

## **The Idea of America in European Political Thought: 1492 – 9/11**

Alan Levine  
American University  
Washington, DC  
alevine@american.edu

[Prepared for presentation at The University of Wisconsin Political Philosophy Workshop.  
Madison, WI, April 7, 2006. Not to be quoted without permission of the author.]

This paper is the précis of a manuscript-in-progress entitled *The Idea of America in European Political Thought: 1492 – 9/11*. The purpose of my book is not to analyze American political thought, but to illuminate how America was perceived by and what it meant to the political thinkers of Europe from Columbus until today. My book is about America as a symbol, and, as the recent debates over globalization and terrorism reveal, to this day the idea of America remains one of the most powerful symbols in the world. Beginning with the “discovery” of America and spanning the 500 years until today, I examine what theorists from the Old World thought about America and how they reacted to events in America at each stage of its unique development.

My project is both broader and narrower than any of the existing literature on European conceptions of America.<sup>1</sup> While my time frame is ambitious, my scope is narrow. I focus on how European *philosophers and political theorists* view America, not on the views of every European writer, traveler, or scientist, nor on the opinions of the European public as a whole, nor on the ramblings of random commentators, many of whom have written on America. I discuss the general cultural critiques to highlight what is unique to the philosophical discourses and what is commonly shared with the larger European critiques, and I put the philosophers’ discourses in the context of the overall European views. I focus on philosophers because as presumably the most thoughtful commentators, they would have the most insight.

Space here permits but a brief sketch of both my findings and my analytical framework. I find that throughout its history, America has stood for two different, almost opposite, things. First, it stands for Indians, who are heralded as natural man and said to represent the world's beginning. Second, it currently stands for the United States, the great political experiment based on natural rights, which has evoked inspiration and fear and envy. The United States inspires such strong feelings not simply because it is the most powerful nation in the world, but because it is often perceived as the world's future. America thus represents both the world's origins and its endpoint.

European views of America can be broken into four periods, two corresponding to the Indians and two corresponding to the United States. Examination of European views of America also reveals interesting patterns of America condemned, praised, and condemned again but for different reasons. Underneath this pattern, however, a deeper struggle is taking place. While European views shed some light on America, they reveal more about Europe's own hopes, fears, and anxieties. The European thinkers' battle over America is largely a proxy war over European civilization, the Enlightenment, liberalism, and modernity itself.

## **The Indians**

From 1492 until the American Revolution, and in some sense still today, in the European consciousness America evoked the image of Indians. What the Indians represent in the global imagination today is a fairly static image informed by media portrayals which starkly depict the Indians either as barbaric savages or as noble stewards of the land living in harmony with nature. These images have a long genealogy.

*The First Period: First Attempts to Explain America.* Although the Americas were undoubtedly visited by the Vikings around the year 1000, the "discovery" of America is

attributed to Christopher Columbus whose voyage to America in 1492 captured the European imagination. Ironically, to Columbus' dying day, he insisted that what he had found was part of Asia. Thus, European perceptions of America have been mistaken from the very beginning. (Sixteenth-century map makers, recognizing Columbus' mistake, named the New World not after him, but after Amerigo Vespucci – hence the name “America” – who they credited as the first to realize that the New World was its own continent.)

The Indians of America were misrepresented by Europeans from the very beginning. Not only did Columbus believe America was someplace else – hence the name Indians – but his description of its inhabitants was fanciful, too. He claimed to discover cannibals, Cyclops, Amazons, Sirens, dog-faced peoples, people with no hair, and people with tails.<sup>2</sup> These bizarre claims were suggested to him by centuries of fanciful tales passed on through medieval times by supposedly reliable authorities.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, Columbus found what he was looking for. This began a pattern of pre-formed opinions dictating what is supposedly found in America. He saw the land as potential wealth and its people as possible converts or slaves. For him, the Indians had no independent status, no integrity of their own. They were just to be used. This instrumental view was shared by most of the early conquistadors and missionaries, such as Cortes and Bernal-Diaz who often describe their massacres with a combination of boastful piety and unblinking cruelty.

