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**Victoria de Grazia.** *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe,*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005. 586 S. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01672-9.

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## Markets and Manners: American Consumer Culture in Europe

Victoria de Grazia's remarkable treatment of the impact of American consumer and business culture on twentieth-century Europe is an engrossing, challenging, and impressive work of scholarship by a historian at the height of her considerable intellectual powers. The book takes on two vexing historical problems that many historians have attacked with far less panache and diligence than de Grazia: that is, to what extent has American consumer culture transformed Europe, and–equally important–to what extent has Europe been able to resist, deflect, or reshape it during the past century? Her answers to these two major questions are not at all straightforward. Like the subject itself, her thesis is somewhat elusive, nuanced, and varied–which only underscores both the high degree of difficulty in the subject matter and de Grazia's fluid approach to it.

This is, of course, territory that has attracted many scholars over the years, though most have worked in a bilateral framework: Richard Kuisel has authored an excellent study of Americanization in France, Volker Berghahn has written on the same process in West Germany, Reinhold Wagnleitner has worked on the impact of American consumerism in Austria, to name only three. More broadly, Richard Pells and Rob Kroes have written surveys on the interpenetration of American and European consumer capitalism. Indeed, this is a subject which reaches as far back as William Appleman Williams and the entire revisionist tradition in U.S. historiography–scholarship on the expansion of American commercial and business interests has never been in short supply.[1]

De Grazia's work stands out, though, because of its breadth, its depth–she has worked in archives in the United States, Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland–and its innovation: she largely leaves behind the usual government sources in favor of business, commercial, civic, and institutional archives that are far less exploited by historians.

De Grazia wisely adopts a case-study approach; she goes in depth into a number of fascinating topics without attempting to cover this massive subject in exhaustive detail. Perhaps the most engaging and innovative chapter focuses on Rotary International, one of the most successful business-oriented civic clubs in the world. Rotary was founded in 1905 in Chicago and developed into

a global network of clubs made up of public-spirited businessmen who liked the contacts it gave them and enjoyed a hearty lunch in all-male company once a week. In de Grazia's hands, Rotary becomes an illuminating subject of international history. Exploring the establishment and expansion of this quintessentially American organization in Weimar Germany, de Grazia reveals through impressive research that Rotary succeeded in Europe not because Germans wanted to join American clubs, but because Rotary could be adapted to the needs of its European membership. Whereas the clientele in Duluth was mostly rather dull, civic-minded Babbits looking for pro-business fellowship, in Dresden–and in Munich, Cologne, Frankfurt, Leipzig, Berlin, and elsewhere– Rotary attracted elites and distinguished members from the arts, industry, and letters, and became a vehicle for Germany's reintegration into the rules-bound world from which it had been expelled during the First World War. Rotary, in its emphasis on ethics, transparency, and international reconciliation, offered a way back to international respectability for its German members.

Another example of the challenging material she takes on is "the standard of living"–a concept whose alternative definitions in the United States and Europe reveal profound divergences over the nature of work, productivity, leisure, and class. Henry Ford, for example, claimed that management's self-interest lay in providing workers not simply the bare minimum, but a standard of living that was sufficiently high to transform their habits and tastes: after all, a well-paid worker would become a good consumer. Moreover, such a standard, if made available to all, might enhance labor peace while holding out the promise of social mobility: through standardization, mass production, and distribution, the masses could gain access to the luxuries once reserved for the elites. Ford's approach was considered an American success story in the interwar years; in Europe, however, it terrified the bourgeoisie. De Grazia believes that in Europe, the ideals of populist consumerism threatened "class-bound norms of consumption," and new models of mass consumption offered "social fragmentation rather than social integration" (pp. 106-107). For the old-world bourgeoisie, which had established control not only over the production of goods and services but also over tastes and culture, the advent of mass-based consumerism portended the loss of control and the withering of established habits. As a result, the prospect of mass consumerism became a politically charged class issue: when the French Popular Front sought to raise the purchasing power of the laboring classes through wage hikes and a shorter work week, it was assailed by the right for its radicalism and revolutionary ideas–ideas which in America had produced a consumption-led boom in goods and services through the 1920s.

