continue to make sense in a world of increasingly

²¹⁾ Quoted from an address by Barack Obama to the Chicago Council on global Affairs, April 23, 2007. Available on: <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/fpccga>.

²²⁾ Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through 20th-Century Europe* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

²³⁾ "French Anti-Americanism: Spot the Difference," *The Economist*, December 24, 2005, 41-43.

rapid cultural change and exchange? In connection with revolutions in communication technology, with globalized networks of control and ownership of the culture industries, with transnational financing, should we not speak of globalization rather than Americanization? Should we not give up on any kind of geographical denomination of cultural origin as hopelessly outdated? Well, not so fast. Individual countries in Europe as well as the European Union collectively feel in need of claiming an exception, if not exemption, when it comes to culture. They tend to promote and sponsor cultural production in such areas as film, music and television precisely because these are seen as critically linked to the expression, formation and preservation of collective cultural identities. They refuse to conceive of cultural products in those areas as being just like any other commodity and therefore subject to the logic of free trade and global markets.

As for Americanization versus globalization, the example of the Basque music video or the Salzburg political poster may remind us that both can be read as forms of protest against globalization as a force eroding local or national cultural standards. Yet at the same time the symbols chosen in articulating the protest are emblems of America, i.e. the Hamburger/Big Mac. In the current global production, dissemination and consumption of mass culture many of the ingredients are still recognizably American. Rap music produced by immigrant youths in Marseille, Turks in Berlin, or a Palestinian rapper in Canada, can still be meaningfully understood as so many uses of an American cultural form, originating in the black neighbourhoods of the United States. Yet at the same time they are culturally different, illustrating my earlier point about the selective appropriation of American mass culture and its hybridization at the receiving end. Once transformed in such ways, the outcome can also be seen as a re-localization of globally available forms of mass culture, allowing for the expression of local life and local identities.

There may be ways, though, where the continued globalization of mass culture may force us conceptually to recast issues of national and geographic origin, or of cultural identities. The area that most radically illustrates this is the Hollywood movie. Suggestive of a place and nation of origin as the richly resonant word Hollywood is, it is in need of a radical deconstruction in much the same way that Saskia Sassen, in her seminal book *The Global City*, forced us to rethink the idea of the city.²⁴⁾ We may need to come up with a conceptual view of Hollywood as a denationalized node within the deterritorialized network of media and entertainment production. The globality of Hollywood, in this view, lies in the transnational nature of its finance, production and distribution. The prime exhibit here is the Blockbuster movie as it has come to define Hollywood since the 1970s. It is a type of movie that basically means high production

²⁴⁾ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City : New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) updated 2nd ed., original 1991.

value, a reliance on special effects and computer technology, and the successful targeting of global audiences. Does this radical reconfiguration of Hollywood and the films it produces mean that we can no longer meaningfully speak of them as “American,” nor see them as powerful engines of Americanization? Surprisingly there are those who look at these recent trends and see no major change. In Europe and the United States there are those who reject the current Hollywood products in much the same vein that European cultural nationalists in the 1920s used to reject Hollywood films. Benjamin Barber, an American critic of Hollywood, in fact brings back the old dichotomy of Hollywood as being only commercial versus Europe producing creative “auteurs.”²⁵⁾ Others in contrast argue that the attempt of assigning cultural nationality to the Hollywood productions of today is done either arbitrarily or aims to serve specific agendas.²⁶⁾

The reconceptualization of Hollywood, as here suggested, may well call for the rethinking of national denominators as meaningful categories in cultural analysis. Transcending them, or leaving them behind, may allow us to see more clearly the portent of things to come, the effects on film content and its narrative structure of the global mode of production of “Hollywood” movies. It may help us fathom the interplay between such separate forms of global entertainment as video games and Blockbuster movies. We may be witnessing the transition from film narrative based on conventions of plot and character development—cultural conventions central to Western civilization since the days of classic Greek tragedy—to a novel form that more closely resembles the logic of levels in video games, with no quality of drama, no sense of history, no transcendence.²⁷⁾ The death of the tragedy, as a sign of cultural loss and the degeneration of Western civilization, has been announced by cultural pessimists, from Friedrich Nietzsche to George Steiner, adding their influential voices to the mainly European chorus of cultural declinists. Often the implied agent in such diagnoses of our time was the baneful and erosive influence of an American mass culture. Now, tellingly, American cultural critics, like Daniel Mendelsohn (cf. note 27), have joined the chorus in their turn. American and European intellectuals, on either side of the Atlantic, now voice their stark warnings of the demise of Western civilization, as we have known and cherished it, at the hands of the uncontrollable process of cultural globalization.

In conclusion: The Atlantic as a Cultural Divide?

Whatever the future may hold, at our present juncture such categories of thought

²⁵⁾ Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 95, 331.

²⁶⁾ Melis Behlil, “Home Away From Home: Global Directors of New Hollywood” (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2007).