The Spanish renaissance philosophers who first reflected on the discovery of the Indians did little better in appreciating them. Two positions dominated the Spanish debates. The first position, arguing that the Indians did not possess the faculty of reason, articulated originally by John Mair, a Scot living in Paris, and advanced vigorously by Juan de Sepúlveda in the courts of Spain, went so far as to argue that the Indians were the concrete embodiment of Aristotle's

natural slave. According to this view, the Indians could be incorporated into Europe's traditional Christian-Aristotelian worldview but only in its lowest place. God created the Indians as naturally inferior, the argument went, so it was just and right that the Spanish subjugate them. The second view, most famously advanced by Francisco de Vitoria, saw the Indians as rational – as evidenced by their languages, economics, and politics – but as underdeveloped and needing Spanish tutelage. Because they were human, the Indians had to be governed by consent, not their formal, explicit consent, but rather by what they would consent to after they came to understand the natural law, which of course the Spanish thought they possessed.<sup>4</sup> Even Bartolomé de Las Casas, the most tireless and dedicated defender of the Indians, who is famous for his statement that “all the races of the world are men,”<sup>5</sup> thought that the Indians were underdeveloped and needing Christianity. He too favored their conversion but through gentle means requiring their formal consent. In short, because the Spanish were so confident in their worldview, it never occurred to them that they might be incorrect or possess only a partial truth. Their cultural confidence led them to reject the Americans as barbaric.

*The Second Period: America as the Home of Natural Man.* In 1580 the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne began a path-breaking, new way of thinking about the Indians. A skeptic and keen observer of human diversity, Montaigne argued that “each man calls barbarism whatever is not his practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Spanish, Montaigne doubts the standards of his own place and time. In his famous essay “Of Cannibals,” he describes Indian society as the best society that ever was, real or imagined, because they are “still very close to their original naturalness” and thus live in a “state of purity” according to “*les loix naturelles*.”<sup>7</sup> He claims their society, held together with “little

artifice and human soldier,” is as pure and natural as a society can be. His account claims that while these Indians do fight and eat their captives, they do so not for economic gain but as a kind of aristocratic struggle for mastery. He describes their warfare as “wholly noble” and “as excusable as this human disease can be.”<sup>8</sup> This is the origin of the image of the noble savage.

Montaigne knows that his account of the Indians’ tranquility and bliss is fictitious. He concedes the barbarous horror of some of their actions, writing, “I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of [their] acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own.”<sup>9</sup> Here Montaigne reveals his true intentions in describing the Indians: he uses them as an image with which to expose the horrors and cruelty of his own world. This usage of the Indians as a counter-cultural marker was to become the norm. While Montaigne’s account of the Indians is in the end neither anthropologically accurate nor fully desirable, he is the first to misrepresent the Indians in a positive fashion.

After Montaigne, no major philosopher in Europe doubted the Indians’ naturalness. To the contrary, the Indians came to represent natural man par excellence. From Montaigne until the end of the Enlightenment, every major philosopher agreed with John Locke’s famous statement that “in the beginning all the World was America.”<sup>10</sup> America represented Europe’s past. In ending one debate, however, Montaigne began a new one. While every major thinker agreed that the Indians represented mankind’s natural state, debate arose over the interpretation of the natural state: was it a brutishness to overcome or an innocence to recapture?

Among these philosophers the debate evolves in a single direction. Hobbes first argues that mankind’s natural state is a horrible state of war to be avoided at all costs. Locke and Montesquieu counter that the state of nature is pacific but undesirable. Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot later praise the Indians as naturally good and happy, in contrast to European artificiality

and corruption. These varied representations, it should be noted, do not correspond to any changes in Indian societies, nor do they respond to new information about the Indians. In truth, the available evidence was barely consulted at all by any of the great thinkers. For example, most of these Enlightenment thinkers described the Indians as atomistic individuals despite the fact that Europeans had from early on been aware of the social nature of Indian living, not to mention the Aztec and Incan civilizations. In short, the linear evolution among philosophers of the representations of American Indians, representing natural man, cannot be explained by changes in the Indians or new information.<sup>11</sup> Rather, these philosophers clearly used their descriptions of the Indians as support for their own ends. As dissatisfaction with the existing institutions in Europe increased, so did praise of the Indians grow as an alternative, more desirable and more natural, way of living. Neither Rousseau, Voltaire, or Diderot wanted to go back to the state of nature or even thought such a thing possible. They use their representations of the Indians as a pawn in their anti-establishment polemics.

