



# Conference Papers on the Web

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

*Conference at the German Historical Institute  
Washington, D.C., March 25–27, 1999*

Mary Nolan  
Americanization or Westernization?

## AMERICANIZATION OR WESTERNIZATION?

Mary Nolan

New York University

Americanization or Westernization? What's in a name? What is at issue in the conceptual contestation that structures this conference? Which term is most helpful in understanding the complex transformation in West Germany after 1945? While I cannot claim to provide any easy or definitive answers to these questions, I do want to offer a preliminary evaluation of the frameworks offered by Professors Doering-Manteuffel, Maase and Berghahn. In addition, I want to raise some questions and criticisms that might inform the evaluation of subsequent papers and suggest some themes that are missing from both these conceptual essays and the more specific investigations, themes that are critical for an understanding of the history of post World War II German and German-American relations.

Let's begin with Americanization. Americanism and Americanization are extremely useful concepts for illuminating many aspects of twentieth century German history. Yet, there is no one definition of Americanization upon which Germans and scholars of Americanization in Germany and Europe agree.<sup>1</sup> What then distinguishes the definition and deployment of the concept of Americanization by Berghahn, Doering-Manteuffel, and Maase?

Both Berghahn and Maase use Americanization in a nuanced and flexible manner to capture complex interactions and negotiations. Both strictly resist any conception of Americanization as a one way transfer, as either a complete imposition of institutions, ideas and values, or a slavish and mindless imitation or emulation of the United States by Germany.

Berghahn sees Americanization as the negotiation of models both represented in and proffered by the United States. It was promoted by Americanizers who were a diverse group, existing on both sides of the Atlantic. He emphasizes that American institutions, policies, ideas and cultural forms were met not only with enthusiasm but also with resistance. Thus the history of Americanization cannot be separated from that of anti-Americanism. In his exploration of economics and politics Berghahn's concern is not

---

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the vast literature on these debates see, Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana, 1996); Alf Luedtke, Inge Marssolek and Adelheid von Saldern, *Amerikanisierung: Traun und Alptraum in Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1996); Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity* (New York and Oxford, 1994); *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan* (New York and Oxford, 1999) and Ralph Willett, *The Americanization of Germany, 1945-49* (London, 1989).

with the general wrenching of Germany away from authoritarian traditions and practices—a process that might be labeled Westernization, but rather in the specific forms that this transformation took, forms which were American rather than British or French. The result was not a replication of American economic or political life, but a mixture of U. S. values, institutions, forms of culture and consumption and German practices and traditions.

Maase moves in the same direction as Berghahn, but goes farther in his emphasis on Americanization as the appropriation and transformation of American forms, practices, goods and institutions by Germans. Writing from a perspective informed by cultural anthropology, he stresses the multiple meanings expressed in daily practice, the multiple material and symbolic uses which people—and his emphasis is on non elites—made of rock ‘n roll, or jeans or jazz. Americanization is, he insists, less a grand explanatory theory than a useful aid to indicate areas of inquiry and suggest provisional understandings.

Americanization provides a tool for talking about the power relationships that conditioned cultural transfers and borrowings, economic interactions and political change. America was hegemonic after 1945 and it was, as Berghahn notes, the medium through which many changes in Germany were negotiated,. Maase elaborates that

“Americanizing oneself was not a purely willful act. It was the utilization of an objectively given constellation and in this respect it depended on the dynamics of Cold War politics and the world economy.... America provided physical, ideational and symbolic materials, arguments, and examples which were being utilized (and increasingly had to be utilized) in the Old World in order to articulate and strengthen different interests.”

By explicitly acknowledging power and hegemony and exploring their operations, these understandings of Americanization avoid the problems of some current discussions of globalization, with their talk of hybridity and flows and their refusal to confront the underlying power relationships of the global economic and political order.<sup>2</sup>

If Americanization is a flexible and useful concept, its deployment nonetheless needs to be specified more sharply. It has been used most frequently, and perhaps unproblematically to discuss popular culture, mass consumption, and lifestyle transformations-- as they were imagined in the 1950s and realized thereafter.<sup>3</sup> The essays

---

<sup>2</sup>Arjun Appadurei, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, 1996). Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. By Anne McClintock, Mamir Mofti and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis, 1997): 501-28.

<sup>3</sup> For two of the best examples, see Kasper Maase, *BRAVO Amerika* (Hamburg, 1992) and Uta Poiger, *Jass, Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, forthcoming)

on urban planning and housing suggest interesting new ways to extend and refine these explorations. The economic aspects of Americanization, especially as regards management strategies, labor relations, and a new consumer orientation, have been explored by Berghahn among others. But what about politics? Theorists of Westernization make their strongest claims about this realm, and it is a place on which our critical discussion should focus. What exactly would an Americanization of politics and of political values mean? And what, by contrast, a Westernization?

