

Excerpted from Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890–2010*, *New Approaches to European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

# Introduction

---

“There are at the present time two great nations in the world . . . the Russians and the Americans . . . each of them seems marked out by the will of heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.”<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville’s prescient 1835 observation is often cited as a succinct summary of European-American relations in the twentieth century. According to the standard story, the multipolarity of the nineteenth century gave way to bipolarity by the middle of the twentieth century and then to unipolarity after 1989. As European power – economic, military, cultural, and moral – waned, America replaced Britain as the hegemonic nation in the global capitalist order, and European culture, politics, and economics were Americanized. As European colonial empires fractured and fell, new American forms of global economic and political integration and dominance emerged. Whereas Europe had once developed the Western values shared by America, America came to define the transatlantic commitment to liberal democracy and consumer capitalism. If the nineteenth century was European, the twentieth was American.

Tocqueville’s observation and sweeping narratives of the decline of Europe and rise of America capture elements of the shifting relationship between Europe and America in the twentieth century, but they do justice neither to the complexity of the exchanges of goods, people, institutions, and ideas in both directions across the Atlantic nor to the ambivalent and contradictory attitudes of Europeans and Americans toward one another. A history of shifting transatlantic power relations, of provisional outcomes and ongoing indeterminacies, of cooperative projects and competing visions of capitalism, modernity, and empire cannot be reduced to the inevitable triumph of the United States; that history is much more nuanced, contingent, and contradictory. It begins with the stop-and-start rise of American influence in Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century, continues with the mid-century assertion of American hegemony in all fields, and then proceeds to the slow erosion of American

<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I (New York: Vintage, 1954), 452.

economic, cultural, and political power from the 1970s on and the emergence of an integrated and more autonomous Europe. American economic might did not automatically translate into political power or cultural influence, and hard military and diplomatic power and soft economic and cultural power did not always move in tandem. Transatlantic perceptions of shared interests, incompatibilities, and animosities were seldom clear-cut or stable.

Our story opens in the decades before World War I when European-American exchanges in both directions were multiplying but America's ascendancy was not evident and Europe's eclipse not preordained. Despite its growing economic might, the United States was not a military power, and Europeans did not consider the United States a major global player or a model to emulate. World War I tipped the uncertain transatlantic balance of economic, political, and cultural power decisively in America's favor. In the 1920s, however, America was deeply ambivalent about assuming a dominant political role in Europe, even as its economic entanglements multiplied. Despite Europeans' growing fascination with Fordist economic models, Hollywood films, and jazz, Europe did not become Americanized. The depression and the rise of fascist regimes in the 1930s ended four decades of globalization, turned nations inward, and curtailed the movement of capital, commodities, and people between Europe and America. Moreover, it tarnished the image of America as an economic model. As governments sought to cope with the devastating economic crisis, regimes with antithetical politics embraced similar programs; ideological divisions seemed at once sharper and more blurred. And neither the United States nor any single European nation emerged as the dominant transatlantic power.

During and after World War II, which ended Germany's attempt at European hegemony and devastated European economies and polities, the United States displayed a new determination to exert European and world leadership. This new global vision was articulated in 1941, when *Life* magazine publisher Henry Luce wrote an impassioned essay condemning isolationism and promoting an "*American* internationalism." His title, "The American Century," named the aspirations that he and others had for the nation's global mission.<sup>2</sup> While acknowledging that "America cannot be responsible for the good behavior of the entire world," he urged Americans to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The term was coined by H. G. Wells.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Luce, "The American Century," *Life*, Feb. 7, 1941. Italics in original.

American politicians, pundits, and scholars have readily adopted the label, most proudly endorsing the economic might, military prowess, and cultural influence of the United States, not merely in Europe but also globally. Many in Europe followed suit, albeit with considerably more ambivalence and at times anger. All too often American hegemony is read backward into the late nineteenth century and forward to the present; in deterministic and triumphalist arguments it emerges as the necessary result of America's impressive industrialization or its irresistible mass consumption and mass culture or its political values and virtuous foreign policy, any and all of which destined the United States for European and global leadership

In fact, America's desire for and achievement of hegemony in much of Europe and the globe was the product of two world wars and the Cold War, which divided Europe for four decades and shaped and warped transatlantic political, military, cultural, and ideological interactions. America's mid-century hegemony rested on five pillars. The first was America's economic prowess, embodied in Fordist mass production, technological innovation, unmatched productivity, and high wages that enabled the mass consumption of cars, consumer durables, and mass culture. The second was America's unchallenged military might, conventional and nuclear, and its military presence across Western Europe and around the world. The third was the Cold War domestic consensus on both sides of the Atlantic about anti-communism, containment, and isolation of the Soviet Union but also about Keynesianism and social policies of a much more extensive sort than before the war. The fourth pillar was widespread Western European sympathy and admiration for America's political values, global presence, and popular culture. Finally, there was Western Europe's willingness to be the junior partner in an American empire built largely by invitation in Western Europe but supplemented by American pressure, threats, and covert intervention when necessary.

