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Review: Americanization and Anti-Americanism in Europe

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AMERICANIZATION AND ANTI-AMERICANISM: THE GERMAN ENCOUNTER WITH AMERICAN CULTURE AFTER 1945. Edited by Alexander Stephan. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005.

THE AMERICANIZATION OF EUROPE: CULTURE, DIPLOMACY, AND ANTI-AMERICANISM AFTER 1945. Edited by Alexander Stephan. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006.

Dead is US cultural imperialism, long live American culture! While none of the authors would probably want to subscribe to this simplistic slogan, there is little doubt that these rich anthologies of essays both edited by Stephen Alexander reflect and advance the new dominant paradigm in the academic Americanization debate. The older view of an American steamroller flattening, obliterating and leveling the European cultural landscapes is clearly waning. Instead, the new paradigm emphasizes hybrid cultures, *bricolage*, the selective adoption and adaptation of cultural expressions as well dynamic, two-way cultural exchanges. This revision in approach has been a most welcome one. As many of the articles in these volumes attest, this academic sea change has led to a vast array of smart, insightful and nuanced perspectives that explore the complicated cultural exchanges with much more finesse and subtlety than the older view made possible.¹

Many of the essays in these collections directly address this theme. Particularly noteworthy in the first anthology, *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: The German Encounter With American Culture*, are the contributions by Richard Pells, Kaspar Maase and Winfried Fluck, three scholars who have written extensively on this topic.² Pells emphasizes in his essay just how reciprocal America's cultural connections with other countries really are. As one example of this development he points especially to the continuous waves of foreign talent that has flocked to and enriched the American film industry. This has created one of the most international and cosmopolitan communities, as he points out it. In this process, Hollywood, similar to other US cultural industries, has "specialized in selling the fantasies and folklore of other people back to them." (190) In addition, as in his book *Not Like Us*, Pells highlights that people around the globe maintain dual or even multiple sets of cultural allegiances and identities and contends that a global US culture will always only be one set among several.

¹ In addition to the studies I will cite hereafter, there are several noteworthy books that have advanced this new approach over the past decade or more: Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1993); Reinhold Wagnleiter, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2000); and Manfred Berg and Philipp Gassert (eds.), *Deutschland und die USA in der Internationalen Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004).

² Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York, Basic Books, 1997); Kaspar Maase, *Bravo Amerika: Erkundungen zur Jugendkultur der Bundesrepublik in den fünfziger Jahren* (Hamburg, Junius Verlag, 1992); Winfried Fluck, "'Amerikanisierung' der Kultur: Zur Geschichte der amerikanischen Populärkultur," in: Harald Wenzel (ed.), *Die Amerikanisierung des Medienalltags* (Frankfurt and New York, Campus Verlag, 1998).

Maase provides a broad overview of the development of German broadcasting in the 20th century. His title, “From Nightmare to Model?,” reflects much of the focus of his analysis. Maase argues that the slow erosion and deterioration of an educational paternalism and an “Americanization from below” (96) were the driving forces behind the increasing adoptions of American cultural models. The dissatisfaction of the German public with “educative radio” (91) and the increasing competition between public television stations were the first step in this transformation. Maase sees the emergence of the “dual system” (public broadcasting side-by-side with private, commercial stations), which was introduced in West Germany in the mid-1980s, only as one of the latest steps in this process of “self-Americanization.”

This notion of “Americanization as Self-Americanization” is also the focus and title of Winfried Fluck’s essay and recent scholarship. As he argues provocatively with an eye not just to Germany but to much of the rest of the world: “In the final analysis, we are not being Americanized. We Americanize ourselves!” (223) Part of the irresistible appeal of American popular culture, as he emphasizes, comes from the unique development of popular culture in the United States: it evolved in a multi-ethnic and multi-racial setting; it frequently emphasized emotional and visual expressions over verbal ones; and it focused on universal, human themes and dilemmas. The result was that it was ready-made for export: “American popular culture faced a market that resembled today’s global market in its diversity and multilingual nature.” (225)³ Even more to the point, Fluck argues that American cultural expressions are ideally suited for direct, unmediated and body-centered experiences which heighten the pleasure of the participant. This “embodiment” and “somatic experiences” especially of films and popular music, as he contends, creates a powerful aesthetic matrix that is both pleasurable and self-empowering. (227-230)

