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A Growing Gap

Thoughts on the current transatlantic relations

The conflict between Europe and America is a reality. At this point it consists mostly of differences of opinion, but the continents are drifting apart, and a larger break is not unthinkable any more. Impressions of travel and time travel by Michael Freund.

"It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world. [...] Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus."

Robert Kagan, *Policy Review*

"The Americanization of Europe is a myth."

Richard Pells, "Not like us"

They had been looking forward to their travels, as in previous years: the art curator meeting dealers and lenders in Paris; the couple on a fall vacation in the bay of Positano; the assistant professor discussing with students in Dessau, Germany. But instead of paintings on loans, nice memories and a friendly exchange of ideas, they brought back a sobering experience – in the words of the curator: "Never before have I met so much hostility towards Americans."

Their travel tales only confirm what can be experienced every day, something that the denials of government spokesmen merely corroborate, something that gaffes communicate at the highest – and therefore frequently the lowest – level, and something that turns out to be not an arbitrary whim or the challenged intellectual insight of some statesman or other, but a long and ongoing development: relations between the USA and Europe are in a crisis.

There has been talk about this for a while – in the form of innuendos since the end of the Cold War, more openly since Bush announced his crusade against the axis of evil. But only slowly has it become evident how deep the differences go. The continents are drifting apart, the Atlantic is becoming wider.

Transatlantic relations based on gratitude, developmental and military aid and confirmed by economic success appeared set to last an eternity. Even as the fall of the Berlin Wall gave a premonition of the changes in the air, Francis Fukuyama was still arguing that "the end of history" had come (Remember? It seems eons ago!), that free markets and liberal democracy made further development obsolete.

As we know, the opposite has happened. There has been a massive confrontational build-up, new dividing lines have formed. Let's remember this too: Samuel Huntington diagnosed a "clash of civilizations" and identified Islam as one of four global blocs, in opposition to the Western, enlightened Judeo-Christian bloc. But Europe is no longer a faithful junior partner in this league. History is just about to start.

So far, all concerned agree. But what is debated on both sides of the Atlantic is the origin of the differences, how dangerous they are and, above all, for whom, and what long-range effects they will have. Who has to watch out more? Are the animosities "only" of a political nature, or do they extend to the cultural and moral roots? Is the process of alienation perhaps a distant echo of something that was already part of the histories and founding myths of the nations involved?

It is also relevant to ask what the inhabitants of the two continents think of each other's politics and values. (And it soon becomes evident that even terms such as "patriotism" and "Christianity" have different meanings for different cultural spheres.)

One-way tickets were handed out at the beginning of the European-American relationship. They were voyages away from religious and social discrimination, towards a New Eden. This place was defined in contrast to the original (England) and later European motherlands. Thus a special form of dual identity emerged; from the outset Americans felt separate but remembered their origins, whether with pride or a sense of distance, or both. And Europeans for a long time thought of the New World experiment as an – admirable or slightly odd – continuation of the Old World. (Of course, when we speak of "Europeans", it is really a fiction, even today. Even more so, "the" Americans exist only in an abstract sense, like the statistical mean in surveys.)

Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first to comment on the formation of a new society on the other side of the Atlantic. *De la démocratie en Amérique*, written after his travels in 1831/32, is still considered to be one of the best books about the country and its form of government. He described how a religiously inspired idealism went hand in hand with very down-to-earth interests; how a young nation was founded on individualism and a distrust of central government; how influential the lawyers there were and, compared to Europe, also the women; how little the inhabitants cared for theoretical debates and how much for applicable knowledge.

De Tocqueville observed the early stage of the Americans' conviction that theirs was the Promised Land. Only in 1845 did a journalist coin the term "manifest destiny", the continuous westward movement towards the "frontier" – which, too, was a metaphor formulated relatively late, at the end of the 19th century. At that point, there was no physical frontier left to be moved further west, and the concept assumed a metaphysical meaning. (Kennedy's space-age formulation of a conquest of the "last frontier" reunited the skyward bound metaphor with technical reality.)

The withdrawal from the world outside the nation's borders, a world the founding fathers had escaped from only a few generations ago, was counterbalanced by the missionary zeal to let others share the blessings of the USA. The interventions in both world wars drastically changed relations with Europe: America became a major international player. More than that, after the second time around it was able to determine the rules of the game. It embodied

the promise of modernity, the future, pop culture, severing the ties with traditions and undemocratic authorities: That was the post-war status quo, not loved by everyone in Europe, but denied by no one.

