

## **American Studies in Europe or: Brother, can you paradigm?**

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“**T**HERE ARE NO BORDERS.” Or so at least a commercial poster for Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes in the Netherlands claimed. Never mind that smoking, particularly in the US, is seen as transgressive behavior, as trespassing beyond borders that the ever alert prohibitionist mind of Americans has newly drawn. The slogan, if taken metaphorically, is redolent of a different reading of America. It conjures up an imaginary America that has stalked for centuries through the European mind. As John Locke once famously put it: “In the beginning, all the world was America.” Locke turned America into a metaphor for that pristine state of human affairs where no social contract had yet imposed borders, nor established social constraints. This view of America as the imaginary site of a primordial freedom has always been with us since. The theme is eagerly taken up, by Americans and non-Americans alike, as the following advertisement may illustrate. The advertisement is for an Italian travel agency, offering trips to Marlboro country, with the telling text: *Fa il vuoto*, Go for the void, for empty space. It plays on the Italian expression at filling stations where people order the attendant “to fill her up.” Here it says the opposite, playing on the post-modern dreams of tourism as the chance to lose yourself in order to find yourself.

This is by way of an introduction to the theme of my presentation today. My assigned topic is to reflect on ways to internationalize the study of the United States, or American Studies as the field is commonly known. The concern to internationalize the field is shared by American scholars in the field and their many colleagues in non-American settings. But as I will argue, they act on different intellectual and existential cues. In other words, American Studies scholars outside the United States may have a specific

contribution to make when it comes to internationalizing the framework of American Studies. I shall focus on that particular contribution, after giving a brief sketch of what our American colleagues have independently come up with. If we put the matter in terms of changing the prevailing paradigm of American Studies, the question for non-American scholars in the field then becomes one that we may phrase as: Brother, can you paradigm?

### **Internationalizing American Studies**

The internationalization of American Studies can mean various things. It is a buzzword that pops up in various contexts. There used to be broad agreement that the object of American Studies was the history, society and culture of a geo-political entity that we know as the United States, but which is commonly referred to by its own citizens and outsiders as America. As recent trends in American Studies make clear, the object of study needs being internationalized, and so do the scholarly approaches to it. A further goal of internationalization appears to be the greater interaction among the worldwide constituency of American Studies scholars.

Internationalizing the object of study means redefining it, taking it away from its nation-state frame of perception and interpretation, if not from the national emphasis in the narratives that it spawned. Even when the object of study—the United States—was taken to exceptionalist extremes, though, there was always a tacit comparative dimension. America could only be conceived as an exception when one assumes the existence of a rule to which the rest of the world is deemed subject. Yet precisely for being exceptional the story had to be told separately, in relative insulation from forces of history at work elsewhere. If the implicit comparative dimension adds one touch of irony to the exceptionalist view, further irony lies in the fact that non-Americans have contributed strongly to the exceptionalist reading of America's historical experience.

Now, increasingly, the need is felt to see America as presenting specific historical configurations of forces that affect the United States as much as other parts of the world. Histories of slavery and the slave trade, of migration and diasporic communities, of the settlement of the Western hemisphere, of industrialization and urbanization and the social movements that attended these massive transformations, studies of class, race and gender, they all squarely place the United States within a transnational and comparative perspective. Relatively straightforward as this program for

research may appear, it has become clear recently that two clashing paradigms are vying for the meaningful recasting of the study of the United States.

One – let us call it the Thelen approach – aims at exploding the very context of the nation-state as the central structuring element in historical narratives. As Thelen himself put it in the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of American History*, devoted entirely to transnational perspectives on United States history: “Since it seemed increasingly strange that history had centered its concern with time and place on the nation-state, we wanted to design a special issue that would interrogate, not assume, the centrality of the nation-state as the organizing theme for American history. We wanted to explore how people and ideas and institutions and cultures moved above, below, through, and around, as well as within, the nation-state, to investigate how well national borders contained or explained how people experienced history.”<sup>1</sup> The second direction in which to take the project of internationalizing the study of the United States – let us call this the Rodgers paradigm – is one that would conceive of the United States as just another nation among nations, without any messianic destiny or exceptionalist aspiration. It is an approach that, unlike the Thelen paradigm, re-emphasizes the nation-state character of the United States, and proposes to present a non- (or post-) exceptionalist history of the United States, as a country whose history is contingent upon larger historical forces and connected to the impact of and response to those forces in other nation-states.<sup>2</sup>