During the high point of the American Century from the late forties to the early seventies, the United States reshaped the European and global economic order, helped restructure political regimes across Western Europe, and experimented with both containment and rollback toward the Soviet bloc. American businessmen, soldiers, and aid officials, American commodities, movies, music, and high culture flooded into Europe. Never had the American presence and influence been greater, but even at the highpoint of America's preponderance of power, there were significant tensions between the United States and its Western European allies over welfare and warfare, nuclear weapons and economic policies, attitudes toward the Soviet bloc, and relations with the Third World. There were numerous conflicts between the United States and the

Soviet Union both within Europe and outside. Europeans engaged in complex negotiations with American ideas, cultural products, and commodities and created hybrid forms of mass culture and modern living.

From the seventies onward, American influence began to erode. The protest movements of the late 1960s challenged both American hegemony and the Cold War categories central to it, and growing antinuclear movements further contested United States leadership. The multiple economic crises of the 1970s – the gold drain, oil shocks, and the exhaustion of Fordism – weakened America's domination of the global economy. Détente as practiced by the United States and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and European states on the other, took different forms that reflected Western Europe's increasing autonomy. In the eighties the United States and much of Europe grew still further apart, as America, along with Britain, embraced neoliberalism, while continental European states defended many of their social democratic social policies and their particular varieties of more regulated capitalism.

For many Americans the fall of communism represented the longed-for American Cold War victory, the end of a troubled history of challenges to liberalism and capitalism, and the beginning of United States unilateral global dominance. For Europeans the series of events for which 1989 is shorthand were more complex; far from ending history, they opened a new era in which Europe had to redefine its identity and institutions. As America turned away from Europe, Europe intensified its economic and political integration, and European states frequently dissented from American global projects. At home, European countries continued to borrow from America while creating their own distinctive versions of modernity.

The end of the Cold War did not lead to closer United States-European relations due to growing United States attention to non-European areas, the geographic expansion and institutional deepening of the European Union, and transatlantic conflicts over issues such as market fundamentalism, multilateralism, military interventions, and relations with the global South. Despite the pressures of globalization, most European states have not embraced neoliberalism; while their economies are less regulated than before, the European social model has persisted. Far from restoring the American Century in Europe, 1989 slowed but did not stop its decline. European prosperity, economic integration, and cultural vibrancy led Europeans to look increasingly to themselves rather than America to define identities, develop conceptions of the just society, and build versions of the good life.

As this brief sketch suggests, America was a very real presence in Europe, due both to the strengths and appeals of the United States economy and to the internecine wars that weakened and divided

Europe. This presence repeatedly raised the questions of whether Europe became or wanted to become Americanized and what was meant by that elusive term. Americanization as used here refers to the adoption abroad of American forms of production and consumption, technology and techniques of management, political ideas and social policies, high and mass cultural goods and institutions, gender roles and leisure practices. Americanization includes not only what was and was not adopted, but also how such borrowings were selectively appropriated and negotiated, how they functioned and acquired particular meanings. Americanization was (and is) in turn shaped by the images and discourses that present America as a model of economic, social, and cultural development, as one possible, extremely powerful, and appealing model of modernity. Americanization, real or imagined, hoped for or dreaded, was central to European-American relations in the twentieth century. It was what American business and government sought to export and promote; it provided many of the concrete images and practices in and through which Europeans debated modernity in ways that more abstract categories of modernization, rationalization, or secularization did not.

Americanism meant very different things to different European nations, classes, genders, and generations. American ideas, goods, and practices were not imperialistically imposed on a willing or reluctant but always-passive Europe; rather Europeans selectively resisted, adapted, and modified things American. Of equal importance, they recontextualized them within distinctive European state structures and policies, economic institutions, and value systems. Thus, American economic, military, and cultural power did not readily translate into wholesale Americanization. Americanization was most evident in mass consumption and mass culture, more limited in political and intellectual life, and scarcely present in social policy. It was intense in the three decades after World War II, the high point of American power globally and of the presence of things American in Europe. Most Europeans were unconcerned about an Americanization of Europe in the decades before World War I and debated but did not adopt American products and practices extensively in the interwar years. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Europeans have looked more to one another than to the United States to define their identity, culture, and everyday life.