How do we talk with more specificity about the agents and vehicles of Americanization? One key way to show both the intentions of Americans and the often very different outcomes, would be to explore, as some of the essays do, the multiple sites of interaction. What films were shown in the border Kreise? What books put in the Amerika Haus libraries? What factories were visiting trade unionists shown? What did all those AFL and CIO personnel do when they met with trade unions and the SPD? Were there any comparable British and French interventions and actions and what were the differential responses to each? Only by such explorations can we reconstruct not only the outcomes but also the complex mediations through which they were arrived at.

Two themes were not, I think, sufficiently handled in the Americanization essays. The first is anti-Americanism, an inevitable accompaniment of Americanism and Americanization. Although Berghahn mentions resistance to American imports and the idea of emulating transatlantic models, we need to know much more about this. In the post World War II era anti-Americanism declined to be sure, but it did not disappear and we need to explore its changing forms and foci.<sup>4</sup> Some groups persisted in critiquing American mass culture and defending German Kultur, for example while other did not. For still others, as Maase's suggestive discussion of upper and middle class appropriation of jazz showed, American forms like jazz could be used to distinguish upper and middle-class youth protest from working-class ones which centered on rock 'n' roll. And they could be used to express anti-American and pro French attitudes! Mass consumption came to be accepted in West Germany, although, as Erica Carter's work suggests, not without deep anxiety and much effort to discipline the threatening female consumer.<sup>5</sup> We need to explore these ongoing anxieties about materialism and consumption as well as the gender implications of these American phenomena. Finally we need to extend the analysis of the many forms of political Americanization and anti-Americanism to not only the late 1960s but also the contemporary period of growing German economic power and European economic integration.

---

<sup>4</sup>For an introduction to this theme, see Dan Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans: An Essay on Anti-Americanism* (Princeton, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>Erica Carter, *How German is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Women* (Ann Arbor, 1997).

A second theme crying out for more investigation involves Americanization and Sovietization. Although the papers for this conference focused only on West Germany, there is a growing body of comparative work that recognizes the impossibility of analyzing developments in the west without looking at the GDR and the broader Cold War context. The task is twofold, involving comparisons between Americanization in the FRG and Sovietization in the GDR on the one hand, and explorations of Americanization and anti-Americanism in the GDR on the other.<sup>6</sup> What were the differences and what the similarities in the intentions, methods and models of Americanizers and Sovietizers, foreign and German, in their respective spheres of influence? What were the differing types of negotiation with and appropriations of the models offered? There were shared assumptions about efficiency, productivity, and economic rationalization among not only east and west Germans but among Americans who provided the economic models from the early twentieth century and the Soviets who admired and emulated parts of Fordism. To what extent, especially in the first postwar decade, did forms of production share similarities, despite differing property relations and political regimes? How did the GDR react to the proximity and ambiguous promise of American models of consumption, popular culture and mass leisure? What complex forms of Americanization and peculiar variants of anti-Americanism were developed there?

Turning from Americanization to Westernization entails a shift in substantive and theoretical focus. The discussion of Americanization centers on popular culture, life style, and gender, on technical transfers and institutional imitations, on exchanges and travel. It posits direct and explicit US intervention across a wide range of fields. The discussion of Westernization focuses on political ideas, on the liberal values of democracy, representative government, social pluralism and free markets. Analyses of Americanization cover a broad range of social classes and arenas; those of Westernization concentrate on elites--intellectual, political and to a lesser extent economic-- and on realm of politics. The central question for those operating within the Westernization paradigm is why and how those elites, who had clung to the "ideas of 1914," adopted western values after 1945.

In attacking Americanization, proponents of Westernization set up a strawman, a crude model which ostensibly argues for the forced imposition of American institutions and values or the slavish emulation of America on the part of Germans. In its place they offer a model which emphasizes the voluntary adoption of American ideas and practices, the uncoerced evolution of a consensus among West Germans, Americans and Western Europeans, and the co-transmittal of ideas via elites who emigrated or traveled. Intercultural transfer is one key term adopted to characterize the nature of these interactions.

---

<sup>6</sup>An exception is *Amerikanisierung und Sowjetisierung in Deutschland: 1945-1970*, ed by Konrad Jarausch and Hannes Siegrist (Frankfurt and New York, 1997).

The model of Westernization, which claims to be a causal grand theory, seeks to unravel what students of Americanism have paid less attention to, namely democratization and politics. This model seeks to occupy a middle ground between arguments that stress a post 1945 German return to its democratic roots and its learning of the lessons of Weimar, on the one hand, and those that emphasize American and only American intervention and imposition on the other. Their emphasis is on German learning, on exposure to and adoption of Western liberal values, even if the procedural and institutional manifestations and embodiments of these values might be distinctively German or very mixed.