Two other articles deal with the theme of “Americanization” and explore diverging perspectives that very much enrich this sometimes labored debate. Michael Ermarth explores the long history of “counter-Americanism” in the context of West German reconstruction. As he stresses, Germans of all stripes have argued for a tempered, partial adoption of American models in a variety of areas. From Robert Müller, a little known avant-garde Expressionist writer and journalist of the early 20th century, who coined the term “Konträr-Amerikanismus” (counter-Americanism), to the sociologist Alfred Weber, who called for a third path of democratic socialism in the late 1940s, this has been a dominant theme in the context of German modernization. Whether discussed as “Scandinavization” (40) or “adoptive semi-Americanization” (43), many Germans have consistently supported a middle-of-the-road, social-liberal variety of Americanization. Bernd Greiner adds to this the intriguing view of a “double America” which many Germans and Europeans carry around with them. This explains why even radical German student leaders such as Karl Dietrich Wolff (one of the leaders of the West German SDS) would come home after a long day of protesting America’s war in Vietnam and relax with friends by playing or listening to American popular music. (56) This notion of a “double America” in general goes a long way to explaining both the love-hate relationship many Europeans feel towards the United States as well as the

³ For a related but much more comprehensive analysis of this development in the 20th century, see Victoria de Grazia, *The Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through 20th-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

ongoing infatuation with American culture in the face of the simultaneous increase of anti-Americanism around the globe.

One section of the volume is dedicated to film studies, which is probably the area best explored in American-German cultural relations after 1945. Yet all three essays add insightful analyses to this already expansive scholarship. David Bathrick focuses on the Americanization of the Holocaust through films in his contribution by focusing on three seminal watershed events: the publication of the documentary *Nazi Concentration Camps*, which introduced many viewers to the horrors of the Holocaust at the end of World War II; the film adoption of the *Diary of Anne Frank*, which created a second iconographic symbol in the mid-1950s; and the NBC miniseries Holocaust that was broadcast on German television in January 1979 amidst much controversy, placing the topic squarely in the German public arena. In his essay on “German Cinema Face to Face with Hollywood,” Thomas Elsaesser analyzes the long history of Hollywood’s status in postwar West Germany in much more detail and with more subtlety than can possibly be reflected in this short review. At the heart of his complex and multi-layered analysis is the “two-way mirror model:” Europe and the United States both appropriate cultural expressions from each other, reprocess and rearticulate them and feed them back across the Atlantic in a never-ending two-way cultural transfer. (177) In her essay on the East German DEFA studio, finally, Sabine Herke takes a closer look at the other Germany and emphasizes the central role of anti-American themes in these productions. The obvious propagandistic nature of films such as *Eine Berliner Romanze* (1956) or *Berlin Ecke Schönhauser* (1958) was couched in the symbolism of cultural, gendered narratives, as she emphasizes, which highlighted the false promises of individual self-realization and Western consumerism, according to the East German political ideology.

No anthology on German-American relations published these days, of course, would be complete without engaging the resurgent anti-Americanism which has spiked especially since the onset of the Iraq War. This collection of essays is no exception. Considering the multi-layered dimension of this issue, one article by Russell Berman on this topic is particularly disappointing. In Berman’s opinion, anti-Americanism really has little to do with Americanization or America’s image in the world. Rather, as he puts it somewhat single-mindedly, “anti-Americanism is fundamentally an expression of hostility to societies with democratic capitalism.” (22) If anything, as he sees it, it is the United States’ emphasis on emancipation and freedom that is the main target: “It is that potential of progress in human history that anti-Americanism resists.” (23) Volker Berghahn, although not responding to Berman directly, provides a much more nuanced view of this perennial discussion. Like other authors in this volume, he highlights the “blending of imports with the indigenous” (239) as the core element of cultural transfer and stresses that much of the recent anti-Americanism (in Germany, at least) is more appropriately captured by the term “anti-Bushism.” Rob Kroes adds to this another important historical perspective in his essay on “Anti-Americanism and Anti-Modernism in Europe.” Much of the anti-Americanism of the first half century in Europe was directed against the image of America as “a machine,” which encompassed fears of Fordism, mechanization and economic rationalization. (204) In the second half of his article Kroes argues that this conflation of modernization and Americanization continues today, although America has frequently become the unspoken subtext in these discussions.

