Citizenship, Nationhood and Multiculturalism: European Dreams and the American Dream

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Abstract
For well-nigh two centuries Europe and the United States have been each other’s ‘significant Other’. They have each served as a reference culture to the other, leading to questions concerning the ‘Europeanization’ of America, or, with particular urgency in the 20th century, ‘the Americanization of Europe’. Yet, whatever the cultural interchanges and encounters across the Atlantic, the United States and Europe, particularly in the days of the European Union, have separately shown inner strains and problems, to do with immigration, ethnicity, and multiculturalism. This paper explores parallels and divergences in the way both the U.S. and Europe cope with these issues.

Keywords: Europe, America, Eurabia, Islamism, multiculturalism.

Introduction
In political discourse, on both sides of the Atlantic, ‘Europe’ and ‘America’ have been the subjects of hotly contested constructions, hugely invested with partisan views. In the U.S., Europe has been cast as a potential Eurabia, unable to fend off the advent of militant Islamism, while America cast itself in the role of being the last bastion of Western values and Christianity. Europeans on the other hand criticized what they saw as an American surrender to the agenda of a narrow and militant Christian revivalism, mired in views that Europeans thought they had left behind in their own onward march to cultural modernity and trans-nationalism. A different, and quite well-known, construction of the trans-Atlantic difference is between an America seen as militaristic, as martial in its culture and foreign policy, and a Europe that has learned its lessons from two devastating World Wars fought on European soil. In that view, famously put forth by Robert Kagan, Europe no longer believes in war as a policy tool that works; they opt for the creation of a European space where constitutionalism and the rule of law reign supreme. In Kagan’s view this left Europe weak, depending for its defense on American military might. At the same time there were those, on both sides, who chose to see the other side in a more positive light, as in Jeremy Rifkind’s provocative book on The European Dream, as a new model for americans to emulate, or in European analyses aimed at transcending and reformulating a Cold-War consensus as it had centered on the concept of Atlanticism. The promise of a new beginning in this relationship, offered by the political ascent of Obama and the hopes it raised among Europeans, constitute the counter-narrative that casts America in a more positive light.

This repertoire of partisan, if not ideological, views of the difference between Europe and America has helped people on both sides to define themselves and their collective purpose and identity by casting the other side as a negative example. And of course, this is what Americans and Europeans have been doing for a long time, in an intricate game of cultural dialectics. It is a game that highlights cultural difference and in a sense engages in what we might call ‘othering’ the other side, exaggerating difference while ignoring continuities and parallels. And in fact, parallels abound. If we can imagine ourselves taking a satellite view of both sides of the Atlantic, we would see two nations involved in frantic debates about their collective identity and purpose. In both Europe and America borders are fenced, shorelines policed and walls erected to keep out unwanted strangers.
No matter whether such strangers are lured by the magnet power of the American Dream, or by the European Promise, no matter whether they would strengthen the national economy in both America and the European Union and help both sides cope with ominous demographic trends. They are unwanted because they are seen as inassimilable, if not as a cultural threat. Academics, public intellectuals, journalists and politicians, have managed to produce best-sellers addressing these questions. In America there have been such vaunted professorial voices like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and especially Samuel Huntington to give poignant expression to widely shared common concerns. Schlesinger addressed problems of immigration and national identity in his book ominously entitled *The Disuniting of America*. More recently Huntington wrote his *Who Are We?* Such concerns have always accompanied the American self-reflection, but clearly have acquired a new urgency. In another best-selling book Huntington took a larger view, exploring the new collective challenge, not just for Americans but more generally the West after the Cold War had come to an end. He saw looming what he called *The Clash of Civilizations*, embodied most clearly in the incompatible world views of Islam and Western civilization. The book was remarkably prescient. Huntington’s predictions seemed almost instantly borne out by the events of 9/11 and their long aftermath. In Europe as well the rise of populism as a force in politics was accompanied by alarmist studies of the failure of multiculturalism, focused particularly on the presence of Islamic minorities in member states of the European Union. The run-away success of books by German author Thilo Sarrazin is a clear marker of this change of public mood.