While I admire the emphasis on negotiation and the recognition of the complexity of the resulting institutions, I found many aspects of the model problematic. First, there is too little exploration in Doering-Manteuffel's essay and in the case studies that follow of the mechanisms by which Germans learned. A too simple model of exposure and enlightenment/conversion seems present. Of even greater importance, there is too little discussion of precisely what Germans learned and adopted. Western, liberal values remain undifferentiated and singular in their meaning. Yet, as several of the case studies show, different Germans learned different lessons from the "West."

Democracy did not have one meaning, but many. Think, for example, about the difference between trade union advocacy of *Mitbestimmung* and the general Social Democratic concern with participation on the one hand, and Alex Springer's version of a relatively non-participatory democracy, in which the masses were to be told what to think by elite opinion makers. Democracy was the common language, which all West Germans came to speak, indeed had to come to speak, but they spoke it with different accents and gave it different meanings. All of the key liberal values--democracy, representative government, free markets, social pluralism--were and still are elastic and capacious, not self-evident and circumscribed.

Maase's analysis of how different Germans adopted and used American cultural forms in quite varied ways provides a model for such analysis. As he argues, the meaning of American products and practices can only be clarified within the German context, when we explore how these forms were deployed and invested with specific meanings and goals by Germans. The working-class adoption of rock 'n' roll was part of a class struggle about rights to mass culture and social entitlements. These contestations around forms of cultural consumption produced forms of democratization that were very different from the elite supported and more restricted set of representative institutions and limited social rights.

The model of Westernization lacks both concreteness and an analysis of power. Individuals, institutions and nations became westernized via negotiation with and interaction with country specific models, institutions and governments, not was a fictive West. Individual economic actors, cultural figures, and states were deliberately

interventionist and consciously manipulative, even if not successfully so in every instance. These individuals, institutions, corporations, and states represented and reflected power relations, even if these relations changed over the course of the postwar decades. Power--political, military, cultural, economic and discursive-- was at play, as postwar America displayed its hegemony and exercised its power much more blatantly and willingly than it had in the 1920s. Germans did not make value choices in an unstructured arena of equality. All this needs to be analyzed.

On a conceptual and thematic level, the relationship of Westernization and Americanization needs to be problematized. How precisely do we distinguish them in the post World War II era, as opposed to the long duree? What were the specific European dimensions of Westernization for which Gassert and others argue? How distinctive were Westernization and Americanization in the post World War II context in which Britain and France, the ostensible alternatives to America, were themselves becoming Americanized?

The model of Westernization raises a questions about *Begriffsgeschichte*. When and by whom were the terms “Westernization” or the ‘West” or “Western values” used? Why did Americans adopt this vocabulary and what role did it play in Cold War politics as well as in conceptions of proper development centered around modernization theory? To what extent, if any, did the impetus to talk about Western values come from Britain and France, perhaps in an effort to be included in the American hegemonic project?

Western values are not a set of timeless, objective truths. They are not a description of the inevitable, if circuitous direction of development of the west or the world, Francis Fukiyama notwithstanding. Western values in the post World War II world, like globalization and neo-liberalism today, are prescriptions more than descriptions. They are ideological appeals and political projects. We need to know much more about who preached western values, whether packaged as Americanization or not, and in pursuit of what interests they did so. We need to explore the often conflicting ways in which the message of Westernization was interpreted and acted upon, the different ends for which it was instrumentalized. We need to examine the obstacles to its partial adoption, reinterpretation and implementation. Only then can we assess the political importance and rhetorical role of Western values in post World War II Germany and the analytical usefulness of a concept of Westernization.

For students of Westernization in post World War II West Germany, it would be most fruitful to compare that experience with the post 1989 Eastern European one. In what different ways were western liberal values interpreted and implemented? Were and are they seen as primarily American? Or are they viewed as Western or European or even global? What are the different experiences of the agents and organizations of different national cultures and polities? Such comparisons would be important not only for better understanding the dynamics of Westernization and Americanization, but also for

rethinking the relationship between East and West Germany, instead of exploring the latter while ignoring the former as irrelevant.

My final comments concern not only the Westernization model, but also the concept of Americanization as well. They involve what is left out, skipped over, and unproblematized in both, namely, anti-Communism, the Nazi era, and the problem of racism.

