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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.

Reviewed by Max Paul Friedman (Department of History, Florida State University)

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Babbitt vs. Buddenbrooks: A Clash of Civilizations?

Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire* is a dazzling work that aims to reassess the American impact on Europe in the twentieth century. De Grazia has produced a fine-grained history of key aspects of late modern capitalism. De Grazia depicts the triumph of scientific marketing and distribution techniques as American innovators imposed their "Market Empire" on Europeans, who reluctantly gave up their old-fashioned, inefficient forms of commerce. Based on prodigious research in underused non-governmental archives of businesses and civic organizations in France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and the United States, this study–nearly 600 pages of often wonderfully crafted sentences–is in its own way an homage to the European style that de Grazia mourns one as displaced by American effectiveness: culturally rich and aesthetically pleasurable, it may be inefficient but it is beautiful to behold.

De Grazia's argument is that the industrialized United States in the twentieth century became a Market Empire, "a great imperium with the outlook of a great emporium" (p. 3). To sell their wares in Europe, American entrepreneurs backed by the U.S. government not only demanded access, but sought to refashion the very structure of the European economic system. Members of voluntary associations, social scientists and businesspeople crossed the Atlantic to supplant European practices with their own. They brought the creed not only of mass production, but of mass consumption, "challenging Europe's bourgeois commercial civilization and overturning its old regime" (p. 5).

De Grazia labored in the vineyards of her multinational sources for two decades, and in the interim, many other studies of the impact of American culture and business on Western Europe have been published.[1] An emerging consensus holds that rather than a forceful imposition by the powerful on the powerless, "Americanization" was a process that involved resistance as well as submission, adaptation as well as adoption. The term "empire," even allowing the degree of metaphorical license with which de Grazia uses it, is still hotly contested. At one extreme, some scholars, such as John Tomlinson, argue that no coercion is involved in the construction of a commercial empire or the Americanization of markets and societies: it is fundamentally a question of many individuals making many individual choices, and choosing American products merely because they like them better.[2] More than twenty years ago Emily Rosenberg provided the outlines of a refutation of the free-actor theory, when she pointed to the extensive level of government involvement in promoting the expansion of American commerce abroad.[3]

But no historian has yet attempted what de Grazia does here: a sweeping synthesis that provides very detailed and thick descriptions of just how private and state projects have operated to carry American methods and products to Europe, changing the nature of business and consumer culture. De Grazia is as finely attuned to the sensibilities and social patterns of village life in Emilia-Romagna as she is to bourgeois aspirations in interwar Dresden. In this telling, what is at stake is not only which products European shoppers take off the shelves (and from which shelves), but how they think about their own societies, their possibilities and their goals in life.

Each chapter is structured around a case study of a "single social invention" (p. 12) such as branding or the supermarket, or a single figure, such as the discount store mogul Edward Filene, which makes the densely written account easier to follow. Most chapters set up a dichotomy between an American innovation and a European tradition, and explain how the former overwhelmed the latter. Thus we see conceptions of American living standards replacing European lifestyles, discount chain stores edging out corner shops, fast food supplanting slow food and Hollywood talkies pushing European art films off the continent's screens. These binaries are useful in simplifying an elaborate narrative. Inevitably, they flatten the complexity of the societies held up as opposites, or even, in de Grazia's phrasing, as "a transatlantic clash of civilizations" (p. 2). Her fascinating evidence often shows a more complex process at work.

The first chapter is the most nuanced and the most successful in demonstrating the adaptation that accompanied adoption of American ways: an analysis of how a civic association, the Rotary Club, changed in character and purpose when it crossed the Atlantic. De Grazia follows the transplantation of the Club in the 1920s from its Middle American context in Duluth, where it served as a meeting-place for the kind of striving salesmen derided by Sinclair Lewis as so many Babbitts, to Dresden, where the membership comprised a haute bourgeoisie including venerated cultural figures such as Thomas Mann, author of *Buddenbrooks*. The Club retained its role as an environment for male sociability, but whereas the American Rotarians sought above all commercial opportunities through networking, German elites welcomed the chance to be received back into international organizations at a time when they were *personae non gratae* all over Europe as a result of the war. That harmony did not last long, however, as the clubs were shut down by the Nazis.