The second collection of essays, *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945*, almost seamlessly picks up where the first anthology ended and reads like a sequel with a significantly broader scope. What makes these essays so very appealing is that they cover a wide range of European countries. Part I deals with “the usual suspects,” Britain, France and West Germany. Part II ventures a bit further into slightly less familiar territories by focusing on Sweden, Denmark and Austria. Part III (USSR/Poland) and Part IV (Italy, Spain, and Greece) finally take the readers to countries that are far less visited in the Americanization debate.⁴ In addition, these contributions also range much more widely in terms of their substantive focus. The contributors were asked to organize their essays around four particular themes: the role of US cultural diplomacy, the transfer and influence of America high culture, the spread of American popular culture, and the degree of Anti-Americanism in the respective countries. In what follows I will focus my attention on the lesser known countries in the Americanization debate, partially because the first part of this review already dealt in great detail with a West European country.

In general, what emerges from this overview is one core lesson that is frequently forgotten in the Americanization debate: for a variety of political, geographical, and cultural reasons, European countries responded in widely divergent ways to the influx of American cultural imports.

While it is not surprising that the USSR would have fought US cultural influences tooth and nail, for example, it might come as a surprise to many readers that Greece and Spain, mainly because of political reasons, exhibited anti-American sentiments at least as powerful as the renowned French dislike for the American cultural invasion for long stretches of the postwar era. As Marsha Siefert reiterates in her essay “From Cold War to Wary Peace: American Culture in the USSR and Russia,” the Soviet Union’s attitude to American culture and products was part and parcel of the Cold War rivalry. The most visible aspect of cultural influences came in the form of exchange programs, which worked on “the formal principle of exact exchange: one performer for another, ten students for another ten.” (187) As is commonly known, the USSR preferred to invite writers and artists like John Steinbeck and Paul Robeson who were themselves critical of the United States, at least until they also voiced their displeasure with aspects of the communist system. Ultimately more influential and more subtle were popular musical imports like jazz and rock ‘n’ roll, which were much harder to control, especially since much of this music reached its Russian audiences over the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe broadcasts. As Andrej Antoszek and Kate Delaney highlight in their essay on Poland, Soviet borders were even more porous because of the greater degree of Americanization in other East bloc countries. Since Poles experienced generally less censorship and more intellectual freedom than other East European countries, for example, Poland was “particularly susceptible to American culture.” (242) This meant that Poles naturally enjoyed greater access to all foreign cultures, including American

⁴ For additional articles on the impact of American culture in less familiar countries, see the edited anthology by Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May, “*Here, There and Everywhere: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture* (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 2000). For readers interested in the nexus between culture, diplomacy, and international relations, I also recommend another anthology of essays edited by Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht and Frank Schumacher, *Culture and International History* (New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2003).

exports, but it also had further ramifications for its neighboring countries. As the two authors put it, “Poland served both as a translator and transmitter of American culture, making American works accessible to others in the East bloc.” (224)⁵

Politics was also the main reason for stronger reservations against American culture among Greeks and Spaniards. Washington’s support of the military junta which governed Greece in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Konstantina E. Botsiou makes clear in her essay, resulted in a “uniquely negative perception of American political culture ever since.” (278) It was not until the 1980s that relations between the United States and Greece normalized. As in much of the East bloc countries, rapid waves of selective Americanization have enveloped the country since the post-Cold War years, which has led to the same mix-and-match consumption strategies typical of other European countries. In Spain, as Dorothy Noyes highlights in her essay “Waiting for Mr. Marshall: Spanish American Dreams,” the critical years were not 1945 and 1989, but rather 1898 and 1953. In 1898, the United States relieved Spain of its last existing colonies, and in 1953 America established military bases on Spanish soil. Noyes editorializes this trend succinctly by arguing that “the language of Spanish anti-Americanism across the political spectrum has been remarkably consistent from 1898 to the present.” (310) However, (similar to Greece and East European countries) the author closes his analysis by commenting that “Spain looks much like the rest of Europe nowadays.” (329)