The discussion of Americanization fails to problematize anti-Communism; those of Westernization distinctly downplay it, arguing that it was at most a secondary and belated motive for adopting western liberal values. The post 1989 demise of communism should not lead us to ignore the potency of anti-Communism and the prevalence and prominence of the Cold War in so many aspects of politics, economics and culture in the 1950s. We need to conceptualize the Cold War not as an enabling context but as a pervasive structuring principle. We need to see anti-Communism as part and parcel of the discourse of Americanization and liberal western values, rather than as a separate and added motivation. Certainly it was in the American context to which Germans were exposed and from which so many interventions came.

Neither models of Westernization nor those of Americanization deal extensively with National Socialism. Westernization seeks a longer time frame on the one hand and focuses on the “ideas of 1914” and opposition to Bolshevism, on the other hand. It ignores the complex ways in which National Socialism represented a culmination of and break with the ideas of 1914 and was related to various projects of modernity. It downplays the impact—social, political, and cultural—which National Socialism had on the postwar transformation of ideas and politics. Models of Americanization do not ignore the Nazi era completely, but few studies have explored in depth the many and varied ways in which Americanization, to be sure in partial, ambivalent and masked forms, proceeded apace under Nazism, despite the growing rhetoric of anti-Americanism.<sup>7</sup> Yet we need to understand these experiences if we are to grasp the meanings of various American economic and cultural forms and the German receptivity to some rather than others. The Nazi era raises a host of uncomfortable questions about National Socialism, modernization and modernity, but these cannot be bracketed if we want to understand the nature of postwar political, economic and cultural change and the role of internal and external forces in bringing it about.

The models and papers not only skirt around the Nazi era, they completely ignore the heritage of Nazi anti-Semitism and racism and the ways in which it was affected by and affected processes of democratization, Westernization and Americanization. There is

---

<sup>7</sup>Phillip Gassert, *Amerika im Dritten Reich: Ideologie, Propaganda und Volksmeinung, 1933-41* (Stuttgart, 1997); Hans Dieter Schafer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein: ueber deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit, 1933-45* (Munich, 1981).



an unfortunate and misleading tendency to regard the Nazi racial state and racism more generally as non modern or antimodern, as an aberration. Liberal values and American cultural practices are implicitly posited as an antidote to residual racism and anti-Semitism. In fact, the situation was much more complex, for racist and anti-Semitic attitudes were deeply rooted in Germany after fourteen years of National Socialism, and racism was deeply rooted in Western history and Western social and political thought.

In discussing how the United States, Britain and France sought to westernizing, democratizing and/or Americanizing Germany, few of the papers dealt with anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and Jewish DPs. They did not explore how Germans reacted to either returning German Jewish émigrés or the presence of American Jewish intellectuals, such as those leading the Congress for Cultural Freedom. These encounters cannot but have been fraught, and an exploration of them would shed light on both the images of America and the West being conveyed and the limits of the social pluralism and cultural tolerance adopted.

As many historians and political theorists have argued, liberal values were raced and gendered, and liberal universalism and tolerance masked the exclusion of women, non-Whites and colonial subjects from full participation in projects of democratization, modernization, and Westernization. . Recent studies of colonial culture and discourse have established the complex ways in which the European metropolis was fundamentally transformed by the experience of colonialism and decolonization just as the colonized periphery was. This was especially true during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when colonial discourse came to construct both the colonial subject and metropolitan social hierarchies in racist terms, which claimed scientific validity. In the discourses that circulated from Europe to the colonies and back, class, gender and race each constructed the other. Proletarians at home were talked about as primitive and exotic others, while in the colonies domestic virtue and sexual propriety were required for white women to prove their Europeanness and mixed raced ones to attain an approximation of that status.<sup>8</sup>

What of this complicated heritage was transmitted along with the more positive aspects of Western liberal values after 1945? How did it interact with the residues of Germany's own colonial past? Surely, the impact of colonialism, racism and decolonization were not negligible, for the powers that occupied Germany were still occupying vast tracts of Asia and Africa and reluctant and conflictual decolonization was the counterpart of 1950s and early 1960s Americanization/ Westernization. The US army that defeated Hitler's racism was itself segregated during the war and only integrated slowly and against opposition thereafter. The postwar military occupation brought American popular culture, which was complexly coded and criticized as "Negro," and it

---

<sup>8</sup>See for example, Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* ((Durham and London, 1995).; *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures n a Bourgeois World*, ed. By Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley, 1997).

also brought U. S. racial categories and conflicts into complex intersection with German ones—a subject Hoehn has explored elsewhere.

A part of the shared value framework that straddled the North Atlantic included the complex forms of racial thought and racism that were the heritage of liberal thought, colonialism, U.S. slavery and emancipation, and European scientific racism. These shaped and still shape the German and European responses to an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-racial Germany and Western Europe.