Another chapter examines the way an American concept of "a decent standard of living," measured in material terms, was haltingly brought by social scientists and marketers to a very different European context. De Grazia writes a sophisticated, empathetic critique of the theories of industrial age sociology developed by Maurice Halbwachs, Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe and Werner Sombart, whose famous query as to why there is no socialism in the United States blamed consumer satiety there. "Suppose," de Grazia speculates, "the 'Red Prince' of European sociology had turned the question back to his own world to ask, 'Why is there no consumerism in Europe?' " Sombart would have found the answer, she argues, in the conflicting values of a socialist tradition that favored increasing workers' standard of living while being "ethically and culturally invested in Western traditions of asceticism" (p. 111). That contradiction opened the way for Sombart's own disillusionment and turn towards National Socialism as a possible resolution of the problem that material gains for the working class seemed to make them less interested in joining working-class movements.

A chapter on the marketing of brand-name goods through mass distribution systems begins with a vivid description of the Leipzig Fair, a thousand-year-old institution that typified the kind of European commerce displaced by American methods. It depended on personal contact and the decisions of individual buyers about individual products. Marketing and branding appear here as innovations developed by clever entrepreneurs whose ideas were irresistible. As often in the book, underlying structural factors receive less emphasis. One reason that American products often displaced European ones was not because of American ingenuity but simply a question of scale. With the largest home market in the world, American manufacturers had economies of scale in production, and could amass huge reserves of capital that most European manufacturers only dreamt of. Moreover, the American urban market, with its large immigrant population, meant that a domestically successful product would probably do well overseas in the markets of the new Americans' countries of origin: it had already been test-driven for a lowest common denominator appeal across cultural divides. This factor was especially significant for Hollywood's success in producing simple narratives often based on archetypes that could cross barriers of language or social setting.

De Grazia suggests that the one power capable of countering American influence to make its expansion more resistible was Nazi Germany, which mounted a determined campaign to thwart the Market Empire. And it

is true that the Nazis shuttered Rotary Clubs and smashed up and expropriated chain stores, especially those with Jewish owners. Historians of Nazi Germany may be surprised to read that this was an anti-American campaign, rather than an antisemitic one. Certainly the central villains in the Nazi cosmology were Jews and Bolsheviks, not Yankees and capitalists. Nazi views of the American economy were no obstacle to relying on Ford plants to build the Wehrmacht's tanks. (Indeed, Germans had long been so enamored of Ford that some of them took up the pun invented by Karl Kraus, who called for more "Fordschritt" in the German economy.)[4] If, in theory, Nazi Germany "could present itself to a demoralized continent as the one European power capable of offering a winning alternative to American dominion," (p. 11) in practice, few Europeans saw the Nazis as liberators from an American imperial emporium, rather as the brutal masters of their own, far more diabolical empire. America simply did not play the role of foil or rival de Grazia ascribes to it as the Nazis took over Europe. The Nazis' state-planned, racially based programs of regulated consumption and forced underconsumption in occupied Europe were not developed or promoted as an "alternative to the American" model (p. 127). Nazi food policy was part of an entirely distinct project aimed at redrawing the ethnic map of Europe through mass murder. Using food as an instrument of this project emerged through a dynamic in which local occupation authorities faced with shortages imposed a kind of racial triage in accord with the ideological line coming from Berlin.[5] America was irrelevant to this process.