In sum, representations of the American Indians really reflect Europe's own debates, not the reality of America. They have left the legacies of brutishness and of the noble savage which remain with us today. But there is another legacy of these debates. In using the Indians of America to promote their own visions of freedom and legitimate institutions, the philosophers set in motion a train of thought and actions that would lead to revolution. The first of these revolutions took place in America and led to the founding of the United States.

## **The United States**

*The Third Period: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Reactions to the American Political Experiment.* The relationship between the Old and New Worlds (and the two images of

America) is intertwined and reciprocal. The American Revolution marked the first major step in the collapse of the European empires founded after Columbus discovered the New World. This revolution was inspired in part by the European philosophical doctrines based on natural rights, which had themselves been partly inspired by the original inhabitants of America. Ironically, the political experiment in the name of natural rights then helps destroy the natural people who had inspired the United States' philosophical forefathers. The American Revolution then served as inspiration for the French Revolutionaries and other lovers of liberty throughout the world. The complex nature of this relationship is seen in the following quotation from the French philosopher Condorcet:

‘The human race had lost its rights. Montesquieu found them and restored them to us’ (Voltaire). It is not enough, however, that these rights be written in the philosophers’ works and engraved in the heart of virtuous men. It is necessary that the ignorant or feeble man be able to read them in the example of a great people. America has given us this example. Its Declaration of Independence is a simple exposition of these rights, so sacred and so long forgotten. Among no nation have they been so well known, or preserved in such perfect integrity.<sup>12</sup>

The reciprocal relationship is evident: it moves from Montesquieu and Voltaire, who had been partially inspired by America's original inhabitants, to the Declaration of Independence then back to Condorcet, who authored France's Constitution of 1793.

Condorcet's praise of America was typical of the initial wave of *philosophes* reactions to the United States. Immediate reaction to the American Revolution by Enlightenment thinkers was one of enthusiastic praise. In his popular pamphlet entitled “Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution and the Means of Making it a Benefit of the World,” Richard Price writes, “I see the revolution in favor of universal liberty which has taken place in America; a revolution which opens a new prospect in human affairs, and begins a new era in the history of mankind.”<sup>13</sup> Given the unprecedented liberties guaranteed in America, Price is hopeful, nay

certain, that liberty will soon spread throughout the world, if unchecked by tyrannical governments. He says the revolution will “raise the species higher” and compares its effect to “opening a new sense.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that “next to the introduction of Christianity among mankind, the American revolution may prove the most important step in the progressive course of [human] improvement.”<sup>15</sup> So many hopes has he pinned on America, that “perhaps there never existed a people on whose wisdom and virtue more depended; or to a station of more importance in the plan of Providence has been assigned.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Turgot, whose brief stint as Finance Minister in France marked the last serious attempt at reform before the French revolution, says that America is “the *hope* of the world” and should “become a *model* to it.”<sup>17</sup>

The Enlightenment thinkers though did not think America was perfect. Slavery was America’s greatest flaw. They understood the difficulties in eradicating this execrable institution and argued that America would be judged by the manner of eliminating it as circumstances allowed.

The great strengths of America, however, more than outweighed its imperfections. They praise the numerous liberties in the USA, including freedom of the press, speech, conscience, and religion. Moreover, America is seen as an inspiration for the world. As Condorcet writes, it is an example “so useful to all the nations who can contemplate it;” “it teaches that these rights are everywhere the same;” “the example of a free people submitting peacefully to military, as to civil, laws will doubtless have the power to cure us.”<sup>18</sup> Europe developed these Enlightenment ideas, but due to its powerfully entrenched institutions, it could not act on them. The Enlightenment *philosophes*, however, unanimously thought that the example of America would inspire the deeds that their own words could not. In fact, they were right. The American



Revolution inspired the French Revolutionaries in 1789, and it still continues to inspire revolutionaries throughout the world.