²⁷⁾ For an illustration of this cultural shift, see Daniel Mendelsohn, “300 a film directed by Zack Snyder,” *New York Review of Books* 54, no. 9 (May 31, 2007): 37–40.

as “European” and “American” are still widely used. In that vein, let me revisit the issue this paper set out to address: At present are Europeans and Americans basically bonded by culture or divided by it? The answer cannot be a simple one. We have explored patterns of interwovenness, of cultural exchanges and clashes, of reception and hybridization, in a story that is basically one of cultural symbiosis. Yet there are areas of life, normally included in the single word “culture,” where the United States and Europe can be shown to have drifted apart in recent history. One such area, clearly, is religion. As cultural changes go, they are mostly unnoticed until a coagulation point is reached and a new cultural configuration presents itself. Thus, after many years of a life in the shadow, in both the U.S. and Europe, Islam now appears as having exploded on to the stage, confronting societies with dilemmas of cultural coexistence. There is not much that European countries can learn from the United States, given the fact that Muslim immigrants in Europe, apart from religion, strongly differ from those in the United States in terms of class, education, geographical origin, and urbanity. Islam as the one common denominator may falsely suggest that Europe and the U.S. share a problem, particularly when Muslims as a group, through cultural “profiling,” tend to set alarm bells ringing in a world that calls itself Christian.²⁸⁾ This is particularly ironic in a Europe that is increasingly secular, yet rallies around its alleged Christianity to exclude the Turks as a nation from membership of the European Union. That the Turks already live among Europeans in sizeable numbers and arguably share a transnational sense of themselves as a community that one might call proto-European is a thing Europeans conveniently tend to ignore.

It is not so much Islam, though, as Christianity that brings ironies I wish to explore further. It is no longer the bonding element it may historically have been. Europe shows a long-term trend toward secularism, while the United States, as if caught in a quasi-colonial time warp, embraces the old-time religion and its world view. Here too the trends have gone on unnoticed for quite a while, until the moment when the opening divide causes a cultural shock and both sides behold each other in utter estrangement. Not only have both sides evolved in opposite directions in the sphere of religion, but other spheres of life, such as politics, education, morality, appear as crucially affected by these diverging trends. Contemporary American religiosity, as many Europeans see it, appears as a form of obscurantism that is still engaged in pitched battles with the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment. Tellingly, though, some of the most incisive criticism of such trends comes from the United States.²⁹⁾ As so often

²⁸⁾ For a particularly shrill example of the construction of Islamofascism and its connection to Iran, see Norman Podhoretz, “The Case for Bombing Iran: I Hope and Pray that President Bush Will do It,” *Wall Street Journal*, Editorial Page, May 30, 2007, <http://opinionjournal.com/forms/printThis.html?id=110010139>.

²⁹⁾ The best brief catalog of the evangelical invasion of politics, is Garry Wills, “A Country Ruled

before, critical voices from Europe sound in unison with American voices.

This may not be as strongly the case, though, in the defense of republicanism, civil rights and democratic values. If political culture, like religion, is part of my brief for this paper, we must remind ourselves of the language used on both sides of the Atlantic in the days and weeks following the terrorist assault of 9/11. In an instant, if not instinctive, response, the terms of public debate were those of the West and the values it stood for, values of freedom and democracy. It did not take long, though, for public debate in Europe to turn away in disgust from what it saw as the cynical subversion at the hands of the Bush administration of precisely those values. This time it was more difficult for Europeans to recognize if not reach out to like-minded critics in America's public space. There, time and again conservative forces can be seen to dictate to the public the terms of public debate and to silence dissent. No one harbouring political aspirations can say the unwelcome thing without alienating entire voter blocs. Age-old fears of what a garrison state, a.k.a. as a warfare state, not a welfare state, or in more current language a national security state, could mean for the survival of republicanism—fears expressed so eloquently, among others, by the Nobel Peace laureate Jane Addams at the time of the First World War—are now more urgently recognised and discussed in Europe than in the United States. This is a tragic reversal of a long history where repeatedly America was the beacon and safe haven of liberty at times when tyranny and dictatorship held sway in Europe, and people from Europe looked to America as the last, best hope of democracy and freedom. Precisely now that Europe is in its long-continuing reinvention of itself as a Kantian place of order and the rule of law, America may be showing worrying signs of placing itself above the law, nationally and internationally. It now finds itself in the dock, literally as in a Milan court on the issue of “extra-ordinary rendition,” or more generally in the court of public opinion. If anti-Americanism has risen steeply all over the world, surely in Europe as well, it may have to do crucially with what many see as the betrayal by Americans of something distinctly American, of “truths held to be self-evident.”

by Faith,” *The New York Review of Books* (November 16, 2006). For countertrends among evangelicals, belying an unduly homogenized reading of their social and political impact, see: Frances FitzGerald, “The Evangelical Surprise,” *The New York Review of Books* 54, no.7 (April 26, 2007): 31–35.

A remarkable book-length analysis comes from the man who may well have masterminded the evangelical penetration into politics, as part of what he called the “silent majority,” and now, like a sorcerer’s apprentice, disowns the creature that he sired: Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2006).