I would suggest there is a third way to internationalize the study of the United States, one that ironically re-introduces an exceptionalist element. If in much recent work the United States as an object of study has lost its national boundedness, this has also been the result of scholarly approaches that look at America as *inherently* an international phenomenon. Studies of the way in which the country, in the course of what became known as the American Century, has projected itself as a force affecting the lives of many people across the globe, are inherently international. They explore the ways in which America’s power, political, military, economic, and cultural, is experienced and made sense of

<sup>1</sup> D. Thelen, “The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History,” *The Journal of American History*, 86, 3, (December 1999): 965-76, 967. (<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/86.3/>)

<sup>2</sup> D. T. Rodgers, “Exceptionalism,” in: A. Molho and Gordon S. Wood, eds., *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 21-41.

elsewhere. Many Americas arose in the process, as so many constructions in the minds of people elsewhere trying to make sense of the forces that changed their lives. If those forces today are often subsumed under the catch-all word of globalization, the problem for research is to try and discern the American agency affecting them. Globalization and Americanization are not identical, although they are intertwined. In addition to American agency, though, there are the further and crucial questions of mediation and reception, questions to do with the manifold ways in which people at the receiving end recontextualize American culture as it reaches them. There is a freedom involved in cultural reception which may make us aware of the agency implied in the process of reception. If America as an imaginary entity results from a cultural construction going on all over the globe, that America (or those Americas) in particular constitute what I called the inherently international object of study for American Studies scholars. The exceptionalist moment in this approach lies in the structural imbalance between America's position as a semiotic center relegating *all* other nation-states to the position of receivers.

This third way of internationalizing American Studies may help to take away the United States as an object of study from the control of American scholars as the intellectual community predominantly in charge of the agenda of American Studies. Too long scholars studying America from abroad have led lives of derivation, at an intellectual periphery that took its cues from a center situated in the United States. Working at the margins their work remained relatively obscure in the center, nor was it noticed much among fellow scholars at the periphery elsewhere. The collective gaze from scholars at the periphery for too long centered on America. Many recent endeavors in internationalizing American Studies aimed precisely at bringing scholars from these various margins together, trying to create a sense of community among them, and an awareness of sharing concerns and research interests that did not naturally arise at the center.

In the following, by way of a case study, I propose to explore an area of research questions that are inherently international, yet all relate to America as a central force in our present-day world. Forces of globalization have allowed America to project itself more forcefully across the world than any other contemporary nation. In the process it has planted the many emblems of its world-wide presence across the globe, emblems that may evoke cultural resistance or serve as carriers of American culture. My

focus will be on forms of American commercial culture, particularly advertising.

### **Cultural imperialism and the freedom of reception**

Students of Americanization are in general agreement as regards the semantic transformations that attend the dissemination of American cultural messages across the world. Depending on their precise angle and perspective some rather tend to emphasize in their explorations the cultural strategies and auspices behind the transmission of American culture. Whether they study Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show when it traveled in Europe, Hollywood movies, or World Fairs, to name just a few carriers for the transmission of American culture, their focus is rather on the motifs and organizing views that the producers were trying to convey rather than on the analysis of what the spectators and visitors did with the messages they were exposed to. All such cultural productions taken as representations of organizing world views do tend to lead researchers to focus on senders rather than receivers of messages. Yet, given such a focus, it hardly ever leads these researchers to look at the process of reception as merely one of passive imbibing. Whatever the words one uses to describe what happens at the point of reception, words such as hybridization or creolization, current views agree on a freedom of reception, a freedom to re-semanticize and re-contextualize meaningful messages reaching audiences across national and cultural borders. Much creativity and inventiveness goes into the process of reception, much joy and exhilaration springs from it. Yet making this the whole story would be as fallacious as a focus centered solely on the schemes and designs of the senders of messages. Whatever their precise angle, researchers agree on the need to preserve balance in their approach to problems of Americanization.

