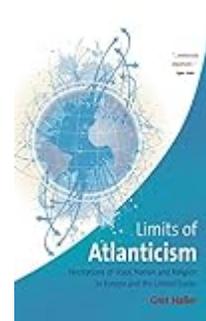


Gret Haller. *The Limits of Atlanticism: Perceptions of State, Nation, and Religion in Europe and the United States.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. xii + 175 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-318-3.



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Cultural Barriers between Old and New Worlds

The end of the Cold War with its all-defining East-West divide has not only raised the specter of “culture wars” along allegedly religious lines, but it has also exposed differences within the “Atlantic Community” of the erstwhile “Free World.” Glowing American pledges like John F. Kennedy’s “Ich bin ein Berliner” no longer inspire millions. Instead, similar U.S. proclamations of common democratic values and crusades of freedom evoke distrust among Europeans. And as this book makes clear, this reaction is not a new response to the siren songs of the much-detested George W. Bush, but held already for William Jefferson Clinton’s peace initiative at the meetings that led to the Dayton Agreement. Indeed, European voices were harshly critical of America’s arrogance and all-pervasive empire during the Vietnam War and the years of detente. But these viewpoints took their cues from America’s own counterculture and did not reject shared, fundamental, western values—only the massive abuse of power by the U.S.’s technocratic establishment. In contrast, the book under review makes the case for a fundamental chasm of values between Europe and the United States, an unbridgeable one. The author, a prominent Swiss lawyer, politician, and inter-

national figure, does her best to dress her arguments in objective, scholarly terms and explain the European and American concepts as simply different due to different histories. But it is clear that she judges the “European” concept as far superior.

The all-important difference, which she lays out clearly in the book’s core, chapter 2, lies in the understanding and function of the state. The translator chose the words “perception of” the state for *Umgang mit* in the original German text. That was probably the best, pragmatic choice, but the author’s German phrase actually captured both the different *concepts* (understanding) of the state and how nations relate to it (*Umgang mit*). Americans, she points out, do not have the same notions of the “state” as most Europeans (like, for instance, that used by G. W. F. Hegel). When Americans use the term, aside from the states of the union, they mean government, and they want as little of that as possible because they believe that a minimum of government maximizes individual freedom: “[O]ne important component of American identity is distrust of the state” (p. 17). Europeans, in contrast, see the state as the necessary frame-

work that enables individual freedom by protecting citizens from arbitrary forces (such as religion) or predatory individuals.

Gret Haller explains this contrast, like all European/American differences she notes, with history. Most of the original immigrants fled to America, she claims, to escape from religious persecution, thus allegedly shaping American identity for all time: “The American understanding of history and politics was definitively shaped by the Pilgrim Fathers” (p. 19). Freedom of religion has always been at the core of American national identity. In Haller’s view, the principle of separation of church and state, which some claim has limited the power of religion, is ultimately no more than a further guarantee for freedom of religion. American independence simply brought recognition to this existing American nation, united by its self-perception as “the chosen people of God.... For others to join this nation required only pledging to the “American way of life” (p. 29). Europeans, on the other hand, were freed from feudal and religious servitude, and the ultimately most oppressive violence of the religious wars, by the triumph of the state at the Treaty of Westphalia. It brought enlightened rule of law with freedom of worship, commerce, and culture/education. This *Rechtsstaat* and *l’État-sprit des lois* became the foundation of freedom, fully realized in the French Revolution, when the *citoyen* won his individual liberty and national sovereignty through, and as the ruler of, the state.

The broad outlines of this apparent divergence are common knowledge and have been widely accepted among students of history. For Europeans, in particular German-speaking readers of the original publication, the centrality of religion in American political culture and history might have been more revealing and practically helpful for fostering an understanding of America. Haller brings these fundamental historical observations to a point in her contrast of the American and French Revolutions: “The American revolutionaries sought to reduce the state in the form represented by the mother countries as much as possible, while in the French Revolution, the people seized control of the state and based their newfound freedom on it” (p. 80). Historically, this radical contrast between revolutions has clearly been visible in varying treatments of established churches and the role of *Étatisme* in the economic success of the French bourgeoisie in contrast to free-enterprise America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet, something is missing in this stark contrast. While Haller does acknowledge an important commonality in that both events were part of the new democratic age at the end of the eight-

teenth century, the American Founding Fathers are curiously absent from her analysis, as are some of their most important texts, such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Federalist Papers. Parts of these texts are demonstrably steeped in French as well as British Enlightenment thought.

Some further difficulty creeps in with her loosely defined terms “European” and “American.” She explicitly counts Canada as European, presumably because its immigrants did not flee religious persecution, and because of the French influence. The important effect of the frontier, which the United States shares with Canada and many Latin American countries, and where aversion to state and government has always been strongest—regardless of religious influences—goes unmentioned. It is also difficult to fit Britain into her scheme; although the British Isles are in Europe, their understanding of the state been quite different from the “European” one. When Matthew Arnold bemoaned the fact his fellow Englishmen lacked the continental concept of the state, he was presumably thinking primarily of French and German intellectuals. Edmund Burke anchored English liberties in the monarchical “constitution,” much in the sense of a state, but anti-state American private entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century, like Andrew Carnegie, looked to the great British advocate of minimal state interference, Herbert Spencer, as their prophet. Margaret Thatcher looked to Ronald Reagan and vice versa. Turning to the rest of Europe, moreover, eastern central Europe is seen as joining the European club only rather recently. And it is not entirely clear that the defeat of religious domination and the parallel triumph of the state as a result of the Treaty of Westphalia were shared, either. For Haller’s own country, Switzerland, it was undoubtedly the major turning point, but only slightly eastward, the Counter-Reformation remained in ascendance in Habsburg lands and Poland-Lithuania. Religious influence, even hegemonies remained a reality, particularly in the classical age of European imperialism.