It seems almost like a voice from a different and past world if we remind ourselves of a seminal book by American historian David Hollinger, called *Postethnic America*. First published in 1995, *Postethnic America* was widely hailed as a groundbreaking proposal for healing our nation's ethnic divisions. Hollinger’s subtitle sounds like a program: *Beyond Multiculturalism*. He conjures up a world where multicultural differences are no longer a force of social and political cleavage and fissure, but survive as cultural repertoires allowing people to toy with a variety of cultural identities. I was reminded of a Saint-Patrick Day’s parade in Chicago, where the city’s Irish establishment festively paraded along the streets and a black girl, standing next to me among the crowd of onlookers, wore the Irish emblem with the words: “Kiss me, I’m Irish”. She, or more likely her parents, had chosen playfully to overcome traditional dividing lines, most crucially skin color. I have another example to illustrate the cultural freedoms and pleasures offered by an America that has moved beyond its divisive multiculturalism. It is the closing scene from a 1988, John Landis film, *Coming to America*. As the final installment of a gag running through the film, set in a barbershop with a mixed clientele, we see black actor Eddy Murphy in white-face, doing a deadpan, yet hilarious, imitation of Groucho Marx telling a Jewish joke. It is a beautiful example of what the future may hold in store, using the power of American filmmaking in showing fantasy worlds that may yet come true. And in fact, for America to have a black president may well have been a step in that direction.

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Citizenship in a Trans-Atlantic Perspective

The United States, throughout what is commonly referred to as the “American Century”, has held cultural sway over those living within its imperial reach, particularly in the years following World War II. Among Europeans at the receiving end of America’s cultural radiance there has been a blend of intrigued fascination mixed in with cultural resistance, trying to make sense of America’s cultural Otherness as measured by European standards, and to fathom the impact of American mass culture on Europe’s cultural landscape. In fact, the history of these European concerns predates the “American century”. Words like Americanization were coined in Europe as early as the 19th century, when America was still in the early stages of developing forms of mass culture to Americanize the many who had come as strangers to its shores. In the process Americans managed to develop a cultural vernacular that could speak to mass audiences rather than elite publics. And it did so with all the mastery it used in reaching mass markets for its mass-produced consumption commodities. In fact, it never shrank from applying the logic of marketing to cultural forms. From its early origins, it might be argued, American mass culture was both democratic and commercial, conceiving of its public as cultural consumers constituting a market. And it appealed to that market with all the force of its advertising wizardry, wrapping its products, whether economic commodities like cigarettes, or cultural products like film, in seductive narrative fantasies that were all equally evocative of an imaginary America, a dreamscape that had Americanized the immigrants before it would tempt foreign publics.2

The history of the European encounter with an American culture cast in this mould is one of European audiences, mostly the younger generations, appropriating these seductive dreams and making them their own, against parental strictures. Thus, particularly in the post-World War II years, when Europe had set out on its own course toward a culture of consumption, in many cases America provided them with the standards for emulation, providing each next generation of youngsters with a cultural vernacular redolent with American fantasies. In these younger generations’ quest for a cultural identity, American ingredients served as alternatives in cultural struggles waged in every European national setting with cultural gate-keepers guarding the purity of the national identity. Thus a shared cultural vernacular could evolve that is meaningfully summarized in the quip that the only culture that Europeans have in common across national borders is American culture.

In this view, we may conceive of this new cultural vernacular in terms of cosmopolitan memory. Replete as this cultural vernacular – or vernacular culture, for that matter – is with imagined Americas, it does put one in mind of David Levy and Nathan Sznaider’s view of cosmopolitan memory as independent of specific carrier groups, but rather as being mediated by films, television, the music industry, books, photographs, all being available for mass consumption. As they put it: “Cosmopolitan memory thus implies some recognition of the history (and memories) of the Other”, the Other in our case being an imagined, if not imaginary, America (Levy and Sznaider 103). In this paper I will argue that European experiences and cultural habits are imbricated with patterns of American mass culture, particularly in the post-World War II era. America, in our case, is that ‘Other’, whose history and memories, as refracted in America’s own mass cultural productions, are being increasingly acknowledged in European forms of cultural appropriation and resistance. To make my case, I’ll be looking at the many ways in which American cultural transmissions, as so many semantic bits and pieces, have been filling Europe’s public space. In other words, I’ll be looking at the American “signage” that has increasingly come to constitute the semantic environment of daily life in Europe.