Furthermore, some researchers, like e.g. Robert W. Rydell in a contribution to the 1998 Lisbon conference of the European Association for American Studies,<sup>3</sup> tend to conceive of Americanization as a process tied to an early American economic expansionism, or, more recently, to an emerging global economy structured by the organizing logic of corporate capitalism, still very much proceeding under American auspices. The main

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Rydell, "The Americanization of the World and the Spectacle of the American Exhibits at the 1900 Paris Universal Exposition," in: T. Alves, T. Cid, and H. Ickstadt, eds., *Ceremonies and Spectacles: Performing American Culture* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2000), 93-101.

area in which Rydell sees Americanization at work is in the “commodification of culture which colonizes the leisure time of people worldwide.” World Fairs and other transmitters of America’s commercial culture conjure up a “veritable ‘dream world’ of mass consumption, a simulation through spectacle of the good life afforded by the technological advances associated with modernization.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to contrast this simulacrum of the good life with the ravages wrought by corporate capitalism in many parts of the globe. He explicitly wants to keep the concept of Americanization in our critical lexicon as a useful reminder of what American economic expansionism has meant in terms of advancing the interests of American corporate culture overseas.

I am not so sure whether this is the right tack. Rydell seems unduly to read the autonomous rise of global corporate capitalism as due to American agency. It is a common fallacy in much of the critique of Americanization to blame America for trends and developments that would have occurred anyway, even in the absence of America. From Marx, via Hobson and Lenin, all the way to the work of the Frankfurt School, there is a long line of critical analysis of capitalism and imperialism, highlighting its inner expansionist logic. Surely, in our century, much of this expansion has proceeded under American auspices, receiving an American imprint, in much the same way that a century ago, the imprint was British. The imprint has often confused critics into arguing that the havoc wreaked by an over-arching process of modernization, ranging from the impact of capitalism to processes of democratization of the political arena or the rise of a culture of consumption, were truly the dismal effects of America upon their various countries. From this perspective the critique of Americanization is too broad, exaggerating America’s role in areas where in fact it was caught up in historic transformations much like other countries were.

From a different perspective, though, this view of Americanization is too narrow. It ignores those vast areas where America, as a construct, an image, a phantasma, did play a role in the intellectual and cultural life of people outside its national borders. There is a repertoire of fantasies about America that even predates its discovery. Ever since, the repertoire has been fed in numerous ways, through many media of transmission. Americans and non-Americans have all contributed to this collective endeavor, making sense of the new country and its evolving culture.

<sup>4</sup> Rydell, 99.

Especially in our century America has become ever more present in the minds of non-Americans, as a point of reference, a yardstick, a counterpoint. In intellectual reflections on the course and destiny of their countries and cultures America became part of a process of triangulation, serving as a model for rejection or emulation, providing views of a future seen in either a negative or a positive light. America has become a *tertium comparationis* in culture wars elsewhere, centering on control of the discourse concerning the national identity and the national culture. When America was typically rejected by one party in such contests, the other party saw it as a liberating alternative. Writing the history of such receptions of America is as much American Studies as it is an endeavor in the intellectual history of countries other than the United States. It also should form part of a larger reflection upon processes summarily described as Americanization.

Undeniably, though, in the course of this allegedly "American Century" America has assumed a centrality that one might rightly call imperial. Like Rome in the days of the Roman empire, it has become the center of webs of control and communication that span the world. Its cultural products reach the far corners of the world, communicating American ways and views to people elsewhere, while America itself remains relatively unaware of cultural products originating outside its national borders. If for such reasons we might call America's reach imperial, it is so in a number of ways. It is imperial in the economic sphere, in the political sphere, and in the cultural sphere. If it is still possible to use the word in a relatively neutral way, describing a factual configuration rather than the outcome of concerted effort and motive, we might speak of an American imperialism, of its economic imperialism, political imperialism, and cultural imperialism. Trying to accommodate themselves to their diminished role and place in the world, European countries have at times opted to resist particular forms of America's imperial presence. Thus, taking France as the most telling case, it chose to resist political imperialism by ordering NATO out of the country, it warned against America's economic imperialism through Jean Jacques Servan-Schreiber's *Le défi américain*, it briefly considered preventing *Jurassic Park* from being released in France, seeing it as a case of American cultural imperialism and a threat to the French cultural identity.