One reason these geographic and historical lines are so poorly defined in the analysis is that despite the book’s title, state perceptions themselves are not really the book’s central concern. Today’s world politics and the all-too-often destructive American role are at the core of the author’s concerns. Gret Haller is angry. A highly respected lawyer, member of the Swiss Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), she served from 1996 to 2000 as Ombudsperson for Human Rights in Bosnia, a position created by the Dayton Agreement in December

1995. Her human rights work in an atmosphere of high ethnic tensions in postwar Bosnia, which she describes very briefly in the short first chapter, was deeply frustrating. Especially in her efforts to overcome ethnic biases and her hope to institute “civic instruction” for local leaders—ironically reminiscent of initiatives by the American High Commission in postwar Germany—she ran into resistance among American officials that led her to conclude that the core problem was “related to the powerful presence of the United States and the dominant position that it took in the international community” (p. 14).

Specifically, Haller found the Dayton Agreement to be the central problem. It was not only “so dominated by the military aspect ... that civil implementation was not given” sufficient “attention” (p. 70), it was in fact “full of contradictions and inconsistencies in the civilian aspects” (p. 71). Most importantly, Haller blames Dayton for the “actual ethnicization” of Bosnia by building it “into the basic constitutional structure of the entire Bosnian state” (p. 76). This “construction massively hindered the promotion of human rights” (p. 77), in which Haller was engaged. American demands to promote democracy immediately by holding elections, she argues, “proved to be an illusion, since the problems of this lawless and stateless society lay deeper” (p. 77). The fundamental clash of American and European conceptions becomes clear here. Americans were betting on individual desire for liberty and democracy, while Haller gives first priority to the European concept of the state—the *Rechtsstaat*. Attractive as the latter argument may be, namely that Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks should first have been trained to shed their ethnic prejudices and to unlink citizenship rights from cultural identities, we might wonder whether this task would have been possible. Perhaps the “dirty” pragmatic solutions of compromises along ethnic lines were the only short-term path to peace.

Haller explains these different conceptions in the larger chasm between fundamental cultural assumptions of Europe and America in terms familiar to all of us. She finds Americans proudly pointing to their pragmatism, while she shares Europeans’ preference for creating full institutional and legal structures first. Practically this means, as she points out, that American treaty texts are always much longer, because they need to cover all practical future eventualities. Europeans, in contrast, only need to lay down the principal rules and structures that, like the state, impose firm limits and thus exclude individual challenges. In one of the most interesting sections of the key chapter, she relates this difficult American con-

duct in international treaty-making to the ultimate dominance of case law in the United States, where essentially any rule and any law can be challenged in court.

However, when Haller applies these attitudes of individual freedom and “pragmatism” to the source of her deepest feelings of outrage—namely, that the United States is eager to enforce human rights law on others, but unwilling to be held liable to the same rules—she does not see that this reluctance has little to do with different cultural assumptions. Actually, the “practical difference between European and American human rights culture” she notes in the tendency of Americans to refer to the United States Constitution rather than to internationally binding agreements (p. 53) is sheer arrogation of power. All hegemonic powers have behaved that way. The British, “perfidious Albion,” did when they ruled the seas. Spain, France, and Germany did so in their periods of delusions about world power. Niccolo Machiavelli observed this behavior and even recommended it. Haller’s own Switzerland has, of course, never been in that position of political hegemony. But where the Swiss do enjoy a preeminent place, in banking, they also show a remarkable capacity for moral duplicity.

Haller sees eastern and central Europe, whose evolution she broadly equates with her experience in Bosnia, in a triangle between “America” and the now more explicitly western “Europe.” The 1989 revolutions shared some characteristics of the American Revolution and thus some of its temptations. They must choose: “Europe requires the ‘strength of the law,’ while the United States is satisfied with the ‘law of the law of the stronger,’” as she puts it in perhaps the most unreflectively bluntly anti-American moment in the book (p. 132). From her Bosnian experience, she clearly senses the continued power of nationalism in the area. She reiterates that it can only be overcome by separating the role of citizen from the bonds of cultural identity. Ironically, here America is well ahead of Europe.

The book climaxes in a suggestion for a European-American “division of labor” in a civilizing human-rights hegemony and the approving citation of a presumably tongue-in-cheek remark made by Egon Bahr: “If America develops its military backdrop, then Europe should develop its political sector so that the military may remain unused to the greatest extent possible. This would be a division of labor that would not take away any of America’s strength and would perhaps even avoid a war, and it would also give the weaker, i.e., most countries, the opportunity to demand the strength of law” (p. 133).

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