De Grazia's exploration of the "chain store" model as it was transplanted to Europe reveals similar trans-Atlantic divergence. In America, the five-and-ten chain store, in which consumers could shop for a limited selection of cut-priced merchandise, had turned Frank Woolworth's chain into one of the country's most powerful corporations by 1929, headquartered in the magnificent Woolworth building in New York. For European retailers, however, the five-and-ten model again presented a serious social challenge. The great department stores of the prewar era, such as Harrods, Galeries Lafayette, Bon MarchÃÂ©, or the German Tietz chain, were institutions designed to regulate taste and class norms. "Though the space of the department store was open to all," de Grazia writes, "social distinctions were omnipervasive (sic), and the service relationship reeked of the bonds of servant to master. The floor man was the valet, the shopgirl a lady's maid" (p. 158). Thus, the model of American mass consumerism once again presented the European elites with a threat to their control of both markets and manners. Yet the business opportunities of reaching a wider public with low-cost, standardized goods, tempted enough merchants so that by the late 1920s, leading European retailers were forming discount operations such as Monoprix, Priminime, Priba, and Uniprix. By the end of the 1930s, the American model of the cut-rate chain store had taken root in the old world.

De Grazia also takes on other topics in the history of consumer culture: the creation of brand names, the expansion of the American advertising style (in which she offers a superb brief essay on the rise and fall of the European advertising poster), and the venerable and well-known subject of the penetration of Europe by the American film industry.Yet what is somewhat surprising, in light of the book's title, is that with the exception of the film industry, what de Grazia shows is not an "irresistible" wave of American consumer culture crashing upon an unprepared, ill-defended and vulnerable European shore. Quite the opposite. European industry and business leaders, she shows, were very well aware of both the opportunities and the challenges that American capitalism presented. Where they could make it work for themselves, they gladly borrowed from the American models; and where they saw social trouble or, more likely, direct market competition, they found ingenious ways to slow or even turn back the American tide. The

German Rotarians, we learn, welcomed only elites, intellectuals, and aestheticians, and numbered Thomas Mann, Viktor von Klemperer, Konrad Adenauer, and banking magnate Baron Moritz von Bethmann-Hollweg in their ranks–no Babbits need apply. Through the 1920s and 30s, the American model of populist consumerism was held at bay by cultural traditions and a taste for distinction over mass production. And at least up to the era of the Second World War, the chain store did not push the haute-bourgeois department store out of its dominant position in Europe as the arbiter of taste and fashion. Europeans found ways to alter the force of the American tidal wave, and at times to deflect it altogether.

This highlights one of the important weaknesses of the book. It is far too heavily weighted to the pre-1939 period. To be sure, so much of the initial European-American commercial rivalries that would define the rest of the century emerged in the interwar years; but the final triumph of American consumer capitalism took place after the war, when a shattered and occupied Europe found it had few means to continue to defy the pressures of American consumer culture. Yet de Grazia devotes only three rather brief chapters to the postwar period. She gives a perfunctory gloss on the Marshall Plan and the advent of the European welfare state, a topic treated in dozens of other works in greater detail and depth; a recounting of the advent of the supermarket in western Europe; and a discussion of washing powder, the kitchen, and the gendered tropes of domestic consumption–again topics that are fairly well worn by now. Given the richness of the material on the interwar years, these final chapters seem thin by comparison. The book ends without any serious exploration of the challenges to American industrial and business culture that erupted in Europe in the 1960s. Nor does the author treat the American high-tech and service industries that came to dominate not just Europe but the rest of the world by the 1990s. The contemporary European-American spats over world trade, tariffs, protectionism, and genetically modified food are barely mentioned. A tantalizing conclusion introduces the story of McDonald's in Europe, but as with many fast food meals, one is left feeling unsatisfied. It is odd that so much of the last quarter of the century is left out, since this period seems to be the one in which the dominance of the American model of consumer capitalism is most apparent.

Nonetheless, there is much to learn in de Grazia's work on the pre-1939 years, and for international historians and scholars of empire, this work should command attention and respect. The past and future of empire has been much discussed of late, due to the United States' recent overseas military engagements. But whatever may be afoot in the shifting sands of the Middle East, Professor de Grazia has shown us that if historians are really to gauge the origins, extent, and power of the American imperium, they will have to dig deeper and wider than military and official records, and explore the remarkably enduring patterns of consumption that Americans have transmitted to Europe. Americans may not have built roads, amphitheaters, and aqueducts, but their impact on the landscape of Europe, from discount super-stores to Euro-Disney and the now-ubiquitous golden arches, may last as long as anything ever dreamed of in Rome.

Note

[1]. Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Volker Berghahn, *The Americanization of West German Industry, 1945-1973* (Berg: Leamington Spa, 1986); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One You've Seen the Mall* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Norton, 1959; revised 1972).