The sharp dichotomy between American innovations and declining European traditions is most persuasive in an excellent chapter on corporate advertising, a genuinely American novelty. The European tradition of vivid, symbolically powerful "fist in the eye" poster art succumbed to Madison Avenue's favored style of persuasive texts. But how lasting was this one-way effect? In the 1960s, William Bernbach led a creative revolution in advertising by hiring artists instead of researchers for his agency, including the German-American Helmut Krone. Krone's cheeky ads for the Volkswagen Beetle (featuring adjectives like "ugly," "lemon," and so on) revived the "fist in the eye" aesthetic, converting Madison Avenue to the techniques first developed by the European postermakers and, one could argue, Europeanizing advertising culture in the United States.

This is not a book about high politics, and it need not be. Our libraries are filled with thoughtful, archivally based studies of diplomacy and strategy, the World Wars and the Cold War, the writings and actions of U.S. officials and European officials. These subjects and players make cameo appearances here, but form only a receding background for a story in Frank Woolworth and Edward Filene are more significant actors than a Konrad Adenauer, a Jean Monnet or a Dean Acheson. So much the better in a book about consumer culture. The dilemma familiar to anyone working in cultural history is how much weight to assign to cultural factors in explaining changes in society. For example, while we learn a great deal about the homosocial world of business clubs and the development of chain store operations, the structural side of American corporate takeovers gets less play, especially the huge amounts of capital available for buying up European companies and converting them by fiat to American management practices (or shutting them down when they compete with the new American parent). This book is not the place to read about the policy debates, responses and initiatives of European governments. When French President Charles de Gaulle observed that American economic hegemony "flows like the course of a river. Even if the Americans wanted to, they could not oppose it,"[6] he was making the sensible point that deep economic structures explained American predominance better than individual efforts or transient policies. There is no room for discussion in de Grazia's book, for instance, of the key role played by the postwar Bretton Woods financial system, which made the U.S. dollar the main currency for international transactions. Since other countries had to earn dollars, but the United States could (and did) print them at inflationary rates, the United States held an enormous advantage. As de Gaulle exclaimed in 1963, "We are paying them to buy us!"[7]

One area where the course of the market empire seems indeed to have been irresistible is in film, certainly by such stark measurements as "For every dollar of film Europe exported to the United States, the United States exported 1,500 to Europe" (p. 288). De Grazia emphasizes the role of the U.S. government in throwing its weight behind a process that was not merely a question of taste. Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, might claim that Hollywood's success comes from making "what the people of those countries want to see," but he also admitted that "without the embrace of the Webb-Pomerene [Act of 1918 exempting export associations from antitrust laws so they could form cartels and fix prices abroad], the U.S. film and television industry would have been seriously, perhaps fatally, crippled in its efforts to win the admiration and the patronage of foreign audiences" (pp. 285, 299).

But was the empire irresistible, or was its success contingent on historical events? De Grazia emphasizes how much the United States benefited from the two world wars that devastated Europe–one of the signal factors that explains so much of change over time in twentieth-century international history. Germany had built up a film industry that might have rivaled Hollywood in some markets, but the Nazis ruined it with heavy-handed state control and the expulsion of Jewish talent. Had they not, perhaps the international film market would have evolved differently.

The degree of resistance to mass consumerism is not emphasized in this account, whether in local communities (especially rural ones) or by intellectuals. In Germany, Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Martin Walser wrote satirical novels and poems about the heady consumerism of the 1950s. The Frankfurt School criticized what JÃ¼rgen Habermas called the "commodification of emotional life during the 'economic miracle.' "[8] And one could ask what was, in fact, more Americanized: the consumerism of the Federal Republic that offended critics and helped fuel the student backlash of the 1960s, or those very critiques, in that they drew explicit links to U.S.-based intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse, to the civil rights movement and to Students for a Democratic Society? When German-speakers bought 100,000 copies of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950; published in 1958 by Rowohlt as *Die einsame Masse*), was that a sign of Americanization–the celebration of an American social critic–or the failure of Americanization to convince universally? Certainly it was a sign that consumerism did not go unchallenged.[9]