After the French Revolution goes awry, European views of America change. Once the French Revolution devolved into terror, anarchy, and despotism, no major thinker ever again unqualifiedly praised the American Revolution. This is peculiar. Thinkers might have said that the French got it wrong, the Americans right, so let's praise America and further intensify the study of it. Instead, they let the horrors of the French Revolution color their understanding of the American. This shows once again how the perceptions of America are based more on European dynamics than on the reality of America itself.

Despite (or because of) the failure of the French Revolution and the halting success of liberalism in Europe, nineteenth-century European thinkers project America as Europe's future. Tocqueville and Hegel, for example, both claim that the USA represents Europe's, and perhaps the world's, future. They mean different things by this, and Tocqueville therefore goes to study America, whereas Hegel thinks its future characteristics are far off and not yet knowable. According to Tocqueville, because America did not have a feudal and aristocratic past, because the frontier exacerbated the equality that was typical of the coming world, as well as for a host of other reasons, the United States was the purest expression of what was coming for the world as a whole and Europe in particular. In short, America is seen as the most pure embodiment of the future because, lacking the entrenched past that impedes the coming of modernity in Europe, America is deemed to be modernity incarnate.

Consequently, the mere existence of the United States adds a dimension to the unsettled nature of nineteenth-century European politics, aptly described by the historian Arnold Hauser as, "longing for the past while yearning for the future, they found only disenchantment with the

present.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic poet and playwright Alfred de Musset characterized the situation as follows: “Everything that was is no more; everything that will be is not yet. Look no further for the secret of our troubles.”<sup>20</sup> Different kinds of political thinkers dealt with this unsettledness and discontent in different ways. In its desire to return to the glorious pre-revolution and pre-modern past of Church, king, and aristocratic hierarchy, the radical right of de Maistre, Taine, Bonald, and Carlyle, lambaste all that America represents. In contrast, the radical left (socialists, communists, anarchists), thinking that liberalism, capitalism, and science represented major improvements over the ancien regime, to this extent supported what the United States represented. But since they considered the liberal present inadequate in comparison to their respective hoped-for futures, they ultimately were critical of the United States. The liberal center, including thinkers such as Tocqueville, Mill, Comte, and Guizot, accepted the liberal modern present even while acknowledging its drawbacks, because they thought human nature being what it is, a modern liberal democracy as embodied in the United States was basically as good a system of government as could be hoped for. Looking for remedies to combat the problems of liberalism from within liberalism itself, this liberal center is the only group that is really supportive of what America represents. Indeed, it is the only group interested in the reality of America in both its positive and negative senses. In all cases, the American political experiment on the fringes of the world stage gets heightened attention in European debate not because of its power (because it had little) but because it is viewed as a living embodiment of modernity and thus as Europe’s future incarnate.

While nineteenth-century Europe’s left, right, and center had different proposed solutions to the then partially-realized modernity of Europe, they all agreed on the general character of this new world that the US represented. What America had become and what they thought Europe

would become—modern and liberal—was regarded as a mixed blessing. The greatest representative of this ambivalence is Alexis de Tocqueville, the great French thinker and statesman. According to Tocqueville, democratic government is inefficient, meandering, and petty. But it has its advantages. It gets more done by energizing the people to do things themselves: “it does that which the most skillful government often cannot do: it spreads throughout the body social a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere, which, however little favored by circumstance, can do wonders. Those are its real advantages.”<sup>21</sup> Democracy is not conducive, however, to refinement, elevated manners, poetry, glory, or heroic virtues. All of the main political theorists of the nineteenth century agreed with this ambivalent assessment of America – and of the budding liberal modernity of Europe.