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Europe’s Inner Contradictions: Nationalism versus Cosmopolitanism

In current reflections on the ways in which Europe is changing if not evolving, two pairs of buzzwords emphasize the contradictory forces affecting Europe’s changes. One pair, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, focuses our attention on the many ways in which the political affiliations and cultural affinities of Europeans have transcended their conventional frames of reference, away from the nation and the nation state. The other pair, nationalism and localism, stresses the enduring power of precisely such conventional forms of affiliation and self-identification. At the present point in time, with Europe engaged in the Promethean venture of introducing a Constitution-like framework for the European Union following its last dramatic expansion of scale, hidebound forms of nationalism and localism are gaining strength. Public opinion in the member states of the Union is increasingly sceptical of the whole project, seeing it as a cultural and economic threat rather than as a promise of a better life for all involved. This may be temporary and transient, a moment’s hesitation in the face of a daring leap into a future whose costs may outweigh its benefits. The current economic malaise in much of Europe may in fact lead many ruefully to look back at the days of national sovereignty and the sense of collective control of the national destiny that is now a nostalgic memory. There is a feeling of loss of direction which in many member states takes people to a renewed reflection on national identity and national culture. Even in a country like the Netherlands where Dutchness has most of the time been more of a “given” – to use Daniel Boorstin’s word to describe the consensual nature of America’s political culture³ – and therefore hardly ever openly contested or argued, it has recently become a hotly debated issue in political and intellectual circles. The causes of this recent trend are as much domestic, to do with the increased multicultural nature of Dutch society, as they are European, if not global. Yet in the eyes of many the two are interrelated; the increased porosity of national borders is seen as due to the super-imposition of a “Europe without borders”.

This hidebound view of what is wrong with Europe stands in opposition to views of European developments in the light of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. German sociologist Ulrich Beck is among those who see transnationalism as the outcome of long-term processes ushering in a stage of Second Modernity; they are processes that have worked to erode the logic of the historical stage of First Modernity, centered on the bonding and bounding force of nationalism in the historical formation of the nation state⁴. Nationalism as a historical project aimed at moulding nations conceived in terms of cultural and political homogeneity, speaking one national language, sharing one cultural identity. Its logic was inherently binary. At the same time as defining insiders, it defined outsiders. These could be strangers in the midst of the “imagined community” of the nation, a living contradiction to the ideal-typical construction of the “pure” nation, and therefore subject to a range of forms of exclusion, if not persecution⁵, or they could literally be outsiders, members of other nations, and therefore cultural, almost legitimate, “others”. In our age of globalization this binary logic has been relentlessly eroded. Exposed to a world-wide flow of cultural expression, people everywhere have appropriated cultural codes alien to their homogenized national cultures. They have developed multiple identities, allowing them to move across a range of cultural affinities and affiliations. The communications revolution, most recently in the form of the World Wide Web, has made for a freedom of movement between a multitude of self-styled communities of taste and opinion, transcending national borders. A person’s national identity is now only one among many options for meaningful affiliation with fellow human beings, triggered at some moments while

⁵On these processes of exclusion and inclusion, as they relate to historical dramas of ethnic and cultural cleansing, see Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989)
remaining dormant, or latent, at others. One’s local roots are now only one of the many signifiers of a person’s sense of self. Beck calls this rooted cosmopolitanism. There is no cosmopolitanism without localism (Beck “Cosmopolitanism” 17).

As Beck also points out, much of this new cosmopolitanism is relatively unreflected, “banal” (“Cosmopolitanism” 21). Teenagers affiliating with a transnational youth culture, sharing cultural appetites with untold others dispersed across the globe, are simply consumers of mass culture, unaware of the existential joy of their transnational venture. Banal nationalism is being constantly eroded by the torrent of banal cosmopolitanism in the forms of mass culture that wash across the globe. It is banal because it is unreflected, never leading the new cosmopolitans to pause and ponder what happened to their sense of self. Yet, unaware as they may be of the intricate pattern of cultural vectors that guide their cultural consumption, collectively they have worked to cosmopolitanzize the nation state from within. Countries like France, Germany, Britain or the Netherlands are no longer nation states but transnational states. Mass culture of course is only one of the forces of change. International migration, the formation of diasporic communities across the map of Europe, and the attendant rise of multiculturalism have also changed the conventional paradigm of the nation state. There is nothing banal here, in the sense of an unreflected cosmopolitanism taking root. Quite the contrary; the anguished consideration of the changed contours of nationhood and the citizenry is a clear reflection of the concern, shared by many, about what has happened to the idea of the nation. Yet, as Beck argues in Dissent, the only way for the European project to go forward is for Europe to become a transnational state, a more defined and complex variant of what its component nations are already becoming.

