



ARTICLE

Europeans: don't be afraid of your culture!

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Abstract The West has exercised international hegemony since the Middle Ages. The European states, until 1918, and the US, up to the end of the Cold War, proved capable of imposing their leadership through their military and economic dominance. Today, however, the Western nations are not the only world powers. China, India, Russia and some Islamic countries share global leadership with the US, while Europe is struggling to find a way to be relevant in the twenty-first century. Merely constituting a massive common market is insufficient. In this endeavour Europe is not taking advantage of its most valuable asset: its rich cultural legacy, rooted in thousands of years of history. Ironically, the young US has thus far done a better job of projecting power globally by exploiting its soft power. Placing the humanities back at the centre of education would be the best way for Europeans to recover both their identity and an important role on the world stage.

Keywords Western civilisation | American culture | European culture | Soft power | Education | Humanities | Multipolar world

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Introduction: ideas versus economics

One of the premises of Marxist ideology is that everything that happens in the world happens, essentially, for economic reasons. Social organisation and policy are reduced to the struggle between classes, which is posited as the engine that has driven all of history. According to Marxist thinking, the same is true of literature, philosophy, art and culture in general, which are considered to be fundamentally the consequences of economic realities. It is this thinking that is behind the analyses of literary and artistic movements and styles, such as that by Arnold Hauser in his canonical *The Social History of Art* (1999, originally published in German in 1951).

This approach, however, in which everything in life hinges on the economy, does not always reflect reality. Limiting ourselves to the history of Europe, there are many cases in which it is clear that *ideas* have triggered transformation. One example is provided by Thomas of Aquinas (1225–74), who managed to render Aristotelian philosophy compatible with a Christian worldview. Again, during the Renaissance, writers and artists saved Western civilisation from medieval otherworldliness by rediscovering the classics of antiquity and embracing a more rational understanding of reality—one example here would be the artist Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and his discovery of perspective. This is why, since the Renaissance, Europe has been a transformational force in the world. As Régis Debray (2014, author's own translation) astutely observes: 'the ancient sage contemplated the world; the Arab sage sought the magical formula that would allow him to acquire riches while barely moving; but the Western sage became an engineer.'¹

The transformational power of the Enlightenment is clearer still, as the ideas of the *philosophes* directly fuelled the American and French Revolutions. American democracy, which Alexis de Tocqueville (2003) very lucidly analysed, and whose evolution he astutely foretold, rests essentially on the works of Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu and Rousseau, and their predecessors Bodin, Hobbes and Locke, among others. Here the political and legal organisation of a society followed parameters previously defined by intellectuals. Their ideas found expression in foundational documents such as the Declaration of Independence (1776), the US Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights (1791). These documents, in turn, became the cornerstones for the construction of one of history's most democratic and powerful states. American democracy was initially an intellectual creation. It should come as no surprise to us that John Adams, the second president of the US, translated a fragment of Justinian's *Digest* from Latin to English each night.

¹ Debray believes that the dawn of the Western vision of the world can be traced to the Italian Quattrocento: 'I believe that the West was born on the day that Petrarch ascended Mount Ventoux. For the West is defined by the idea that one must go from contemplating the world to dominating it—thus, one must not merely contemplate Mount Olympus, as the Greeks did, but climb it' (Debray 2014, author's own translation). Circa 1350 Petrarch published a letter in which he considers himself the first person since antiquity to climb a mountain for the exclusive purpose of enjoying the view, referring to his ascent of Mt. Ventoux, in Provence (France), on 26 April 1336. On the meaning for Western history of the ascent of Mount Ventoux by Petrarch, see Blumenberg (1985, 341–2).

The powerful allure of the ‘American way of life’

If the US, thanks to former US President Woodrow Wilson, had become the premier Western power by 1919, its role as such was consolidated by and unquestionable following the collapse of Europe in 1945. Thus, the reordering of the world after Hitler’s defeat was negotiated in the US at conferences such as that at Bretton Woods. The main organisations arising from this international reconstruction, such as the UN, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, are all headquartered in North America. Thanks to its military might and economic clout (hard power), the US won the Cold War (1948–89) against the USSR and the Communist world. Its victory, however, did not mark the ‘end of history’, contrary to the predictions of Fukuyama (2012). This is demonstrated by the attacks on 11 September 2001; the growing conflict between the West and radical Islam; and the rise of other burgeoning powers, including China, India and a neo-imperial Russia under President Putin, which have rendered the world multipolar.

