



**Roundtable: “Cultural Transfer or Cultural Imperialism?” (roundtable discussion),  
*Diplomatic History*, Volume 24, Issue 3 (Summer 2000).**

- [Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Shame on U.S.? Academics, Cultural Transfer, and the Cold War: A Critical Review”](#)
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- [Richard Kuisel, “Commentary: Americanization for Historians”](#)
- [John W. Dower, “Commentary: ‘Culture,’ Theory, and Practice in U.S.-Japan Relations”](#)

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“Americanization: The Lowest Stage of Globalization?”

The recent *Diplomatic History* roundtable on “Cultural Transfer or Cultural Imperialism?” will expand the compass of scholarship on American foreign relations in some important -- indeed, essential -- new ways. The centerpiece essay by Jessica Gienow-Hecht and the commentaries by Richard Pells, Bruce Kuklick, Richard Kuisel and John Dower each contain a wealth of new information, new ideas, and unfamiliar citations which will lead scholars down a variety of cultural paths.

The format of the roundtable has already left Professor Gienow-Hecht’s essay, “Shame on US?”, subject to engaged and spirited critique by the other participants. To enter into a detailed critique of Gienow-Hecht’s essay, then, could add little. At the same time, the range of issues touched on by the contributors is so broad that addressing them point-by-point would be a lengthy process. So instead of noting my agreement or disagreement with specific claims, this commentary will highlight five themes suggested by the symposium. In the course of outlining some directions for future study and concerns for ongoing research on America’s world role in the twentieth century, I will draw on the valuable contributions of the symposium.

1) “When I Hear the Word ‘Culture,’ I Reach for My Dictionary”: Meanings of Culture and Cultures of Meaning

As the literary critic Raymond Williams noted in *KEYWORDS* (1976), “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” So when scholars describe the effects and course of “cultural imperialism” or “cultural expansion,” a crucial antecedent question is: “Which culture?” Gienow-Hecht turns to this question effectively in her discussions of two important German issues: first, the German Democratic Republic’s (GDR) use of *Kultur* in the service of Cold War conflict. (468) This German definition of culture as “high culture” had plenty of adherents in the rest of Europe and even in the United States. GDR authorities had their own political spin on American culture, calling it “a manifestation of a corrupt democracy.” But the GDR line echoed claims by many western European intellectuals. As Gienow-Hecht

describes the collection *AS OTHERS SEE US* (1959), edited by Franz Joseph and Raymond Aron, condemnations of American mass culture were repeated across western Europe. America offered only “intellectual fodder” to the masses, resulting in a nation which was a “giant with the head of a lout.” (468) American propagandists seemed oblivious to some of these criticisms, relying on a vague definition of American culture but nevertheless insisted that what the world needed was more of it. (469) Perhaps because of the imprecision over what exactly constituted American culture, American expansion found far more success in exporting mass culture than in exporting Kultur. And the American expansion was similarly unsuccessful at exporting a definition of culture. (486)

Gienow-Hecht alludes in passing to earlier critiques of American mass culture, especially in the 1920s. Citing Briton D.H. Lawrence and German Adolf Halfeld -- to which one could add Andre Siegfried and the entire French industry of America-bashing -- she notes how interwar European intellectuals dismissed America as an economic power entirely bereft of culture -- that is, of high culture. [1] But such critiques did not emanate only from Europeans or conservatives; American intellectuals of various political stripes similarly questioned America’s ability to move beyond a “pecuniary society” -- one focused on consumption and production to the exclusion of edification. While many social and literary critics worried over the state of American high culture, a few (John Dewey and Lewis Mumford, for instance) specifically addressed what the perceived weakness of American high culture would mean for Europe. Some felt strongly enough about this weakness that they escaped what they considered America’s cultural wasteland to the expatriate community in Paris.

These fleeting observations suggest two points. First, the debates about the meanings of culture profoundly shaped the debates over American cultural expansion. American commercial culture led the charge overseas, picking up steam in the 1920s, especially in the new medium of film. With the Cold War and the expansion of a governmental apparatus for spreading American culture, the process of cultural expansion became more complicated. The U.S. Information Agency was catholic in its definition of American culture, sending Martha Graham, the Boston Symphony, and Van Cliburn overseas, along with middlebrow cultural figures like James Michener -- not to mention the efforts to promote the “American way of life” at international exhibitions and elsewhere. [2] USIA officials sought not only to rebut foreign skeptics who insisted that America had no high culture worthy of the name, but also to sway those who cared more for modern appliances than modern dance. In Richard Kuisel’s phrase, “we have exported many ‘Americas.’” (510). It is worth adding here that differentiation among the many “we’s” is also important. As Walter La Feber’s reflections on the basketball and commercial juggernaut that is Michael Jordan suggest, the most important symbols for America may have little to do with official efforts to expand America’s cultural profile.