Throughout the twentieth century the flow of ideas, investments, commodities, and people was not simply from west to east, from the new world to the old. Except in the 1930s and first post-1945 decades, Europeans invested in the United States, sold goods there, and often set up production facilities. European films dominated the globe before Hollywood became hegemonic in the twenties. For European migrants in the decades before

World War I and for refugees in the thirties and forties, the United States was the preferred although not the only destination, and many returned to Europe. Europeans in the 1920s and 1950s traveled to America to study the United States economy, but Americans were equally eager to study European history, culture, and social thought, and American tourists have traveled in their millions to enjoy European culture.

Even from 1945 to the mid 1970s, when United States influence in Europe was greatest, Europeans borrowed from and were influenced by one another, not simply by American goods and practices. From the late nineteenth century on, there were complex circuits of exchange, movement, and negotiation among European nations, including across the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. After 1989 Eastern and Western Europe were reknit as Western Europe funded the economic restructuring of former communist states and integrated them into the European Union and NATO. These all contributed to the creation of distinctive European ways of life. Over the course of the twentieth century, Europeans developed alternative fascist, communist, and social democratic versions of modernity that were not simply pale imitations of the American model.

The ways Europeans adopted and adapted things American, in turn, have been shaped by European varieties of capitalism and varieties of socialism. Across the twentieth century, European states developed forms of capitalism that distinguished themselves from the American model in terms of business organization, labor rights, investment strategies, and relations between the state and capitalism. Ironically, the state and economy that looked most like the United States in its organization of production, infatuation with technology, and faith in modernization was the Soviet Union.

Different conceptualizations of the social and of social rights as well as distinctive social policy regimes were integral parts of Europe's distinctive varieties of capitalism and versions of modernity. In the decades before World War I, Europe was the teacher and leader in social thought and practice. Although the transatlantic social policy gap narrowed in the 1930s in response to the depression, it widened again after 1945. Even in the heyday of Keynesianism and the welfare state from the fifties through the seventies, Europe and America differed in the extent and kinds of social rights they recognized and in the place accorded the state in the economy and everyday life. The transatlantic social policy gap widened much more from the 1980s on as the United States and Britain embraced neoliberalism and launched a full-scale assault on social rights and the "nanny state." These different varieties of capitalism and social policy regimes generated disputes between more social democratic Europe and the United States that at times were nearly as intense as the conflicts between communist and capitalist states.

War was as central to shaping and reshaping European-American relations as economics. The fundamentally different experiences of the two world wars in Europe and the United States were central to the crisis and decline of Europe after 1914 just as they were to the rise of America economically and politically. Wars fought on European soil not only destroyed political regimes and devastated economies; they also led to massive death, social and cultural dislocation, and demoralization, while America was spared all of these. After 1945 the experiences and memories of war led Western Europeans to emphasize multilateralism, diplomacy, and international law and the Soviets to fear a renewed major war. The United States, by contrast, defended international institutions and laws, while simultaneously emphasizing American exceptionalism and engaging in unilateral interventions. The lessons learned from the world wars and the lived experience of the Cold War were more similar to one another across Europe than across the Atlantic and led to many of the conflicts about foreign and domestic policies that shaped not only United States relations with the Soviet Union but also with Western Europe. Although war did as much as economics to create American dominance at mid century, by the late twentieth century military spending and controversial military interventions undermined it, as the United States wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have shown. After 9/11 America has turned away from the post-World War II order that it had been instrumental in establishing and to which most of Europe remains committed.

The transatlantic twentieth century has flexible chronological boundaries. Many historians conceptualize a “short” twentieth century, which begins with World War I and ends with 1989 and whose central dynamic is the struggle among liberalism, fascism, and communism. My “long” twentieth century begins in the 1890s and continues through the first decade of the twenty-first century. It focuses not only on ideological competition and warfare across the Atlantic world but also on the changing character of transatlantic and global capitalism and consumer culture, on competing approaches to social rights and policy, and on shifting forms of empire. By opening with the late nineteenth century rather than World War I, this book captures the multiple contenders for transatlantic and global power in that phase of intensive globalization and suggests how contingent the rise of America and decline of Europe were. Continuing the story past the mid 1970s illustrates the limits of the American Century and the complex transatlantic renegotiations resulting from the erosion of American power and the divergent sociopolitical paths taken on different sides of the Atlantic. The long-twentieth-century approach avoids determinism and false triumphalism.

