

Publications

Americanization and Europeanization

by Victoria de Grazia

The term “Americanization” is back again after a lull of a couple of decades. The press loves it, likewise academic conferees, especially in playful fields like cultural and American studies. But the term has not been as easily digested by the social sciences. The numbers of significant works on the subject can be counted on one hand. 1 Not to address Americanization might seem like a strange omission for the CES, whose mission should oblige it to reflect on the power embedded in transatlantic circuits of knowledge, were it not for the tacit consensus that it is an unwieldy, often ideological notion. It is the stuff of loose conversation, cropping up in so many diverse contexts and referring to myriad processes that to define it, much less to develop models for research, seems like a futile exercise.

Each time the “A” word crops up in Europe (which occurred first in Great Britain with the English publicist W. T. Stead’s *The Americanization of the World* in 1899, then again in the 1920s, 1960s, and the 1990s), it has been inflected differently. These changing inflections tell us why we have to pay attention to the term, even if we can’t settle on any single method appropriate to its study. This time its usage arises in tandem with two phenomena, one which might be described as Europeanization, meaning the search after a European cultural identity; the other might be called “civilization-ism,” referring to cultural arguments mounted in the U.S. to give a pretense of ethical substance to free market pressures issuing out of corporate and official responses to globalization.

If we go back to the late 1960s, the American challenge, as Jean-Jacques Servan Schrieber famously described it, was basically economic. In the face of the heavy influx of U.S. corporate investment, the European Community was to respond imitatively with economies of scale and scope and transnational cooperation in technology and instruction. This time around, the American challenge presents itself in cultural terms: as an assault on identities, notions of justice, and ideas of market in a broader ethical and institutional sense. This is not to say economic considerations are not worrisome, but whereas the European Union appears to have evolved the resources to respond economically, its cultural defenses seem weak. This weakness is all the more disturbing in recognition that a stronger civic culture is required to overcome its “democratic deficit.” It is the nurturing of this civic culture that is undercut by the mogul-driven mass culture fostered by U.S. “infotainment” empires in Europe in cahoots with or copy-catted by the various Murdochs, Berlusconi, and Kirchs.

Unlike in the past, however, state-based solutions such as quotas, or outright bans of the kind that were instituted by authoritarian states in the name of cultural autarchy in the 1930s are recognizably futile. State frontiers have never blocked cultural flows. They certainly don’t in the age of global free trade and the Internet. True, the Uruguay Round of the GATT on trade liberalization conceded to making cinema a “cultural exception,” and the contribution of various cross-national experiments aimed at constituting a European audio-visual space need to be assessed sympathetically if Europeans societies are to cohere and prosper. However, the consensus of post-1968 generations, drawing on the practice of cultural studies, is that cultures are hybrids and national cultures were never pure. Moreover, Europeanness has

everything to gain from the fluid boundaries and multi-cultural vitality that over the past century was a major source of American mass culture's universal appeal. If Americanization is to be confronted, the unit of analysis cannot be the culturally-hermetic nation-state nor a culture-clad Fortress Europe. The response has to be a broader reflection about civilizational differences—in the material, cultural, institutional, ethical, and epistemological sense.

At the same time, Americanization is, if not more aggressive, differently aggressive from the past as the U.S. uneasily occupies its role as sole superpower. Since Woodrow Wilson, American leaders have been forthright about regarding the export of mass culture and consumer goods as central to America's global democratizing mission. However, cultural battles occupy a new role in building the post-Cold War order. With the collapse of the Soviet Empire, it was hypothesized that "soft" power would not just complement, but begin to replace some measure of "hard" power enabling cut backs in U.S. military forces. ² In the mid 1990s this position gave way to a significantly different one, namely that globalization was proving so disruptive of local societies while undermining the power of nation-states that strategists had to anticipate that people would fall back on religiously-based cultural communities and repudiate western values. In the well-known formulation of Samuel Huntington, the U.S. had to brace itself for the coming "clash of civilizations." ³

Not surprisingly, this aggressive "civilizationism" combined with Europeans' own concerns about their common identity, have generated new positions on Americanization. One is to be explicit about treating the U.S. as the Other against which the new Europe has to define itself. If there is any virtue to this position, it is to recognize that there is no eternal Europe, that Europe, like other civilizations, is discursively as well as institutionally formed in relationship to others. ⁴ Just as the idea of Europe was generated in confrontation with its fluid frontiers with Eurasia and around the Mediterranean, Europe's identity was shaped by the presence of the New World on the Atlantic side. The problem with "orientalizing" the U.S. is that unlike Islam or so-called "Asiatic" Europe, the U.S. is a hegemonic not a subaltern power. What America means is a contested resource for any number of groups to advance their interests and identity. But how this discursive power is exercised to define alternatives is misunderstood unless it is connected to analyses of circuits of institutional power.

A bolder way to interpret Americanization is to consider it as one of multiple alternative modernities, one which contemporary Europe, having now matured its own brand of modernity, is ever more prepared to contest. ⁵ This has the undeniable virtue of allowing for the societal convergences that have occurred over the last decades, while at the same time highlighting recurring differences between the two models such as in the role of the state, the nature of individualism, definitions of justice, the quality of the standard of living, and the meaning of culture itself. These differences become especially visible in the face of major historical turning points, with the turn to globalization since the 1980s accelerated by the collapse of the Soviet bloc as merely the most recent. The question is whether it is really useful to speak of alternative modernities unless it is acknowledged that behind every claim to be modern, there is also a claim to be hegemonic or to resist further domination.

Talk of Americanization recurs across the Atlantic when there are significant shifts in the relations of dominance, as has been occurring over the last decade. The current period of convergence and

differentiation is characterized by new vectors of U.S. penetration and new areas of European coherence around economic institutions as well as issues of civic and (perhaps) military security. This is also true for life and death issues such as gun control, the death penalty, the future of the environment, and the use of genetically modified goods. Latching on to prior European traditions, these positions may become constituents of a civilizational outlook and define structures of action different from the American. As in the past, Americanization poses the perennial question: What is a European identity? This remains, as always, a provocative question, without any simple answers.

Notes

1 See Luc Boltanski's chapter on the culture of the cadres in *The making of a class: cadres in French society*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987; Marie-Laure Djelic's *Exporting the American Model: The postwar transformation of European Business*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; Jonathan Zeitlin, ed., *Americanization and its limits: reworking US technology and management in post-war Europe and Japan*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Historians, not being held to the same definitional rigor, have made substantial contributions to understanding U.S. influence. See Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993; Volker R. Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

2 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic, 1990.

3 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

4 For example, Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe. Idea, Identity, Reality*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1995.

5 See Björn Wittrock, "Modernity: One, None or Many? European Origins and Modernity as a Global Condition," in *Daedalus*, Winter 2000, 31-60; Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994; Goran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945-2000*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995.