Yet, suggestive as the terms are of neat partition and distinction, the three forms of imperialism do in fact overlap to a large extent. Thus, America in its role as the new political hegemon in the Western world, could restructure markets and patterns of trade, through the Marshall Plan,

which guaranteed access to the European markets for American products. Political imperialism could thus promote economic imperialism. Opening European markets for American commerce also meant preserving access for American cultural exports, such as Hollywood movies. Economic imperialism thus translated into cultural imperialism. Reversely, as carriers of an American version of the “good life,” American products, from cars to movies, from clothing styles to kitchen apparel, all actively doubled as agents of American cultural diplomacy. Thus, trade translated back into political imperialism. And so on, in endless feedback loops.

In my own work of recent years I have chosen to focus on the cultural dimension in all these various forms of an American imperial presence. American culture, seen as a configuration of ways and means that Americans use for expressing their collective sense of themselves—their Americanness—is mediated through every form of American presence abroad. From the high rhetoric of its political ideals to the golden glow of McDonald’s arches, from Bruce Springsteen to the Marlboro Man, American culture washes across the globe. It does so mostly in disentangled bits and pieces, for others to recognize and pick up, and re-arrange into a setting expressive of their own individual identities, or identities they share with peer groups. Thus, teenagers may have adorned their own bedrooms with the iconic faces of Hollywood or rock music stars in order to provide themselves with a most private place for reverie and games of identification, they have also been engaged in a construction of private worlds that they share with countless others. In the process they re-contextualize and re-semanticize American culture to make it function within expressive settings entirely of their own making.

In his contribution to the Lisbon conference Bob Rydell referred to W.T. Stead, an early British observer of Americanization as “the trend of the Twentieth Century.” As Rydell makes clear, Stead saw Americanization mostly as the world-wide dissemination of material goods, as so many signs of an American technical and entrepreneurial prowess. It would be for later observers to look at these consumer goods as cultural signifiers as well, as carriers of an American way of life. An early example of an observer of the American scene with precisely this ability to read cultural significance into the products of a technical civilization was the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. In his collection of travel observations, published



after his only trip to the United States in 1926,<sup>5</sup> he showed an uncanny awareness of the re-cycling of the American Dream into strategies of commercial persuasion, linking a fictitious world of self-fulfillment—a world where every dream would come true—to goods sold in the market. High-minded aesthete though he was, forever longing for the lost world of late-medieval Europe, he could walk the streets of the great American cities with an open eye for the doubling of American reality into a seductive simulacrum. He was inquisitive enough to ask the right questions, questions that still echo in current research concerning the reception of mass culture in general, and of commercial exhortations in particular. He wondered what the effect would be on everyday people of the constant barrage of commercial constructions of the good life. “The public constantly sees a model of refinement far beyond its purse, ken and heart. Does it imitate this? Does it adapt itself to this?” Apposite questions indeed. Huizinga is aware of the problem of reception of the virtual worlds constantly spewed forth by a relentless commercial mass culture. More generally, in these musings, Huizinga touched on the problem of the effect that media of cultural transmission, like film and advertising, would have on audiences not just in America but elsewhere as well. In these more general terms, the problem then becomes one of the way in which non-American audiences would read the phantasy worlds that an American imagination had produced and which showed all the characteristics of an American way with culture so vehemently indicted by European critics.

In the following I propose to explore a few ways in which we might reflect on the intricate ways in which, in the post-World War II period, American mass culture, reaching a Europe that more than ever before had come within America’s imperial sway, may have affected European cultures. My focus will be on advertising, seen as a peculiar blend of economic and cultural imperialism.

