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Editorial: the American Century in Europe

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In 1999, the Whitney Museum of American Art had a very successful exhibition called *The American Century*. Indeed, there were two exhibitions, *The American Century, Part I* about the first half of the 20th century and *Part II* dealing with the following 50 years. The presentation was divided up into decades, each of them having its own motto. The one for the 1950s was: ‘America takes command’. This may sound rather martial but the motto is indeed very appropriate, as one could argue that as from then on American leadership also included cultural leadership.

The name of the exhibition, ‘The American Century’, was of course derived from the title of the famous article that Henry Luce, the editor/publisher of journals such as *Life* and *Time*, published in *Life* on 17 February 1941. Luce wanted the Americans to play a major role in the war for freedom and democracy that was in progress at that time and the building of the better world that would have to come after that. In his article Luce insisted that ‘our vision of America as a world power includes a passionate devotion to great American ideals’.[1] The idea of America as a world power and, indeed, as *the* world power of the future, is, of course, much older than the concept of the 20th century as the American century. Already in 1902, the British liberal journalist and advocate of world peace through arbitration, W.T. Stead published a book with the title *The Americanization of the World, or the Trend of the Twentieth Century*. According to Stead, the heyday of the British Empire was over and the US was the Empire of the future. The enormous success of America was due to three things: education, production and democracy. Britain’s choice was between subjugation or cooperation. Stead even proposed the merger of the two countries. In the following decade, this idea that America was Britain’s successor and that the two countries should – and could – form a union because of their intimate familiarity, became popular among British writers.

Much earlier and long before the role of America as a world leader had actually become apparent, Alexis de Tocqueville had already prophesized that America would become a future master of the world, one of the two superpowers, the other one being Russia. For Tocqueville, America and Russia were also two opposite models of society. A few years before Tocqueville, the German philosopher

G.W.F. Hegel had said in his famous lectures on *The Philosophy of History*, given in Jena in 1830–31: 'America […] is the country of the future'. But he also remarked that 'its world-historical importance has yet to be revealed in the ages which lie ahead'.[2] In the best of European traditions, Hegel went on to declare that both physically and spiritually America was still impotent and that the Americans were like unwise children, far removed from higher thoughts and aims.

Hegel's ideas were part of a tradition according to which civilization follows the course of the sun. From Asia, where it was born, it had come to Europe, where it had come to full blossom. For Hegel, Europe was the final destination of the journey of civilization. America might be a country with a future but it had offered nothing to the world yet and thus there was no place for it in his *Philosophy of History*. Others argued that civilization would follow the path of the sun even further, across the Atlantic to America and that there the Empire of the future was to be found. The most famous formulation of this is to be found in the last quatrain of a poem by the philosopher – and bishop – George Berkeley, after whom the location of a well-known university in California has been named. The poem was written in 1726 but published only in 1752. The last lines read as follows:

> Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;
> The four first Acts already past,
> A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;
> Time's noblest Offspring is the last.

America would be the last chapter in the great book of empires and civilizations, because westward from America there was only the Pacific and behind that lies the East, where long ago, it had all begun.

Economically and politically speaking, the American Empire began at the end of the 19th century. In 1898, with the Spanish–American war, America officially became an imperial power by taking over the remains of the Spanish Empire (Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines). The US position of world power was confirmed by the First World War and the Peace of Paris. After the Great War, the European powers had become debtors instead of creditors. Now, not Europe but America was 'the world's banker'. This new economic world order became clearly visible with the Wall Street crash in 1929, which led the world into the great depression of the 1930s. From that time on, everybody knew that when America was ill the rest of the world would suffer too.