Secondly, discussions of the different sorts of “American culture” had histories predating the Cold War. From the transatlantic conversations of the 1920s, which portrayed an America barren of culture, to later defenses of American culture which significantly broadened the term’s definition, the debate over culture began long before World War II. Examining the meanings of exported “culture” over a longer time frame calls for a more expansive view of the critiques of that culture: from the transnational context of the rise of literary and artistic modernism early in

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the century to the critiques of modernity by the peripatetic Frankfurt School, no one nation has a monopoly on mass culture or its critics.

Criticizing mass culture as “American,” Gienow-Hecht reports, has hardly waned in recent years. Gienow-Hecht cites Russian playwright Edvard Radzinsky’s rather implausible claim that Russians have escaped from American films to the authentic Russian artistic form of Socialist Realism (visitors to Moscow, at least, will quickly note that the latest cult of personality involves not Stalin but Schwarzenegger). (492) But blaming the United States alone for the corrosive spread of mass culture is to fall into an easy trap perceptively identified in the DH symposium. How much of mass culture is truly American?

### 2) America as the Oldest Country:

America as a Nation vs. “America” as the Highest Stage of Modernity In *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ALICE B. TOKLAS*, Gertrude Stein curtly corrected those who thought that hers was the youngest country in the world. America, Stein insisted, is indeed the oldest country -- because it was the first to enter the twentieth century. To Stein, America represented the leading edge of modernity, whether that modernity was defined in terms of industrial production, consumer society, or mass culture. The tendency to associate the deleterious effects of mass culture or the “global economy” with the United States is hardly a new one. Bruce Kuklick’s warning that globalization is not necessarily Americanization -- or even generated within the United States -- is an apt one here. (506)

To what extent has America served as a symbol for all that was right (or wrong) with capitalist economics, with mass culture, or with political democracy? Here Gienow-Hecht’s footnotes are especially useful, as she directs diplomatic historians towards a literature ranging from Mary Nolan to Victoria de Grazia to Paul Hollander. These authors and others have explored not just the images of America overseas, but also (especially in works of Nolan and de Grazia) the contestations and political and economic stakes in defining America in various ways. “America” could be cast as an economic powerhouse or a cultural weakling, even within one nation over a short period of time -- depending on the constellation of political and intellectual forces and the goals of specific critics. Specific studies of the meanings of Americanization and anti-Americanism would greatly benefit our understanding of America’s multiple meanings overseas.

Recent changes in corporate ownership provide numerous examples of how “Americanism” involves entities outside the US. From Sony’s ownership of Columbia Pictures to Bertelsmann’s purchase of Random House to Rupert Murdoch’s international media empire, even icons of American mass culture aren’t necessarily American-owned any more. This is not to claim, as Gienow-Hecht paraphrases theorist John Tomlinson, that “all countries are victims of a global cultural change.” (481-82) But it is to suggest that globalization and Americanization are hardly synonymous, that the most recent rounds of deregulation and international corporate mergers and acquisitions have indeed created a capitalist world economy in which the United States is one of many crucial players. The complex web of nations and economies complicates any easy claims about “cultural imperialism” as a unidirectional force originating in the United States.

### 3) Can Cultural Imperialism Be Transnational?

As with business, so with culture: the networks of mass-cultural imports and exports similarly flow in various directions, not emanating solely from the United States. At the same time that European critics blame America for their cultural ills, their compatriots busily play the American game... in many cases better than Americans themselves. While French intellectuals fell over each other in the rush to criticize Euro Disney as purveying the worst sort of American “culture,” Americans of late have had to endure the Europeanization of at least one niche in the television world. From “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” (adapted from a British show) to the onslaught of new forms of voyeuristic shows such as “Survivor” (a program developed in Britain) and “Big Brother” (modeled on a popular Dutch show), European critics of television programming must now cast their scornful gaze not just across the Atlantic but down the street. (This is not even to mention the latest idea, to debut in America this fall, in which four men are chained to a woman until viewers vote the men off one at a time; “it’s a relationship show,” insist network executives.)