All nineteenth-century European thinkers saw America as the epitome of the self-interested individualism of the new commercial society and as representing the centralization of power by the new middle class regime. As such, four criticisms were repeatedly leveled at it. First, America was said to embody the disorder caused by collapsing institutions. The authority of all previous standards – experience, age, birth, genius, talent, and virtue – was undercut in America. Second, America represented a growing obsession with money. It was because of this that all other standards of human value were ignored. Third, America represented unchecked equality. The new type of man preferred equality to liberty, as Tocqueville and Mill warned. Finally, the new form of government represented the power of the majority, the tyranny of the majority, in Tocqueville’s famous phrase. This stifled creativity and individuality. It guaranteed that society would be geared to the mediocre middle at the expense of individual refinement, the cultivation of culture, and the emergence of spiritual sublimity and greatness. These are essentially the same charges that are leveled against the United States today by traditional

authorities in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, by the educated elites in Europe and elsewhere, and by the anti-modern radicals, such as the Ayatollah Khomeini, Hezbollah, and Al Qaeda.

*The Fourth Period: America as Technology.* The idea of America as technology has roots deep in the nineteenth-century – i.e., well before the United States becomes a global power. The rise of this representation of America parallels a movement in European thought to America representing not only the place where the future resides but also a phenomenon, “Americanization.” The label of “Americanization” begins with Baudelaire, but it is most assiduously and systematically cultivated by the German right. The spiritual crisis that the right sees for the “coming future” that America represents is in Nietzsche, who writes, “The breathless haste with which they [Americans] work – the distinctive vice of the New World – is already beginning ferociously to infect old Europe and is spreading a spiritual emptiness over the continent.”<sup>22</sup> Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (who reintroduces the phrase ‘Third Reich’) is perhaps the first to speak about the Americanization of the world in German. According to him, America must be “not locally but spiritually understood.”<sup>23</sup> This view of Americanization as technologicalization, and the mediocrity and conformity it entails, starts to be popularized during the Weimar period by people such as Stephen Zweig and Rudolf Kayser and finds a home across the ideological spectrum. Thus, America, once described as the home of nature, now becomes the place where nature is most obscured, the polar opposite point of view.

Indeed, the main twentieth-century critiques of America, such as those by Spengler and Heidegger on the right and the Frankfurt School on the left, equate the essence of America with technology and materialism. Twentieth-century thinkers do not agree on the origins of America’s technological morass. For example, the Frankfurt School sees technology as the result of capitalism, whereas Heidegger attributes it to a particular metaphysical way of being. The

characteristics that they lament in America's technologicalization, however, are similar. They lament the mechanization of society and the way it alienates human beings from their deeper essences. They deplore the monotonization and leveling of the world and the resulting loss of individuality. They decry the way technology kills the spirit and prevents the attainment of the highest human developments. In short, their substantive list of complaints is very similar to those made during the nineteenth century. Whereas the dominant nineteenth-century representation of America attributed the cause of the problems to an array of social, political, and economic factors, twentieth-century thinkers center the blame around technology.

Beyond the technological blame, there is another important divergence between nineteenth- and twentieth-century European thinkers' assessments of America. Whereas nineteenth-century thinkers like Tocqueville saw Russia, as well as the USA, as an emerging power, they almost all greatly prefer the American model to the Russian. This is not true in the twentieth century. The creation of the Soviet Union led many revolutionary and progressive thinkers to not only turn their admiration away from the United States but to deplore it as a regressive force in world affairs. This is yet another example of how Europe's internal hopes and convulsions color its philosophers' views of America. Consequently, numerous twentieth-century figures on the left, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, ideologically committed to communism, lauded Soviet approaches and condemned American ones. Even on the anti-communist right, however, many considered the United States and Soviet Union to be equally bad. Heidegger, for example, says that "Russia and America... are metaphysically the same, namely in regard to their world character and their relation to the spirit."<sup>24</sup> An abstraction from politics that allows such comparisons is regrettable, but in Heidegger's case the comparison is even worse. While formally arguing that the USA and Russia are the same, when he needs a

short-hand label for the phenomena that he describes as a “*katastrophe*,” he calls it “Americanization,” not Russianization, implying that the former is closer to the core of the problem.