### **Advertising: The Commodification of American Icons**

A nation that stops representing itself in images stops being a nation. It is doomed to lead a life of derivation, vicariously enjoying worlds of imagery and imagination imported from abroad. Or so President Mitterrand was reported to have been musing. In a mood of cultural

<sup>5</sup> J. H. Huizinga, *Amerika levend en denkend: Losse opmerkingen* (Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink, 1927).

protectionism, against the backdrop of a seemingly unstoppable conquest of Europe's cultural space by American images, Mitterrand's France called for—but failed to get—a clause exempting cultural goods from the free-trade logic of GATT. The episode, in the final negotiating stages of the Uruguay Round, is reminiscent of earlier defensive ploys by France in the face of a threat of Americanization. There is the story, as told by more than one author,<sup>6</sup> of the fight that France chose to pick to keep Coca-Cola out of the country. Coca-Cola became the symbol of everything that a certain intellectual discourse in Europe had always rejected in America, as the country that had succeeded in mass-marketing bad taste. If there was much to be envied in America as a model of modernity, it offered an example that France should be following selectively and on its own terms—under strict “parental guidance,” so to speak. Yet the example as set by America was tempting, precisely because it undercut parental authority and cultural guardianship, promising the instant gratification of desire rather than its sublimation, consumption rather than consummation. Coca-Cola was the item that the French chose to symbolize this pernicious pleasure principle in the global transmission of American mass culture. The soft drink, in this French campaign, was turned into an icon of an alleged American strategy of cultural imperialism. It also gave the strategy a name: Coca-Colonization.

More recently, another soft-drink commercial, for Seven Up, illustrated the seductive semiotics that underlies so many of the messages that reach us from across the Atlantic Ocean. It did this without drawing on the repertoire of American icons. There was no Marlboro Man roaming the open space of an American West, no Castle Rock, no Statue of Liberty. Instead it introduced a streetwise little brat, a cartoon character by the name of Fido Dido (If I do, they do?). Only few among the European audience watching the commercial would have been aware of its American auspices. As it happened, however, the cartoon character was American, and so was the commercial itself. Yet, to all intents and purposes, it could have been produced by advertising agencies anywhere. The only clearly American referent in the commercial was the product it tried to promote, a soft drink that saw its market share slipping and felt in need of a new image.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and: M. Pendergrast, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola: The Unauthorized History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company That Makes It* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993).

In the first instalment of what turned out to be a little series of narrations centering on Fido Dido, we see him meeting the hand of his maker. Briefly it may seem like a lighter, cartoon version of the scene in the Sistine Chapel where a drowsy Adam, touching fingers with God, is brought to life. But Fido Dido's meeting is of a different kind. His confrontation is with parental authority, with the commanding hand of social propriety. The hand of the maker, "in living color," holds a pencil and gets ready to retouch Fido Dido. First his unkempt hair gets neatly combed and partitioned. Fido Dido indignantly shakes his hair back into its previous state. The pencil continues the attack and dresses Fido Dido in jacket and tie. It moves on to the object in Fido Dido's right hand, also in full color, as real as the hand and pencil: the can of Seven Up. The pencil tries to erase it, yet the can is beyond such manipulation. Fido Dido meanwhile has moved towards full rebellion. Jacket and tie have already been thrown off; a well-aimed kick hits the pencil. Its tip breaks and hangs limply—a fitting symbol of parental impotence. Victoriously Fido Dido walks off the screen. In final retaliation his yo-yo now hits the pencil. The broken point falls off. His victory prize is a taste of the elixir of freedom: cool, sparkling Seven Up. The semiotics all merge into one message: a simple soft drink has been turned into a symbol of freedom. Much as the product, as well as the commercial and the cartoon character itself, may be American, the message is understood internationally.

We may see in this one example the end stage of a process of internationalization and generalization—decontextualization, if one wishes—of a sales pitch that was developed in America and, in its earlier stages, relied on much more explicit American iconography. We mentioned the Marlboro Man as a contemporary case of strong American symbolism—the West as open space, a realm of freedom—used to connect the sense of freedom, of being one's own man, to a simple item of merchandise like a cigarette. Yet the Marlboro Man is only a recent version of the commodification of American symbols of freedom that as a process has gone on for over a century. America as empty space, the epic America of the frontier, America as a mythical West, had long before the consumption revolution been turned into a symbol of freedom. The West as a beckoning yonder had kept alive the dream, in far-away corners of Europe, of a life lived in freedom and independence. As the promise of a new world and a new era, it could vie with contemporary utopian views offered by Marxism or similar emancipation movements. Posters, produced for shipping lines, emigration societies, and land development agencies, contributed their imagery to the continuing construction of

America as the very site of freedom and space. To many such imagery must have represented the promise of freedom and escape offered by America.