Another element of the transnational nature of both corporate ownership and cultural production offers numerous insights for the study of American history. While more than one participant in the roundtable refers to the bidirectionality of cultural flows into as well as out of the United States, these connections merit further analysis. For instance, the Armory Show of 1913 served as the beachhead for modernist European painting in the United States -- though the links between this artistic movement and the origin of mass culture may be more complex than Pells’s claim that the latter was a direct result of the former. (496) Daniel Rodgers’s widely praised *ATLANTIC CROSSINGS* (1998), to give another example, emphasizes how much of American Progressivism was inspired by or adapted from European (or occasionally Antipodean) sources. Keynesian economics, similarly, was imported to the United States, molded into what Robert Collins called “business Keynesianism” and shortly thereafter re-exported back to Europe. On cultural grounds, the critics of the Frankfurt School developed some of their most effective (and some of their most scathing) criticisms of mass culture after emigrating to the United States. From their positions in American universities and research institutes to their involvement in the Office of Strategic Services, the scholars of the Frankfurt School were intimately engaged in American intellectual projects. And, as Pells mentions, Hollywood itself became a melting pot for European émigrés and an American icon at the very same time. (498)

The flow of people and ideas, then, does not necessarily fit into easy category of “cultural imperialism.” The relationship between these two flows -- people and ideas -- would elucidate important aspects of American unusual form of economic and cultural interactions. On this point, it is perhaps unfortunate that Richard Kuisel sets the Americanization of immigrants apart from the question of the Americanization of foreign cultures. (511) It would seem an especially fruitful line of inquiry to compare what Americanization meant at home with its meanings overseas. Did the content of these two processes overlap? Did they elicit similar forms of resistance or accommodation? Where there individuals actively promoting (or challenging) both domestic and foreign Americanization? If we are to move beyond models of cultural imperialism, as Bruce Kuklick is exhorting us to do, then transnational questions such as these assume all the more importance.

Once again, Gienow-Hecht performs a service for diplomatic historians by introducing unfamiliar scholarship on the nature of cultural interactions, the relationship between economic and cultural power, and related issues. Her enthusiasm for articles in communications studies will help interested scholars of foreign relations learn their way around that area. And her frequent references to German scholarship, perhaps revealing the presumed genesis of this paper at a Bielefeld University seminar, will also help orient linguistically equipped Americans to relevant readings. What is perhaps most embarrassing for American scholars is our general lack of familiarity even with relevant English-language scholarship which is produced in Europe. “European Contributions to American Studies,” a fine series edited by Rob Kroes in Amsterdam, is a ready example of how important and relevant works published outside the US are unevenly integrated into historiographic debates to which they have much to contribute.

#### 4) Culture and Economics

The relationship between culture and economics -- more specifically, between cultural and economic power -- plays an important role in the debates about cultural imperialism/ cultural transfer. Gienow-Hecht, in focusing her article on the decades after World War II, may have inadvertently stacked the deck for cultural imperialism. Entering the 1950s with unprecedented relative economic power, American officials sought to deploy economic success in the battle for the hearts and minds of individuals the world over. Under official sponsorship -- as John Dower so incisively describes for occupied Japan -- as well as through commercial means, American culture raced American capital across western Europe, the emerging Third World, and eventually across eastern Europe. As Kuklick suggests, those engaged in this race across oceans -- US diplomats, multinational as well as US-based corporations, not to mention missionaries of modernization -- did not necessarily think of themselves as cultural imperialists. (505) They saw the spread of American culture and economic organization as part of America’s contribution to the world, or part of the best way to improve their company’s balance sheet, or indeed as acts of altruism. While we need not take them at their word, it is worth inquiring what these so-called imperialists thought they were doing.

Not all acts of cultural expansion were conspiratorial grabs for power-- though, as recent work on the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) suggests, conspiracies did have their place. [3] As scholars, we must not fall into the trap which Kuisel describes, in which “non-Americans. . . have often found it difficult to distinguish” between economic, cultural, and military power. (513) We must be able to differentiate, as most non-Americans are indeed able to, between Euromissiles and Euro Disney and between the CIA and Coca-Cola -- even if separating the CIA from the CCF is not quite so simple. What is needed, then, is a new framework for understanding the relationship between economic and cultural power, especially in the context of “empire” or expansion. Here reference to not one but two Williamses may prove helpful.