*Historical Epilogue: A Postmodern View of America.* Jean Baudrillard is the most prominent postmodern thinker who has written extensively on America so as an historical epilogue it is worth concluding with a few words on his America, because his writings on America bring together the whole history of European images of America and perpetuate the pattern of European indifference to the reality of America.<sup>25</sup> As a postmodern thinker, Baudrillard rejects the idea that there is any humanly knowable truth, and this leads him to write contradictorily that “For me there is no truth of America”<sup>26</sup> and that “I knew all about this nuclear form, this future catastrophe [America] when I was still in Paris, of course.”<sup>27</sup> There is no truth, yet he “knows” the truth of America. In addition to this contradiction, Baudrillard, as with Columbus, largely knows what he will find before ever going to America. Baudrillard is learned and aware of the opposite images of America, playfully describing the United States as both “the original version of Modernity” and “the only remaining primitive society.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, he cleverly combines the five hundred years of opposite European imagery of America, calling America the “Primitive society of the future.”<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard fancies himself a modern-day Tocqueville and he raises questions even if it doesn’t treat them with moral seriousness.

Baudrillard also analyzes the terroristic attacks of 9/11, and he does so as he would a text. The fundamental postmodern critique of texts and discourses is that they hegemonically attempt to impose a unity where postmodern thinkers say exists only difference. Postmoderns aim to identify the internal contradictions of texts in order to let their irreducible otherness irrupt,

collapsing discourses of their own weight. Similarly, Baudrillard (and Derrida and Zizek) claim that 9/11 was not an attack from outside the system but an irruption from within, a suicide.<sup>30</sup>

“The West,” Baudrillard writes, “has become suicidal, and declared war on itself” (7, repeated on 50); “we can say they *did* it, but we *wished for* it” (5, italics in original).<sup>31</sup> For Baudrillard, “the horror for the 4,000 [sic] victims of dying in those towers was inseparable from the horror of living in them” (45). Why? Because they were “subject to artificial conditioning,” not only “Air conditioning, but mental conditioning too” (43). To fail to be able to distinguish between the horror of burning alive and the horrors of a life with air conditioning is a level of abstraction rivaled only by Heidegger’s inability to distinguish between the processing of tuna and the processing of human beings. Baudrillard goes further than Derrida and Zizek, however, in celebrating 9/11’s freeing of the West from its hegemonic discourse, calling the mental liberation enabled by the attack a “gift” (17) that “restores an irreducible singularity” (9) and thus rescues us from the “deepest despair” of our “radical comfort” (15). Terrorism as gift.

Baudrillard’s account of 9/11, however, has at least as much to do with his own agenda as with the terrorists’. He describes the terrorists as “solely with the aim of disrupting” the system (19), as “not seek[ing] the impersonal elimination of the other” (25), and as aiming to radicalize “the relation of the image to reality” (27). Insofar as the perpetrators of 9/11 want to establish a new system and do not simply value every particular view, belief, or gender as a worthy “other,” and insofar as this list of motives closely tracks his own, one suspects Baudrillard of attributing his agenda to the terrorists.<sup>32</sup> In short, even Europe’s postmodern thinkers, those who claim to celebrate the ‘other’ above all else, use America to advance their own agendas. Baudrillard continues the five hundred year pattern of European thinkers using America to promote their own views.

## **Conclusion**

America has moved from representing Europe's past to representing Europe's future and from representing the epitome of nature to the epitome of technology, polar opposite views. Four points might be noted, however, that raise questions about the validity of these representations. First, descriptions of America have been fantastical from the beginning. They are inaccurate and often intentionally so. Second, although twentieth-century thinkers blame the United States for the technologicalization of the world, it is apparent that the technological attitude long predates the founding of the United States. Columbus and the conquistadors neither see the New World for what it is nor have any desire to do so. Rather, they seek to exploit resources and people, and this is the essence of the technological attitude, the attitude that some claim begins only with the United States. A fair-minded observer must admit that even if the United States was later to export technology to Europe, the technological attitude began in Europe and was originally transplanted from there to America.

Third, there is a fundamental but dubious continuity in European thinkers' views about America. The Indians are described as on the one hand, naïve, innocent, child-like, and simple, and on the other as brutish, vulgar, shallow, stupid, and lacking spirituality. These are essentially the same charges that Europe and the world level at the United States today. The United States might be all of these things, although probably not more than most countries and possibly less so than many. But the fact that ways of life as opposite as the Indians' and the United States' are described in fundamentally the same terms indicates a problem in the substantive nature of the representations. This highlights the way in which America has since its discovery served as an imagined alternative, for good and for ill, to the existing reality in Europe.