Photograph by the author<sup>7</sup>

If such is the central appeal of “America” as an image, we need not be surprised at the craving for material that could visualize the image. Chromo lithographs, photographs, stereographs and their suggestion of three-dimensionality, all tried to still this hunger. They allowed people to move beyond the limited horizons of their daily lives and to enter into an imaginary space, a fantasy world. They offered reality and illusion at the same time.

Nor need we be surprised that such pictures soon were turned into advertising tools. When images of the West, or rather: of America as one huge space, could trigger fantasies of fulfillment and liberty, common merchandise might hope to benefit from an association with such images. Today everyone is familiar with the West as “Marlboro Country,” with the successful marriage of a cigarette brand with the Marlboro Man. But as early as a century ago advertisements tried to bring about this union. A colorful 1860 poster advertises the *Washoe Brand* of the Christian and Lee Tobacco Company from Richmond, Virginia. No tobacco leaf, cigar, or

<sup>7</sup> “Fai il vuoto” (Go for the void, for empty space) is a pun on the Italian expression “Fai il pieno”, “Fill ‘er up!”.

pipe in sight. What we do see are images of the West—Western horsemen, far horizons—grouped around a medallion that shows us a picture of the Goddess Columbia draped in the American flag, an eagle, a globe with the Western hemisphere turned forward, and a pot brimming with gold coins. The West appears as a vision of plenty. Another poster, from the same period, advertises *Westward Ho Smoking Tobacco*. Its very name ties the tobacco to the beckoning call of the West. Yet the producer, G.W. Langhorne and Co., from Lynchburg, Virginia, did not leave it at that. The poster shows us an allegorical female figure, a version of Columbia with stark Indian features, feathers in her hair, her extended hand holding forth a calumet, her body, save her breasts, wrapped in the Stars and Stripes. This is not Europa abducted by Jupiter, this is America, impetuously galloping forth on elk-back: “Westward Ho!” indeed.

Apparently, well before the decade of the “roaring twenties,” commerce had appropriated the allegorical repertoire of the American dream. The images that now flooded across the country through techniques of mechanical reproduction, could be endlessly re-arranged to render new symbolic messages. The West as a realm for the imagination could connect with the world of trite consumption goods such as tobacco or cigarettes. Advertising developed into an art of symbolic alchemy that has continued to retain its potency. The symbolic connection that advertisers sought to establish hinged on the concept of “freedom.” This linking of evocative images of American freedom and space tended to work best with leisure time articles, such as cigarettes, beer, an automobile or a motorbike, a pair of blue jeans. Consumption, leisure time, and “freedom” thus became inextricably interwoven. And even today “America” can be counted on to trigger an association with freedom. The iconography of America has become international. Italian jeans manufacturers now advertise their wares in Germany on posters depicting Monument Valley. The German cigarette brand *West* mounted an international advertising campaign whose central metaphors revolve around the American West. The Dutch non-alcohol beer *Stender* used the imaginary West of American road-movies for its television commercials, including brief encounters at gas stations in an empty West, an exchange of glances between the sexes, the half-inviting, half-ironic sizing up, the beginning of erotic tension. The release of tension occurs, surprisingly, when he or she, in gleaming black leather, irrespective of gender, in the true macho style of the West, flips the top of a bottle of Stender and takes off again on a shiny motorbike, into the empty distance.