William Appleman Williams observed many years ago that it was Americans who frequently confused an economic standard of living with a cultural way of life. To what extent were Americans celebrating economic successes as cultural ones? Clearly examinations of USIA propaganda about consumption suggests that economic achievements were seen in cultural terms. [4] But it was another radical Williams, the literary critic Raymond, who may help scholars address this quandary. Raymond Williams’s landmark *CULTURE AND SOCIETY*,

1780-1850 (1958) traces how culture came to be defined as the antithesis of society and economy in nineteenth-century England. Cultural pursuits were those outside the discipline of the market. This new definition never took hold completely, but since the Victorian era, confusion over culture’s meaning has often related to different proposed relationships to economic activity. Germans’ Kultur was not threatened by American mass culture (here paraphrasing Gienow-Hecht) because they saw Kultur as standing outside the market, in some ways outside of society itself. If Williams’s argument holds, then the innovation of mass culture was to traverse the boundary between economy and culture. So one useful distinction between types of culture might involve ostensible relationship to the market. Whereas Kultur proclaims its position away from (above?) the market, mass culture revels in being in the market’s midst. How did these relationships play out in the transmission of American culture overseas?

##### 5) Globalizing the Study of Americanization

The issues raised in this symposium will serve to expand the study of American foreign relations in two different dimensions. First, they will aid the continued “cultural turn” among a segment of those studying American foreign relations, thus bringing new topics into the mix of what constitutes “foreign relations.” Secondly, consideration of these issues will help replace the implicit model of policies and practices emanating from Washington around the world with one highlighting interactions in multiple sites. This latter move coincides nicely with the recent push toward multi-archival and multinational studies of relationship between states. [5] Historians working on diplomacy, then, are reviving a Samuel Bemis style of history which places the United States in its appropriate international context -- though presumably without the Flagg-waving of some of Bemis’s own writings.

Symposium participants differ greatly in how to best decenter the study of American cultural expansion. Rooted in the European literature on cultural expansion, Gienow-Hecht espouses the optimistic view that such an interactive model is well-worked out. Kuklick is somewhat more skeptical, but his references to the literature on “cultural imperialism” as an “embarrassment” implies that a more interactive model is an intellectual and perhaps a political necessity. (506) Kuisel is the most specific, calling for “microhistories” which could explore the forms of expansion, incorporation and resistance in greater detail. (511) The examples from John Dower’s detailed and sophisticated overview suggest the values of such a closely focused approach. But whatever the specific methods employed, the literature cited by symposium participants indicates the considerable innovation in the study of American foreign relations in the last decade. As Michael Hunt optimistically predicted eight years ago, the “long crisis” of diplomatic history is indeed “coming to closure.” Reinvigorated by archival openings (especially in the former Soviet bloc), new cultural approaches, and increased work along multinational lines, the field of American foreign relations is in an especially vibrant and productive phase. As its practitioners reach from William Appleman Williams to Raymond Williams, from the study of “empire as a way of life” to the complex relationships between economy and culture in an international context, the field has much to look forward to in the coming years. Gienow-Hecht’s contribution serves as a status report and a call to action for all of us to live up to the promise of these new histories of American foreign relations.

NOTES

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[1] See especially Victoria de Grazia, “The Exception Proves the Rule: The American Example in the Recasting of Social Strategies in Europe between the Wars,” in *POURQUOI N’Y A-T-IL PAS DE SOCIALISME AUX ETATS-UNIS? / WHY IS THERE NO SOCIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES?*, ed. Jean Heffer and Jeanine Rovet (1987); and David Strauss, *MENACE IN THE WEST: THE RISE OF FRENCH ANTI-AMERICANISM IN MODERN TIMES* (Westport, Conn., 1978).

[2] See Christina Klein, “Cold War Orientalism: Musicals, Travel Narratives and Middlebrow Culture in Postwar America,” (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1997).

[3] Frances Stonor Saunders, *THE CULTURAL COLD WAR: THE CIA AND THE WORLD OF ARTS AND LETTERS* (New York, 2000).

[4] See Walter Hixson, *PARTING THE CURTAIN: PROPAGANDA, CULTURE AND THE COLD WAR, 1945-1961* (New York, 1997); and Laura Belmonte, “Exporting America: The U.S. Propaganda Offensive, 1945-59” (forthcoming).

[5] See for instance the essays by Hunt and Leffler in *AMERICA IN THE WORLD: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY SINCE 1941*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge, 1995).

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