



Conference Papers on the Web

**The American Impact on Western Europe:
Americanization and Westernization in Transatlantic Perspective**

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Comment on the papers of Victoria de Grazia
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If we took an old-fashioned approach to the 1960s in Germany and concentrated on the political figureheads steering the country, former chancellor Ludwig Erhard would be an obvious choice. Ludwig Erhard comes to my mind for a different reason – as the central character in a story which ties in some of the observations featured by both Victoria de Grazia and Axel Schildt. The story runs as follows: A couple of years ago, the "Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung" was in need of cash and therefore put up some of the personal belongings of Ludwig Erhard for auction. Among these were a valet dating back to the days when Erhard as Secretary of Commerce presided over the "economic miracle" of the 50s, the so-called "Wirtschaftswunder". The happy buyer of the valet found a little note inside in Erhard's handwriting. "In case of inflation or an otherwise severe economic crisis", the ever optimistic politician had written down, "there is some cash in a coffee-box stored in the kitchen-cabinet."

So much for the story as it was reported years ago in the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung". It brings me to my first observation on the excellent presentations by Victoria de Grazia and Axel Schildt. Once we use, as Professor de Grazia suggests, "Americanization" as a heuristic device to approach European history, then economic history should be read not only in terms of exchange rates, growth statistics and investment records, but also as cultural history and as a history of mentalities. In Ludwig Erhard's case, we find a mentality closely related to Professor de Grazia's notion of a "solidaristic European market", based on a stratified and closed system of exchange. Once we interpret the "closed system" as an attempt to avoid risk-taking and to protect oneself against the turmoils of a globalized free-market economy, we

are close to a traditional German mind-set. It was prominent, if not dominating in the first half of the century and dates back, among other things, to the devastating experience of the horrible twins, war and inflation, which ruined a generation's life twice. Judging from this perspective, the policy of German big business cartels and the economic attitude of small buyers are very much alike. In both cases we witness the ever-present fear of economic breakdown and the attempt to re-insure oneself against all odds.

Axel Schildt argues quite convincingly that the 50s and 60s mark a new approach, an age of consumerism symbolizing the attempt to make good for all the losses and disappointments of former decades. For further research, I suggest to build on this observation and to write German economic postwar history along the lines of Professor de Grazia's essay. In other words: To approach Germany's economic postwar history as a record of an economic behavior undergoing profound changes. We witness the gradual development of an attitude which might be described as "creditcard mentality". To afford the luxury items mentioned by Professor Schildt, people began, albeit slowly, yet visibly to live beyond their means. They designed individual instalment plans, spent money they had not yet earned – an attitude unheard of in the past and obviously spooky for Ludwig Erhard as well who is otherwise remembered as the man encouraging the new approach. The 60s, it seems to me, were a point of no return, a decade of learning how to take risks by doing, very much apart from the 50s and their agenda-setting slogan "no experiments" – for further details, see an insightful essay by Michael Wildt in a recently published volume on "Westbindungen", which I co-edited with my colleague Heinz Bude. Risk-taking, however, is something as American as apple-pie. Ever

since the 60s, Germans were ready for a large piece of that pie, occasional problems of indigestion notwithstanding.

Both papers make a strong case to measure the effects of "Americanization" by comparative studies. In the case of Italy, as Professor de Grazia suggests, we witness a society resistant to the impact of economic "Americanization" – at least for quite a number of years and due to the dominating impact of tightly knit neighborhood economies. Whereas in the case of Germany, we are confronted with a society the social fabric of which was literally torn apart by the war. Traditional neighborhoods were destroyed, the demographic balance was severely disturbed, social relations had to be re-arranged vis-a-vis an unprecedented flow of 12 million refugees. As superbly demonstrated by Martin Broszat in his "Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform", German society in a sense was left without a fall-back position. In other words: It was forced into opening up to the dynamics of a globalized economy – no matter whether the protagonists liked it or not.

The paradigm "Americanization", it seems to me, is a useful tool to measure how far a traditional economy breaks away from its limitations. And, for that matter, it tells us a lot about the capabilities and capacities of a given society to cope with the costs of modernization. Victoria de Grazia's notion of "inertia", it seems to me, is an important case in point. On the one hand, there is a traditional European "economic inertia", on the other hand the challenge of American-styled acceleration. "Americanization" for that matter – and again defined as a heuristic device – helps to focus on a crucial issue of social history: How societies come to terms with a new pattern of time, with a new regiment of time dominating public and individual life. A reflection

of "time" is one of the issues long overdue in our stocktaking of the 20th century.

Axel Schildt asked in his paper: Did the Federal Republic during the "long 60s", covering the time span from 1957 to 1973, finally become a Western nation? He touched on various topics which should be on our research-agenda for the years to come. Let me add three more items which, according to my judgement, are crucial both for this period and for Germany's potential to find its way back to Western traditions of politics, philosophy and, equally important, a set of moral values usually defined as respect for life and individuality:

First, the Auschwitz trial in the early 60s. This trial highlights the issue of individual responsibility and guilt which, as Raimund Lammersdorf pointed out in his presentation, runs through all of German postwar history. It can be interpreted as an example how Germans regained moral ground which had formerly been contaminated by Nazi-rule – and covers an issue without which our image of postwar Germany gets out of focus.

Second, I was somehow surprised that during this conference the issue of German militarism was not touched. For if there was something urgently in need to be broken up and remodeled, it was the German military tradition. We all know that the concept of "Innere Führung" was an attempt to learn from the American role model of the "citizen soldier". Yet this chapter of history still waits to be critically evaluated. The same applies to the history how former Wehrmacht generals reacted to American leadership.

Third, talking about "Americanization" we should not miss the issue of "civil disobedience". The year 1968 is a case in point: The long record of protest and deviating behavior more often than not is interpreted as Germany successfully joining ranks with the political agenda of Western democracies. And yet, important questions remain unanswered: Did the students' movement actually open up a new understanding of politics? Of how to deal with conflicts, how to compromise and how to balance pragmatism with the traditional set of ideological assumptions? And if so, did this new understanding permeate German society and politics?

These and other topics which might easily be added vindicate the assumption I tried to make at the very beginning: The deeper you dive into German postwar history, the more you'll find that the concept of "Americanization" is a useful device – if used in a heuristic sense. Professors de Grazia and Schildt convincingly demonstrate how to apply this approach to historic research.

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