Fourth, European thinkers miss the mark in blaming America for problems that have to do with modernity itself. One must be careful about conflating the United States and modernity as if they were identical and coequal sets. On the one hand, the USA can be seen as less modern than Europe insofar as according to opinion polls the American public is more religious. On the other hand, there are plenty of modern institutions and desires outside of the United States, too. There are multinational corporations in Europe and other countries around the world, and most people wherever they live in the world desire the standard of living and freedom that the United States – and many modern countries – have. So while there is a certain justification for seeing the United States as embodying modernity, it is not modernity's sole embodiment.

\*\*\*\*\*

Given the current trans-Atlantic tensions, it may not perhaps be deemed excessively indulgent if I add a few personal conclusions. I came to this project through a scholarly and not a political connection. At the beginning of my research I admired (and still do) the authenticity that European philosophers celebrate and I to some extent lamented the lack of authentic culture in the United States. In the course of this research project, however, I became increasingly frustrated with European thinkers. The very repetitiousness of their views on America disproves many of their claims to originality and authenticity. Many leftists after WW II would be embarrassed to know the rightest roots of their views in pre-war thought. And there is no European equivalent of the pragmatic good sense found in the American *Federalist Papers*. I am all in favor of an intellectual rapprochement across the Atlantic, where thinkers on both sides jointly confront the problems of modernity, but a sound trans-Atlantic intellectual rapprochement requires recognition of the virtues and vices found on both sides of the Atlantic and separating modernization from Americanization.

Many philosophers clearly understand that the fundamental phenomena with which they wrestle is modernity and America is just their shorthand way of referencing the deeper problem. In discussing America they are not interested in America itself but use America as a way to get a handle on their own hopes, fears, and anxieties about Europe's future with respect to fundamental questions of modernity. But all too often the shorthand is mistaken for the phenomena itself and America and modernity are equated. This leads people to blame problems not on modernization itself but on Americanization and the United States. It may be easy and perhaps satisfying to foist off the problems of modernity onto an 'other,' to present problems as externally imposed as opposed to being issues with which one's own society is implicated. To do so, however, is both wrong and potentially dangerous. It is wrong because it misses the mark. It is dangerous because it creates a caricature which exacerbates real problems and gets in the way of potential solutions.

One part of my argument is prosaic: it turns out that those who favor modernity, especially modernity in its liberal form, favor America, whereas the far left and the far right dislike the United States. The anti-modern right, including both Europe's traditional defenders of the ancien regime and the defenders of traditional authority throughout the world today, are anti-American. Those who condemn the liberal version of modernity in favor of what they think are more advanced versions of modernity such as communism and socialism, are also ultimately anti-American. Whereas many progressive thinkers celebrated America in the nineteenth century as the best that had been achieved until then, progressives and revolutionaries abandoned the US after the rise of the Soviet Union and authored some of the most vituperative anti-American writings of the twentieth century. It is perhaps less appreciated, however, that the far left and far

right, unlike the liberal center, are but little interested in factual data and evidence about the real America. Their ideologies seem to supply almost all they need to know.

The unfortunate problem for America concerning European perceptions of it is that so few European philosophers are moderate or liberal. In the twentieth century, most European countries have but few liberal thinkers of note – Raymond Aron and his followers in France; Popper, Oakeshott, and Berlin in England; Habermas and Sternberger in Germany; Croce in Italy. They are few and far between. This should not perhaps be surprising given the historical lack of liberal political systems in Europe. Liberalism came to France for good (excluding the Vichy lapse) only in 1870. Germany had only the brief Weimar experiment before liberalism was imposed by the US after WW II. In Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece liberalism had no political roots until after WW II. And today, at a time when Europe's peaceful coming together is lauded by Europeans everywhere, where, other than Habermas, are the European philosophers of federalism? At a time of European constitution building, why is there so little interest in the theory and practice of American constitutionalism?