“Europe” and “America” cry out for definition every bit as much as “the twentieth century” does. America refers to the United States and the two terms are used interchangeably. Although it is politically incorrect to appropriate America for only one nation on the two vast American continents, I have adopted the term because it pervades the discussions and debates on both sides of the North Atlantic from the late nineteenth century on. Europe is more elusive. To begin with, America and Europe are not equivalent entities, for America refers to a politically unified, territorially delimited entity, while Europe denotes an idea, an aspiration, and a contested identity. Its geographic and cultural borders have been and still are shifting and disputed. Sometimes Europe refers to states acting as separate nations, sometimes to post-World War II processes of integration. And even now the European Union and Europe do not completely overlap. So why and how is Europe used here?

Throughout the long twentieth century, Europe featured in discourses about transatlantic relations, assuming great prominence after 1945. European politicians, writers, social reformers, businessmen, and labor leaders spoke for and about both particular national entities and broader continental ones, while Americans imagined a Europe with which they could trade or lend or which they hoped to reform or save, even as they engaged primarily with individual nations. Europe increasingly became an imagined frame of reference used by those living on the continent – and sometimes in Britain as well – to define themselves over and against the United States, just as Americans, particularly at times of conflict, defined themselves as not like Europeans. From the 1970s on Europe has become an increasingly thick and powerful institutional entity with coordinated and interconnected economies, a shared currency, and movement toward political, military, and foreign policy cooperation. These shifting constructions of Europe and America and the gradual emergence of transnational European institutions, practices, and identities are central components of European-American relations.

Europe is also obviously a collection of nation-states and this study defines that collection expansively rather than focusing on the major Western European powers as many works on twentieth-century transatlantic relations do. It is time to overcome the long-standing Euro-American ambivalence about whether Russia/the Soviet Union was and is part of Europe. It is time to abandon the Cold War geographic imaginary that divided Europe firmly in half with Soviet specialists studying the East and students of transatlantic relations looking only at Western Europe. America had long-standing interests and exchanges of all sorts with the East as well as the West, and Europeans east and west borrowed and learned from one another, even during the most frigid decades of the

Cold War. Russia/Soviet Union has long been a Eurasian power (just as the United States is both an Atlantic and a Pacific one), but it looked west and engaged with Europe and America as part of the West rather than as an outsider offering a complete alternative to it. The Soviet Union was particularly fascinated with economic Americanism and borrowed from America and collaborated with Americans as well as competing with the United States. It is thus necessary to reconstruct the complex circuits in Eastern and Western Europe and across the Atlantic along which capital, commodities, cultural borrowings, social policy discussions, and memories of war moved.

Relations and exchanges between the United States and various European states always involved competing visions not only of how to order domestic economies and politics and transatlantic relations but also of the global order. The changing forms and fortunes of empire have been as important to shaping transatlantic relations as has the ebb and flow of globalization. From the 1890s on the United States, like many European countries, had become an imperial power, even if America then, as later, disliked the concept while nonetheless seeking political and economic influence abroad. But various European states and America had different kinds of empires, ranging from Western European colonial empires in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries to the new empires of Nazi Germany and Japan in the thirties and forties to America's post-1945 empire of bases and free trade. In the increasingly global twentieth century, Europeans and Americans never gazed only across the Atlantic, and transatlantic relations were triangulated and complicated by competition and conflicts in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

A decade into the new millennium, the future of the transatlantic century is uncertain. A multipolar global order has replaced the bipolarity of the Cold War decades and the unipolar moment of the 1990s. The North Atlantic no longer contains all the global players, nor is it central to all networks and exchanges. The United States enjoys military dominance, but that is no longer bolstered by economic and cultural hegemony, and it does not guarantee success in America's numerous limited wars. Of equal importance, the severe financial crises and deep recession that began in 2008 threaten economies on both sides of the Atlantic and, many believe, may threaten the European Union itself. This has exacerbated transatlantic disagreements about economic policy, cultural norms, and military interventions abroad. The transatlantic market gap, God gap, and war gap continue to contribute to a widening Atlantic. For neither Europe nor the United States will the twenty-first century be transatlantic as the twentieth was.