Despite these developments, however, the US continues to boast a virtually uncontested international monopoly over soft power, as it is incontrovertible that American civilisation has prevailed, with the world admiring and seeking to adopt the ‘American way of life’. This is true not only from a technological point of view, in its use of smartphones and tablets, but also with reference to the success of the US’s films and television series; the Oscars awards ceremony, for example, is recognised as the world’s leading cinematographic event. We don the fashions worn in the US, and many of us eat American, thanks to the country’s fast-food chains and soft drinks.²

As Europeans we are also fascinated and affected by the US’s soft power, accepting with few reservations its cultural hegemony, and even adopting quintessentially American celebrations such as Thanksgiving and Hallowe’en, which have no roots in our traditions. And we follow the US presidential elections as even more important than our own,³ because the president of the US has become the West’s unquestionable leader.⁴

The biggest challenge we face as a result of believing in the US’s cultural hegemony is that many Europeans tend to harbour a certain complex about their own cultural

² ‘In Vietnam the GIs lost, but Coca-Cola won the war.’ In Vietnam today, ironically, the US is the dominant influence, rather than France, which occupied ‘Indochina’ for almost a century. Today the Vietnamese strive to speak English, not French, and it is the US model that captures young people’s imaginations. ‘True hegemony exists when domination is not only accepted, but desired by those who are dominated.’ This is the great victory of the US. (Both quotations are from Debray 2014, author’s own translations).

³ Régis Debray believes that one of the West’s strong points is its ‘unprecedented cohesion under the aegis of Washington—which, when all is said and done, is accepted by all. In a multipolar world, the West is the only unipolar entity. A Chinese would never allow himself to be represented by an Indian, nor would an Indian agree to be represented by a Chinese. And the same could be said of a Brazilian and an Argentinean, or a Nigerian and a South African. In contrast, the West has only one emergency phone number: that of the White House’ (2014, author’s own translation).

⁴ ‘We should not be surprised that when Barack Obama was elected president of the United States the entire world sighed with hope, because everywhere there was a feeling that a president for all of humanity had won’ (Zuppiroli 2014, 24).

heritage. Too often, we undervalue it. We do not dare to truly defend it, or to publicly uphold it, feeling that it belongs to the past and that Europe is outmoded and out of step with today's world. This is due to the fact that Europe has lost its identity, to a great extent, by committing to an essentially economic union in which cultural integration has been deferred. The surprising thing is that today Americans are actually the greatest champions of European culture.

The US's fascination with European soft power

It is, without a doubt, a paradox, but today it is in the US that European culture is most valued. The phenomenon is not actually new; Charles Dickens (1812–70) read his works in the US, drawing massive crowds (Pearl 2009). The presence of European culture in the US increased after the temporary triumph of Nazism in Europe, which spurred eminent European artists and intellectuals to emigrate and settle there. These individuals included the film directors Fritz Lang and Billy Wilder; the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen, father of the redefinition of the 'rule of law' doctrine; and the politician Jean Monnet, the architect of the process of European integration, who, in the 1930s, became one of the most eminent members of the think tank advising President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, enabling him to have a major influence on the launch of the European Recovery, better known as the Marshall Plan.

The fascination with European soft power also transformed art in the US. An example from the fine art world is that of John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), an American who was born in Florence and died in London and managed to completely master the technique and capture the pictorial genius of the greatest French Impressionists, along with his fellow American and Francophile Mary Cassatt (1844–1926). A genuinely American pictorial vein was created by Edward Hopper (1882–1967), who spent a good part of his life in Europe, which has caused his work to be highly valued by Europeans. Likewise, the discipline of photography, a European invention, soon spread to the US as a result of Europeans moving to the New World. These migrants included Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) born in Germany; Weegee (1899–1969) born in Austria; and Robert Frank, born in Zürich in 1924,⁵ whose best-known work was his new vision of the American Dream presented in the famous work *The Americans*. Without a doubt these migrants had a decisive influence on the work of US photographers such as Garry Winogrand (1928–84), Diane Arbus (1923–71) and Annie Leibovitz (born 1949), unquestionably today's most renowned photographer.