Transatlantic travelling has of course increased considerably since de Tocqueville's time. Writers have crossed the Atlantic in both directions. Mark Twain was able to apply his irony to England as well as New England; the German novelist Friedrich Gerstaecker wrote his novels about the Wild West on the basis of first-hand knowledge. In the 1920s, the lost generation bought one-way tickets to Paris – it was the avant-garde of the nostalgia of American intellectuals for The Other, for a life that seemed not to be possible (or affordable) in the US any more.

The journey in the opposite direction has become affordable only in the last few decades. Those who have travelled to America since the 1960s have come with many media images in their mental baggage. But if they tour with open eyes, they can perceive a lot of de Tocqueville rather than just a soap opera reality. They can discover that the USA, far from being thoroughly "modern" as has been constantly suggested, is quite traditional in certain areas. They have found out that Europe is a lot further away from America than the other way round. (For Americans, by the way, the countries of the Old World are no longer as important as places of origin. Today, two thirds of the US population are still of European descent; in 20 years they will constitute a minority, at the expense of Latinos and Asian Americans.) They have also been able to discover that America is full of contradictions, for all the platitudes uttered about it – in part simply because it is a whole continent and not a homogeneous, monocultural state. (Paradoxically, the opposite is also true: in many respects the USA seems to be a lot more homogenous than the old continent.)

Thus, trips westward have become a subtle factor in the relations of Europeans to America. They have helped to debunk many old myths but have also created new ones. Certainly they have helped Europeans to perceive the United States as something separate and not just a poor imitation of their own culture. In the complexity of the transatlantic web of relations, personal impressions function as seismographs that foresee larger shifts.

There have been more evident signs of the increasing pressure on these relations. The results have varied, depending on the country and government involved. The French president de Gaulle, for example, frequently got into conflict with American (and Anglo-Canadian) politicians, chased NATO headquarters out of France and supplemented the defense pact with a home-made "force de frappe" – all within the framework of a clear Western world view. Liberal Sweden, always open to exiles and conscientious objectors, irritated Washington at the time of the Vietnam war. Italy's "eurocomunismo" was considered a nuisance – secret societies in alliance with the CIA allegedly stood by to avoid what they considered the worst case, i.e. a government not favoured by the West. Opposition to the war in Southeast Asia united leftist student cultures on both sides of the Atlantic. A feeling of international solidarity pervaded the late 1960s and early 1970s, which made it possible to forget the different traditions of protest. It is ironic that two major organisations of dissent with the same acronym existed in Europe and the US and frequently made the headlines under similar circumstances. But the American protesters would have had a hard time with the leftist socialist party roots of the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund SDS (Socialist German Student Association). And the German comrades ultimately would not have

embraced the libertarian streak in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

The 1980s brought a consolidation of the official European–American relations. This was most evident in the honeymoon relationship between Reagan and Thatcher. In fact, relations between the US and Britain have always been the least complicated. With Western Germany under Kohl, too, there were few problems after the protests against medium–range missiles had died down. The end of the Eastern Bloc seemed to justify Reagan's politics, hence Fukuyama's comments about the end of history.

Relations with France were and remain a special case. On the one hand they have been characterised by a strongly felt sympathy – remember that the French supported the young nation in its battles for freedom, they sold Louisiana to the Americans and gave them the Statue of Liberty. On the other hand animosities have sometimes extended to the angry exchange of diplomatic notes. Usually, though, they have been restricted to cultural battles – and these too are ambivalent. True, there are French initiatives to combat Hollywood's domination of the film market and the Anglo influence on French language, but hardly anywhere in Europe do American cultural icons meet with so much popular sympathy. McDonald's may be despised *chez les français*, the Wall Street Journal noted last fall on the occasion of a Bruce Springsteen concert in Paris, "but the Boss still rocks".

For the average American moviegoer, in turn, there is hardly anything more alien than films in which people who do not even look like stars, clad in black turtlenecks, sit around chain–smoking and engaging in endless debates. That at least is the perception of French films – true French cinema barely finds its way into American movie theaters at all.