Much as I agree with this vision of Europe’s future, I am struck by the historical myopia in Beck’s argument. As he presents his case, Europe’s Second Modernity, its age of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, evolves from Europe’s First Modernity, an age whose central logic was that of the nation state. This seems to deny the long historical experience of cosmopolitanism in Europe, of a view of the civilized life centering on what can only be described as European culture. Art history, in its traditional, if not canonical, version has long been the repository of this view, looking at the history of European music, painting, writing, and architecture, from this encompassing vantage point, seeing art forms evolving through an interplay of transnational inspirations and influences, distinguishing styles and periods, but always in a trans-national discourse. No banal cosmopolitanism here, but the high-minded version of cultural elites producing and consuming a culture that was truly cosmopolitan, transcending the borders and bounds of the nation state. It was always a rooted cosmopolitanism, with European trends and styles in the arts always being refracted through local appropriations, reflecting local tastes and manners. As Kant defined cosmopolitanism, it was always a way of combining the universal and the particular, Nation und Weltbürger, nation and world citizenship. This is the lasting and exhilarating promise of European history, in spite of the atrocities committed on European soil in the name of the homogenized nation, marching in lock-step, purging itself of unwanted “others”. The vision of world citizenship, the transcending idea of humanity, has always had to be defended against the other half of Kant’s dialectical pair, against the claims on behalf of the nation. In an astute discussion of the Nuremberg tribunal and the new legal principle of “Crimes against humanity” which it introduced, Beck makes the following observation, worth quoting in full:

It is at this point that cosmopolitan Europe generates a genuinely European inner contradiction, legally, morally, and politically. The traditions from which colonial, nationalist, and genocidal horror originated were clearly European. But so were the new legal standards against which these acts were condemned and tried in the spotlight of world publicity. At this formative moment in its history, Europe mobilized its traditions to produce something historically new. It took the idea of recognition of the humanity of the Other and made it the foundation of an historically new counter-logic. It specifically designed this logic to counteract the ethnic
perversion of the European tradition to which the nation-based form of European modernity had just shown itself so horribly liable. It was an attempt to European antidote to Europe\(^6\).

This is truly what the post-World War II project of building a new Europe has been all about, to draw on a long European tradition of high-minded cosmopolitanism, inclusive of cultural variety and cultural Others, and internalized by its citizens as a plurality of individual selves.

This is a daunting project. If it succeeds it may well serve as a model to the world, a rival to the American ideal of transnationalism, of constituting a nation of nations. I remind the reader of high-minded calls made at the time of World War I by a young generation of intellectuals, such as Waldo Frank and Randolph Bourne, who brilliantly and paradoxically sought to translate their cultural nationalism into a quest for American transnationalism, inspired by the heterogeneous, immigrant multitudes who composed the nation. Yet, if the European way into the future and the American way are rival models, they are at the same time of one kind. They are variations on larger ideals inspiring the idea of Western civilization and find their roots in truly European formative moments in history, in the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. Larry Siedentop places the formative moment even earlier in time, coinciding with the rise of a Christian view of the universal equality of mankind vis-à-vis God. As he presents it, the formative moment consisted in universalizing a religious view that in Judaism was still highly particularist, claiming an exceptionalist relation between God and the people of Israel (Siedentop 190, 195, 198). This shared heritage inspired the first trans-Atlantic readings of what the terrorist attack of 9/11 signified. It was seen as an onslaught on the core values of a shared civilization. How ironic, if not tragic, then, that before long the United States and Europe parted ways in finding the proper response to the new threat of international terrorism.

As for the United States, under its then-President George W. Bush the first signs of a farewell to internationalism in foreign policy – to its Wilsonianism, if you wish - and to its pioneering role in designing the institutional and legal framework for peaceful inter-state relations in the world, had actually preceded 9/11. No longer did the Bush administration conceive of the United States as a primus inter pares, setting the guidelines for collective action while seeking legitimacy for action through treaties and United Nations resolutions. As the one remaining hegemony on the world stage, it apparently felt free from constraints set by its own Constitution or by international law in the pursuit of its national interest through policies that one can only describe as unilateralist. Such a pursuit by the Bush administration may appear like a throwback to the time of nation state sovereignty, a stage in history that Europe is struggling to transcend.