Equally as surprising might be the fact that Denmark has resisted American imports far longer than most other European countries and relied much more heavily on British entertainment than its neighbors. As Nils Arne Sorensen and Klaus Peterson explain, the Danish case is somewhat unique because of the slower rates and later waves of Americanization as well as their “strong partiality for Britain and all things British.” (116) In the late 1950s, for example, about 90 percent of all popular musical imports came from Britain, and “only in 1980 did US imports exceed the British.” (129) Likewise, American and British cultures were given equal status in the educational curriculum in the early 1970s only. At the same time, the authors readily concede that British cultural imports, because of their own debt to American culture and their hybrid nature, “served as the cultural entrepôt that received, filtered, and retransmitted American culture” to Denmark as well as the rest of Europe. In Sweden, as Dag Blanck emphasizes, American cultural imports experienced similar resistance for quite some time. Official efforts to curtail American music and TV programs resulted in the fact that almost half of all Swedish entertainment programs on television originated in Great Britain in the late 1970s; the American share was only half the size of the British market. In contrast, Swedish academia eagerly absorbed influences from American social sciences, economics and sociology. And despite the strong and outspoken opposition of the Swedish government during the Vietnam War, Blanck argues that “expressions of anti-Americanism have been weaker in Sweden than in many other European countries.” (109)

⁵ The same could probably said for East Germany, which was more exposed to Western culture because of ready access to West German media. For intriguing discussions of this development, see David F. Crew (ed.), *Consuming Germany in the Cold War* (Oxford and New York, Berg Publishers, 2003) as well as several essays in Axel Schildt, Detlef Siegfried and Karl Christian Lammers (eds.), *Dynamische Zeiten: Die 60er Jahre in den beiden deutschen Gesellschaften* (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 2000).

Another overall theme that is intriguing and noteworthy is that several authors hypothesize about indisputable advantages of the Americanization of specific European countries. In her piece on Spain, for example, Noyes argues that American culture might “well have eased the difficult process of national reconciliation by providing a neutral ground on which at least the younger generation could meet.” (321) In a similar vein, David W. Ellwood concludes his observations about the mixed response to American culture in Italy on a positive note: “On balance, decades of containing and domesticating the American challenge, in all its fluid variety of forms, was probably an experience that helped unite Italians more that it divided them.” (273)

In the concluding essay of the anthology “Imaginary Americas in Europe’s Public Space”, Rob Kroes, one of Europe’s foremost experts on the Americanization debate, picks up on this theme and takes it one step further. Kroes builds on several arguments that he has developed in other studies on the same topic.⁶ One is his notion of “triangulation,” which implies that Europeans frequently use the United States and Americanization as reference points for their internal political debates and controversies. The other is the notion of America as a metaphor for freedom, open space and unbounded opportunities. In this essay, he asks a very intriguing question along the same lines as the authors mentioned above, “But might there also be a way to argue that Europe’s exposure to American imagery may have worked to Europeanize Europe at the same time?” (346) He answers his own question by arguing that America has helped Europeans develop a common identity. What he has in mind are not the national identities and ethnicities of former decades, but decidedly transnational countries which are inhabited by citizens with multiple cultural identities. He refers to this new belonging as “rooted cosmopolitanism,” (355) and closes with the provocative notion that partially through their exposure to American culture many European countries have created very different post-national entities. As Kroes puts it, “Countries like France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands are no longer nation states but transnational states.” (355)

In conclusion, a few disappointments notwithstanding, these two anthologies contain a vast number of engaging and stimulating essays. In many cases, they represent the most recent historical and theoretical advances in the field of cultural studies in connection with the American cultural influence on Germany and the rest of Europe. In addition, many essays provide American readers with some of the path-breaking scholarship that has emerged in European and American universities over recent decades. I have no doubt that these anthologies will find an eager readership in the English-speaking world and significantly model expanded transnational scholarship as well as facilitate transatlantic collaboration.

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⁶ See particularly Rob Kroes, *If You’ve Seen One, You’ve Seen The Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1996) as well as his article, “Advertising: the Commodification of American Icons of Freedom,” in: Wagnleitner and Tyler May (eds.), “*Here, There and Everywhere*,” 273-286.