In the field of literature it is necessary to mention American writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway, who were undeniably fascinated by Europe. They were the 'Lost Generation' ably described by Cynthia Ozyck in her book *Foreign Bodies* (Ozyck 2010), and by American film director Alan Rudolph in his splendid European-style film *The Moderns* (1988). Since the 1960s the deconstructivist

⁵ Frank was a disciple of the US photographer Walker Evans, who, with Dorothea Lange, revealed images that captured the terrible realities of the Great Depression at the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in an effort to sway US public opinion so that the nation would accept his New Deal reforms.

and structuralist revolution, dubbed ‘French Theory’ and advanced by European thinkers including Derrida, Barthes, Cixous, Kristeva and Deleuze, has been widely accepted by literary critics and the departments of literature at US universities, to the extent that it informs the vision of contemporary American writers as influential as Paul Auster and John Irving. These authors do not hesitate to adopt the most avant-garde literary techniques, although without abandoning the narrative thread, following the model of the European novel as defined by Maupassant (1850–1893) in his prologue to *Pierre et Jean*. Paul Auster evidences this tradition in *Brooklyn Follies* (2005) and John Irving sets many parts of his novels in Europe, such as *The World According to Garp* (1982), and, more recently, *In One Person* (2012), part of which takes place in Madrid. Meanwhile, one of the world’s most esteemed literary critics, American Harold Bloom (born 1930), is a staunch defender of European literature as the foundation of Western culture (Bloom 1995).

The most recent example of an American creator fascinated by Europe is Woody Allen, whose films are even more popular in Europe than in the US. This has prompted him to shoot some of his most famous projects on the Old Continent, demonstrating an obvious European sensibility in films such as *Match Point* (2005), in which he portrays the English gentry in a magnificent counterpoint to Theodor Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. Allen has also ventured into Spain to shoot *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008); into France to film *Midnight in Paris* (2011), a work expressing nostalgia for a bygone era when Americans formed part of the Parisian cultural universe under the aegis of Gertrude Stein; and Italy, to create *To Rome with Love* (2012).

Education and soft power

In light of all this, it is worth asking whether this European cultural attitude which we have towards US soft power is, to a great extent, a consequence of the fact that the US has also become the world’s premier force in the field of education. US universities are training grounds for elites from all over the planet; even the children of Chinese leaders attend US business schools and colleges. Fascination with the American model even prompted the EU to seek to adapt the continent’s higher education model to look more like that of the Americans’ under the Bologna Process of 1999. This initiative, in spite of its positive points, has devalued our own university tradition (Aguilera-Barchet 2012). Is there a relationship between the complex that we Europeans have when it comes to defending our cultural traditions and the degradation of our educational model? There clearly is, as the paradigmatic case of France shows.

Has French culture died?

French culture is, traditionally, one of the most respected in the US. Thus when, in 2007, the US journalist Donald Morrison wrote an article in *Time* magazine titled ‘The Death of French Culture’ (Morrison 2007) French intellectuals were indignant, with thinkers on both the right and left quick to respond to what they viewed as insolent criticism

(Compagnon 2010). However Morrison had only set forth the evidence that showed how French culture had lost its influence in the world, a fact surely due, in great part, to the progressive dismantling of the French education system over the last 50 years.

The revolution of May 1968, which failed in the political sphere, nevertheless triumphed notably in the ideological and educational arenas. Almost half a century later, the ideological celebrators of the 1968 Revolution continue to dominate French education. In spite of a succession of governments on the left and right, national education has remained in the hands of the ‘pedagogocrats’ ensconced in the Rue de Grenelle, the headquarters of the French Education Ministry. Only now is there a growing recognition, even on the left, that the educational reform has failed, and that several generations of French students have been done a disservice (Marianne 2015). Despite this, the current minister of education under the Socialist government of President Hollande, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, insists on a line that seeks to eradicate any references to culture, suppressing history, philosophy, literature, Latin and Greek, in favour of a positivist scientism that constrains freedom of thought and leads to the progressive elimination of thinking people, turning citizens into submissive subjects. This is the kind of society described in Huxley’s *A Brave New World* (1932), in which citizens gladly accept a system of social classification based on postulates which are not to be questioned. In reality, intellectuals in France who seek to develop their own lines of thought without endorsing official positions, such as Régis Debray, are considered traitors by their colleagues.

The worst part is that the education system inspired by the ideals of May 1968, which was originally designed to reduce social inequalities, has actually aggravated them. The result is that today, gaining access to France’s elite education, offered at its *Grandes écoles* of engineering (École Polytechnique) and business (Hautes Études Commerciales), and at the École Nationale d’Administration and the École Normale Supérieure, is almost impossible for the children of families without economic resources. The education system imposed by the left is, then, much more socially unjust now than it was before 1968 (Marianne 2015, 42).