A counter-current, the Europeanization of American culture, is also not the subject of this book, but its existence says something about unidirectional, irresistible empires. New York's mid-century art and literary scene, and Hollywood itself, owe a great debt to refugees escaping Europe in the 1930s.[10] American literary modernism would have been quite different without the impact of 1920s Paris on so many U.S. writers. De Grazia acknowledges this reverse effect in describing a different kind of imitation, when Hollywood replicated the venerable European cartels by boosting its international market muscle through close coordination with government. In this way, the U.S. government "emulated what were viewed as European practices, lending strong state support to business abroad" (p. 213). The thoroughgoing changes wrought in American society by the New Deal grew out of decades of transatlantic progressive thought on welfare and urban planning that was firmly rooted in the European social democratic tradition.[11] In the monetary realm, one might consider the influence not only of de Gaulle, but of widespread Western European official unhappiness over the inflated U.S. currency in finally leading President Richard Nixon to devalue the dollar and abandon the gold exchange standard in 1971-73.[12]

De Grazia has written a richly textured transnational history, the basic limitation of which is its attribution of most transnational change to American sources. European commercial patterns had focused on urban centers and a bourgeois clientele, while Americans sought a mass market that blurred class distinctions. As the book (and experience) show, Europeans gradually made the switch. But was this Americanization, or was it a less nationally defined process of modernization? Was it the product of savvy hucksters from the New World or the outcome of organic economic forces already at work on the continent? To take a counterfactual difficult to conceive: if there had been no American model across the pond, and no American apostles of mass consumption trekking through Europe's capital cities, would the changes have happened anyway?

To judge whether this empire was truly irresistible, one could do worse than continue to follow, or engage in, the ongoing debates over whether Europe will offer an alternative social model to the neo-liberal consensus promoted from Washington. Europeans may now largely shop like Americans and enjoy American movies. By patronizing fast food outlets and walking less, they are rapidly closing the gap with Americans' high rates of chronic disease. But they tend to be more willing to see state power intervene in the marketplace to protect workers, families and the environment, as well as to slow down the headlong rush toward the creation of media monopolies. And they have not fully embraced American models of workplace rules, health care delivery, energy consumption, criminal justice, winner-take-all elections or militarized diplomacy.

De Grazia credits Henry Ford as the first father of European unification (he wanted a single market for his cars). A century later, it is not yet clear whether a unifying Europe is building a federal system structurally imitative of the United States of America and similarly committed to neo-liberal economics, or rather is becoming a great power that will hold its own in the international system, promoting distinct approaches to both international affairs and social organization. Whatever the answer, it will come from Europeans making their own decisions.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Volker R. Berghahn, *The Americanization of West German Industry, 1945-1973* (New York: Berg, 1986); Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Frank Schumacher, eds., *Culture and International History* (New York: Berghahn, 2002); Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Brian Angus McKenzie, *Remaking France: Americanization, Public Diplomacy, and the Marshall Plan* (New York: Berghahn, 2005); Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Alexander Stephan, ed., *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: the German Encounter with American Culture after 1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2005); Alexander Stephan, ed., *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2006); 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).

[2]. John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

[3]. Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

[4]. Dan Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans: An Essay on Anti-Americanism* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1996), p. 69.

[5]. Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, ErnÃ¤hrung, VÃ¶lkermord. Deutsche Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Pendo, 2001).

[6]. Alain Peyrefitte, *C'Ã©tait de Gaulle*, vol. 2 (Paris: Fayard, 1997), p. 74.

[7]. Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 121.

[8]. See Jan-Werner MÃ¼ller, *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 39.

[9]. Axel Schildt, "Reise zurÃ¼ck aus der Zukunft," in *Exilforschung. Ein Internationales Jahrbuch. Band 9, Exil und Remigration*, ed. Claus-Dieter Krohn et al. (Munich: Text und Kritik, 1991), p. 37.

[10]. Jarrell C. Jackman and Carla M. Borden, *The Muses Flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation, 1930-1945* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983).

[11]. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[12]. See Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power.*