After 1945, the US became the world's Number One superpower. The American economy alone produced more goods and services than all the rest of the world together. The dollar took over from sterling as the world's reserve currency. The American fleet ruled the waves as once HM's Navy had done and the President of the US was the only statesman to approve the use of the atomic bomb. As a matter of fact, America used that weapon twice, in August 1945. As

Tocqueville had predicted, Russia was the other superpower, but although a great military power, economically speaking, the Soviet Union was very vulnerable, as became clear with the revolutions of 1989/1990. After that, America remained as the world's only superpower. Henry Luce's prediction that the coming age would fulfil history, and tensions and wars would become obsolete was faintly echoed by Francis Fukuyama when he coined the expression 'The End of History'.

While after 1914–1918 nobody in Europe could remain blind to America's economic and political power, its cultural impact was very limited. Luce argued that American culture had laid the foundations for the American century. All over the world people listened to jazz music and watched Hollywood films. This may be true, but for Europe's intellectual elite the US remained a primitive country that had nothing to offer to the enlightened mind. The Americans were seen as naïve, uncivilized human beings, whose only interest was in making money. All over Europe, and even in the former mother country, Great Britain, writers and essayists were uttering similar sounds. C. S. Lewis for example remarked: 'The so-called Renaissance produced three disasters: the invention of gunpowder, the invention of printing and the discovery of America'.[3] And Harold Nicolson told a journalist who was leaving for America that 'there is one thing you will miss in America – that is the adult mind'.[4]

The war did not bring about an end to these forms of cultural contempt. Graham Greene for example said that he would rather spend his old age in the Gulag Archipelago than in California.[5] France soon took over the leadership of post-war anti-Americanism, of which Coca-Cola and later McDonalds became the symbols. When Coca-Cola, in 1949, opened its first factory in France, there was a strong protest against the 'Coca-colonization' of France. The Catholic daily *Témoignage Chrétien* summarized its rejection of both the Soviet Union and the US in the slogan: 'We want neither Coca-Cola nor vodka. Good wine is enough.'[6]

The American intellectual elite was irritated by this refusal and tried to improve America's image in the world of high culture by subsiding journals and scholarly institutions. The history of this campaign is described by the historian Volker Berghahn in his article on 'European elitism, American money and popular culture'. This article is one out of a collection of 13 contributions that are brought together in a recent book: *The American Century in Europe*. The book has three sections, which deal with diplomatic, cultural and social responses to the American challenge, respectively. The majority of the authors are Americans and, among the Europeans, Italian authors take pride of place. This is easily explained by the fact that the book is the outcome of a joint project of the universities of Cornell and Turin. This is not to say that the book is unbalanced. There are two contributions that specifically deal with Britain and Germany. What one misses, however, is a chapter on what might well be the most interesting case, France.

The book appeared too early to deal with the European reactions to the

American intervention in Iraq, but Walter LaFaber's warning seems to be very much to the point. 'If … the United States, defying the warnings of Europeans and others, attacked states suspected of harboring terrorists and/or developing weapons of mass destruction (Iraq would be the prime target), European and Islamic governments could well turn against the American action, unless the United States won quickly, conclusively, and established a well-regarded and effective government to replace the overthrown regime – a large order.'[7] So far the effect of the war has not so much been a separation of Europe from America as an internal division of Europe. This is a new division that does not coincide with the former East–West division. Maybe the American Century in Central and Eastern Europe has yet to begin.

References

1. Quoted in R. L. Moore and M. Vaudagna (eds) (2003) *The American Century in Europe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), p. 11.
2. G. W. F. Hegel (1975) *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge 1975) p. 170.
3. Quoted in A. Sisman (1994) *A.J.P. Taylor. A Biography* (London) p. 186.
4. Quoted in A. Sisman (1994) *A.J.P. Taylor. A Biography* (London).
5. Quoted in A. Sisman (1994) *A.J.P. Taylor. A Biography* (London).
6. See F. Costigliola (1992) *France and the United States. The Cold Alliance since World War II* (New York) pp. 77–78.
7. R. L. Moore and M. Vaudagna (eds) (2003) *The American Century in Europe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), p. 43.