French *savoir vivre* is highly regarded in the US everywhere, be it fashion to cuisine or, a few leagues higher up, protection of the cultural patrimony or health care. "I had been critical of an 'exaggerated' welfare state, a US correspondent living in Paris recently wrote in the *International Herald Tribune*, "until I underwent several months of cancer treatment and in the end was billed 50 francs (around 8 dollars)." Back home, she added, she would have fallen under the poverty line. (The English historian Tony Judt, who has lived in France and America, once told me that in his opinion, the ridicule the Anglos reserve for the French is fuelled by pure envy. And the American historian Richard Pells argues that the Europeans have mostly transformed US cultural imports, not merely submitted to them.)

Two developments since the end of the Cold War put the relationship between the US and the European Union (EU) to the test, and it did not fare well in the process: the conflict in the Balkan and the consequences of 9/11.

In ex–Yugoslavia it looks as if Europe may indeed have been striving for economic unity, but was unable or unwilling to pursue a common foreign and defense policy. Thus a division of labor came about: the US would handle the military aspects, the EU would take care of humanitarian efforts afterwards. This division has been cited frequently since, in a critical vein by American hawks, in an affirmative way by advocates of a new European identity.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon at first put all divergences on the backburner. The appeals to unity and to Western values are well–known. But signs soon appeared to indicate that the front was crumbling.

Many factors combined at different levels: the disappearance of a bipolar world with clearly contoured enemies; the sobering experience of Europe in the Balkan; a new style in Washington which started with the Bush administration, i.e. six months before the attacks; growing skepticism about the righteous claims of this administration; the lack of experience with a new kind of enemy against whom the old military doctrines do not work; diverging ideas on how to deal with certain states. And these are only the macropolitical factors. Add to them the social and cultural differences which develop their own, unpredictable dynamics.

Western Europeans are generally quite critical of the USA, especially the French and the Germans (71 and 67 per cent respectively think that the dissemination of American ideas and values is not a good thing). Only the people affected by America's Middle East and anti-Islam policy show higher percentages, whereas Eastern Europeans and especially the Japanese have very strong sympathies for American ideas. Still, a qualified majority in Western Europe agree that the world would be a more dangerous place with a second superpower around. So there are reservations about the value of the big ally, but also a feeling that it is good to have it and only it around.

This is where the American critics of Europe come into the picture. The EU, they argue, cannot even solve its own problems, but wants to play the role of an equal partner on the global stage. "But real international life isn't nice", the renowned neo-conservative political analyst Robert Kagan argued recently in the *Herald Tribune*. Without military power, he continued, there is no international policy.

Kagan's criticism is directed against European as well as American "abstentionists", i.e. all who reject the war option against Iraq. Actually, European opposition troubles him less, since he does not see the EU foreign policy as serious competition. Like other neo-conservatives – e.g. Walter Russell Meade – he notes a stagnation in the European economy: "Jacksonians (i.e. US nationalists, among whom he counts himself) think that Europeans will continue to lose influence, because their numbers are in decline, they are growing older, and because their economies are growing more slowly than those of developing countries, not to mention the economy of the United States."

The demographic problem within the EU is well-known and will be difficult to solve without a radically altered immigration policy. The economic forecast of Kagan and others, however, is by no means undisputed. In his new book, *The End of the American Era*, the historian Charles A. Kupchan argues that the expected boom of a united Europe will contribute to the decline of America, which has the additional problem of trying to maintain a unipolar world order. Richard Sennett, the sociologist, is also convinced that Europe by now has a bigger chance of achieving worldwide recognition than his home country.

The list of American critics of current US politics and its position vis-à-vis Europe is probably as long as the list of its supporters – for the former let us just, in an alliterative mood, mention Carter and Clinton, Chomsky and Cronkite. In Europe, too, the fronts crisscross the political establishment and the academic and cultural elites. Apart from an impending war against Iraq there are the issues of ecology and environment, foreign aid and state intervention, religion and gun control – as examples of values with staunch supporters on both sides of the fence.

The positions taken on these issues can go to fundamentalist extremes (of which the Americans are accused as it is). At all events, a continental drift has started, and the transatlantic gap exists. How it will develop is a matter of effort on both sides.

Maybe we should travel more, in reality or at least in virtual reality. There is much to be discovered when the view is less obstructed. And from a European perspective the pluralists who, according to the German historian H.A. Winkler, have always prevailed in America, offer some hope. These days more than ever before, progressive, antidogmatic politics need allies on this side of the Atlantic.

Published 2003-02-11

Original in German

Translation by Michael Freund

Contribution by [Der Standard](#)

First published in *Der Standard, ALBUM*, 11 January 2003 (German version)

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