One final word on the limits of my study. I have examined the views of philosophers. In modern parlance, I have examined elite, as opposed to mass, views of America. These two views are not the same. European public opinion as a whole responds to the actions of the United States in a more or less common sense manner. As shown by the longevity of the images I have discussed, this is not true of the elites. Opinion polls serve as another measurement of this phenomenon. For example, French elite opinion of the US does not vary with what the US does. Whereas after WW II and the Marshall Plan, French mass opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of the US, French elite opinion of the US was overwhelmingly negative. The inflexible, ideological nature of elite opinion is regrettable. It is dangerous, because it has created a

discourse of anti-American stereotypes that can readily be tapped in to and exploited by demagogues when the European masses go through an unfavorable view of America. The masses respond to media portrayals of what the US *actually does*. The elites condemn the US for what they *think it is*.

In conclusion, as long as both the United States and Europe are liberal and more like each other than like any other region of the world, transatlantic relations will be relatively good. As long as there are disparities in power between the US and Europe, there will also be fear, envy, and mutual resentment. Rivalry must inevitably emerge as the Cold War fades from memory and as long as a new common foe does not exist. Policy makers should expect tension in the relationship, and they should be prepared to deal with excessively negative reactions, when in times of disharmony, cynics and demagogues tap into the 500 year old legacy of imagery of America.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> The most interesting accounts of Europe's first encounters with the Indians include: Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World*, Chiapelli, ed., *First Images of America*, Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, and O'Gorman, *The Invention of America*. C. Vann Woodward's *The Old World's New World* and James Ceaser's *Reconstructing America* are the best accounts of European reactions to the United States.

<sup>2</sup> See "The Letter of Columbus" in *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*, Cecil Jane, tr. (New York: Bonanza Books, 1989), 198-200. See also Columbus' journal entries for 11-4-1492, 11-26-1492, 11-23-1492, and 1-9-1493.

<sup>3</sup> These myths are nicely documented and traced in R. Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952) and M. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) is the best account of the Spanish debates.

<sup>5</sup> George Sanderlin, ed., *Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Selection of His Writings* (NY: Knopf, 1971), 200.

<sup>6</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "Of Cannibals," in *The Complete Essays*, Donald Frame, ed. & tr. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1957), 152.

<sup>7</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*, 153.

<sup>8</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*, 156.

<sup>9</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*, 155.

---

<sup>10</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, § 49.

<sup>11</sup> The linear development of the philosophers' thought is in sharp contrast to the overall European debate where both good and bad representations of the Indians are present throughout. These representations are used in numerous intra-European struggles: Protestants v. Catholics, Spain v. her enemies, nobles v. kings, and in dynastic struggles.

<sup>12</sup> Condorcet, "On the Influence of the America Revolution on Europe" (1786). In *Condorcet: Selected Writings*, Keith Baker, ed., 76.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Price, *Political Writings*, ed. D.O. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 117.

<sup>14</sup> Price, *ibid.*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Price, *ibid.*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> Price, *ibid.*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Turgot, "Letter to Price," in Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the means of making it a benefit to the world* (London: 1784), 127 & 123.

<sup>18</sup> Condorcet, "On the Influence of the America Revolution on Europe," 77 & 81.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of France* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 168-76.

<sup>20</sup> Musset quoted in Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (NY: Oxford UP, 1953), 79-80.

<sup>21</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I., pt. II, ch. 6. Mayer edition, p. 245.

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Bk IV, section 329.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Die Zeitgenossen*, 13. Quoted in Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 174.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics" in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959), 45.

<sup>25</sup> Baudrillard's works include *Amérique* (1986, translated into English as *America* in 1988); *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991, English translation 1995); and *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002, English translation 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard, *America*. Tr. Chris Turner. Verso: 1988, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, 76 & 7.

<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida's piece on 9/11 is entitled "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides." In Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85-136.

<sup>31</sup> All in-text references in this and the following paragraph are to Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Tr. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> Baudrillard also compares 9/11 to "the events of 1968" (27), the magical year of upheaval for recent French radicals. In another work he confesses: "it would be nice to be a terrorist," if death still had some meaning. "I am a terrorist and nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons." Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Tr. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 163.