Obviously, this degradation of France’s public education system has undermined the influence of the country’s intellectuals. Many French thinkers were leading figures in the 1950s and 1960s, but today, French intellectualism is subject to a dictatorship of political correctness and *pensée unique*. This has led the average Frenchman to lose respect for his country’s thinkers, and thus explains the lamentable popularity in France of the extreme-right thinker Eric Zémour (Zémour 2014).

In search of the lost soft power

Having reached this point, one must ask whether Europe has definitively lost the battle for soft power. And the answer ought to be a resounding ‘no’. First, because when it comes to daily life the world remains rife with European elements: pizza is from Naples; the baguette, Camembert and champagne are French; and *jamón serrano* is Spanish. The great fashion designers—Valentino, Chanel, Nina Ricci, Versace, Dior and Yves

Saint Laurent—are still mostly European. The world's leading multinational fashion firm is Zara, built by Spain's Amancio Ortega (born 1936), while in cosmetics the leader is France's L'Oréal. Luxury continues to be a European concept.

In addition, thanks to what has been called the 'cultural exception', the EU has promoted the development of an excellent cinematographic industry in Europe, not only with reference to feature films, but also the production of quality European television series, such as France's *Engrenaje*, Spain's *Isabel*, and Denmark's *The Killing* and *Borgen*. In the literary field Europeans are beginning to publish international bestsellers once again, such as those produced by the UK's Ken Follett, Sweden's Stieg Larsson and Denmark's Jussi Adler Olsen. France's Patrick Modiano won the 2014 Nobel Prize for Literature, demonstrating the manifest recovery of French culture, as splendidly pointed out by the UK's Sudhir Hazareesingh (2015).

In addition, European soft power is not only limited to the strictly intellectual or artistic spheres. It also has much to contribute to the way we organise our societies in Europe, as demonstrated by the case of transport. During the Eisenhower administration the US automotive industry exerted considerable pressure on the government to build a national interstate highway system, whose construction sent the US rail network, then excellent, into decline. As a result, today Europe is well ahead of the US in terms of rail infrastructure. Europeans use public transport much more, which is not only environmentally sound, but enhances our quality of life too. European soft power has, then, much to offer for a Western cultural renaissance, provided that it is based on true talent and admiration for and respect of Europe's cultural heritage.

Conclusion: soft power, the West's greatest potential contribution to the world in the twenty-first century

At first glance today's world belongs to pragmatists, economists and businessmen, and not to intellectuals or artists. But, if this were true, we would be dealing with an economy of scale in a multipolar world in which Europe and the US would be at a disadvantage. And yet the fact is that we still have the upper hand and a lot to offer when it comes to soft power: Western patterns are still the most widely accepted all over the world and, in the end, cultural reflexes are the most important of all.⁶

The problem for Europeans is that if we want to play an important role in the world again we must regain our pride and confidence in our own soft power. Europe cannot

⁶ At the decisive moments of history, the keys are always cultural. In the second century BC Rome had serious problems subduing Hispania. The Celtiberian tribes had revolted, and Rome's legions were unable to suppress them. Rome decided to send to its greatest general, Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus, to put down Hispania's rebels. There was, however, a problem: he was not of legal age. In spite of this, the Roman Senate agreed to name him commander-in-chief, upon the condition that he be accompanied by a tutor. Designated for this position was one of the era's most renowned intellectuals: the Greek historian Polybius. Though old and frail, he accompanied the great general who, after seven long years of siege, took Numancia in the year 133 BC.

limit itself to being merely a great market, but must find its own way to represent itself and present itself to others (Debray 2014). We must reconstruct our cultural identity and encourage our young people to once again study our history, literature and art. Thus it is indispensable to equip them with humanist educations, the only type capable of enabling them to understand the world they live in.

Of course, recovering our European identity does not mean we should ignore US soft power. In the same way that American intellectuals admire European culture, Europeans must appreciate American culture in order to understand how Europe is unique. Rather than competing, the aim should be to foment intellectual and artistic exchanges spanning the Atlantic, which, as we have seen, can yield excellent results when it comes to achieving original and attractive soft power.

The recovery of Europe's cultural essence, without a doubt essential to the Old Continent becoming a major force in the twenty-first-century world, is the challenge that Europeans have ahead. And we can only achieve this if we transform our educational system into an instrument that produces thinking young people who rediscover and admire their culture and centuries of history. Europe will only become internationally relevant again if it effectively bolsters the forces of Western soft power. Only then will it be possible to join Tony Judt (2010, 800) in thinking that the twenty-first century might yet belong to Europe.

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