The tragedy in these recent trends is all the more poignant for those who gratefully remember America’s relatively disinterested role, following World War II, in the creation of a larger, self-conscious, European entity, if not identity. This entity, as the United States envisioned and sponsored it, was to be economic, political, and cultural (Lundenstad 263-277). As for the latter aspect, United States public diplomacy actively worked to disseminate its culture abroad, from its high-brow to low-brow varieties. In addition, though, under its own commercial steam, American mass culture successfully conquered foreign markets and formed cultural tastes and appetites abroad, Americanizing its publics in the process. Ironically, in this way as well America worked to create a larger European sense of self and of place, by providing Europeans with a shared cultural vernacular.

Conclusion: Two final points for consideration:

1. If a shared cultural vernacular across Europe’s cultural space consists partly of American mass cultural productions as consumed in Europe, how can we understand this to translate into a meaningful sense of European affinities? Perhaps the translation proceeds dialectically through acts of cultural resistance where an internalized America is again externalized as a symbol of globalization. There are many examples of this happening. A sense of Europeanization is then the result of the act of ‘othering’, if not exorcising, the ‘America’ in us, i.e. us Europeans. At this point I have two further illustrations I wish to share with you, illustrating the complex interactions between the European appropriation of American cultural forms, and their re-arrangement in defence of the variety of Europe’s local cultural identities. Both are visual documents, music videos produced in Europe, one in the Basque country in Spain, the other in Romania in the wake of shedding its communist regime.

The Basque video in itself represents an act of cultural emancipation from the cultural hegemony imposed under the Franco dictatorship. The lyrics are in Basque, 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. The music used is “world music”, known as Ska, hailing from the Caribbean and popularized through the British music industry. The format of the music video as such is itself part of global musical entertainment. Yet the message conveyed is local. What the video shows is a confusing blend of the traditional and the modern. The opening shot is of a man using a scythe for cutting grass. The camera moves up and shows a modern, international-style, office block. A mobile phone rings, and the grasscutter answers the call. More images evoke 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, like 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 fast food, a Basque 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 to get a taste of “true Basqueness”. They come to life, spurred by an alleged authenticity of relics of traditional Basque life. The lyrics repeat the refrain: “Down with McDonald’s, Long live Big Beñat” (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 testifies to the impact of precisely those forces as much as it protests against them. There is much irony in all this, but most important is the fact that what is shown as modernity truly revives a long repertoire of European cultural anti-Americanism. America is 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.

The Romanian music video, a co-production by Puya and Rapsinger Connect-R, is called “My Americandrim” (My American Dream). It takes the viewer back to the heady days of the toppling of the Ceausescu regime, eagerly reported on American TV news. Connect-R, who in other work shows he can be the perfect local replica of an American gangster rapper, here takes a disabused view of life in Romania after the Revolution. The refrain keeps repeating these lines:

I can be what I want to be
Losing my identity
Cause I got a lot of life in me
Let me live my American dream.

7URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXuffvjs_Ps (song and lyrics by Fermin Muguruza)
The key words here are “losing my identity”. Images and lyrics go together in showing a cultural wasteland, cut adrift, without local moorings or a sense of cultural continuity with the past, yet open to influences from all sides. They build up to an indictment, not unlike the Basque video, of the pernicious impact of globalization. Yet, ironically, the message is being delivered by a man who does live his American dream in the borrowed identity of an American gangster Rapper.

2. If America, in addition to providing Europeans with a model for cultural tastes and affinities in the post-World War II era, has managed to set itself up as a political model as well, are there similar dialectical processes at work? May we, for instance, see signs of this happening in the European political ferment during the run-up to the Iraq War? I may remind the reader of Jürgen Habermas’s widely publicized opinion that Europe could only come to a sense of its collective political identity through resisting America’s overbearing power. In the wide-spread anti-war protest across Europe, Habermas saw signs of a European public opinion forming. His was a public position reminiscent of Randolph Bourne’s just prior to America’s intervention in World War I on the side of Britain. Bourne argued that continued non-intervention would allow America finally to cut the umbilical cord that tied it to Britain’s cultural and political dominion. Or do things work differently, and is there a submerged longing in Europe for an America returning to its inspirational role, as evidenced by the signs of mass affiliation with what Obama appeared to represent during his swing through Europe as a presidential candidate? The high point was the mass rally in Berlin on July 24th, 2008, reminiscent of the public enthusiasm aroused by John F. Kennedy’s June, 1963, visit to the city. Can we see in this the longing for American inspirational leadership, and a sign of Europe falling far short of showing such power of promise and political affiliation?

URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFKa_gaFMIQ (song and lyrics by Puya and Connect-R)
Multiculturalism and/or Transculturalism (Part 1)

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