America's national symbols and myths have been translated into an international iconographic language, a visual lingua franca. They have been turned into free-floating signifiers, internationally understood, free for everyone to use. Yet it is only a replay, on an international scale, of what had previously occurred in the United States. Given the characteristic American bent for dis-assembling whatever presents itself as an organically coherent whole, only to re-assemble it differently, this American leadership role need not surprise us. In their production of commercial messages this same cultural bent has been at work, removing symbols from their historical context and re-arranging them into novel configurations. The appropriate metaphor may be that of Lego-construction, which uses the individual pieces as just so many "empty signifiers," combining them into ever-changing meaningful structures. Commerce and advertising are but one area where we can see these rituals of cultural transformation at work. For indeed, consumption goods as well can freely change their meaning, appearing in ever-changing configurations, furnishing a realm of virtual reality, turning into simulacra at the hands of the wizards of advertising. They become true phantasmas set free by the human imagination.

No bastion of conventional order is immune to this erosive freedom. In the area of advertising as well as in other areas of cultural production we can discern a moving American frontier, affecting an ever-increasing number of social conventions with its "deconstructing" logic. Recent shifts in this frontier have affected the established constructions of gender, re-arranging at will reigning views of what constitutes the typically male and female, the masculine and feminine. "Genderbending" is the word that American English has invented for describing this process. Pop culture heroes like Michael Jackson, Grace Jones, or Madonna, project invented personae that are strangely androgynous. Hollywood is busy bending gender in films like *Alien II*, where the enemy computer is called *Mother* and the heroine copes as if she were a man. Commercials like those for *Stender* also play on the repertoire of accepted gender definitions. The best recent example is a television commercial for Levi's 501. A young, chocolate-skinned woman, invitingly dressed, her midriff bare, is shown taking a New York cab. While the driver is ogling her in his rear-view mirror, his lips moving a toothpick back and forth, suggestively, as if engaged in a mating ritual, she coolly adds a few final touches to her make-up. But then the tables are turned. What gives the driver a start and brings his cab to a full stop, is the sound of an electric razor and the sight of his passenger shaving. The last shot is of the passenger walking away, the

victor in another battle of the sexes, the Levi's as snug and inviting as ever. As the text reminds us, in case we didn't know already: "Cut for Men Since 1850." Thus, in all these cases, an entire new area has opened up for fantasies of freedom to roam.

There may be a cultural "deep structure" underlying such developments that is characteristically American, yet our point is that the appeal of such cultural *bricolage* is international. Even in the absence of clearly American markers, as in the case of our Fido Dido commercial, the underlying logic of recombination, tying "freedom" to a soft drink, is American. The appeal, though, is worldwide. In that sense we have all become Americanized. We have grown accustomed to a specific American mode of cultural production, or rather to the ways in which American culture reproduces itself, through endless variation and recombination. Not only have we cracked American cultural codes and can we read them flawlessly, we have also appropriated these codes. They have become part of our collective imaginary repertoire.

One illustration will make an additional point. In the spring of 1994, on walls all over Italy, there were posters displaying a scene taken from the history of the conquest of the West.



Photograph by the author

We see a covered wagon in what is clearly a Western landscape, dry and desolate. A few men gather together in front of the wagon. The scene is one of relative relaxation. Clearly, the day's work has been done. The poster's color is sepia, suggesting a reprint of an old photograph. The legend informs us that *Vendiamo un' autentica leggenda*—We sell an authentic legend. Clearly a variation on Coca-Cola's claim of being "the real thing," the viewer is left wondering what the authentic legend might be. Is it the Levi's blue jeans? The answer must be yes. Is it the American West? Again: the answer is yes. A commodity, a piece of merchandise as down-to-earth as a pair of workingman's trousers, has become a myth, while the West as a myth has become commodified. And Levi's, as the poster honestly tells us, sells it. Yet there is more to this poster. There is an ironic *sous-entendu*, an implied wink to the audience. After all, the audience has long since got the message. They *know* that Levi's is a myth and they *know* what the myth represents. It represents more than the West, it represents their own collective memory of growing up in a Europe filled with American ingredients. Generation upon generation of Europeans, growing up after the war, can all tell their own story of a mythical America as they constructed it, drawing on American advertisements, songs, films, and so on. Ironically, these collective memories—these imagined Americas where people actually spent part of their past growing up—are now being commodified: to all those who on the basis of Jack Kerouac and a pop song remember *Route 66* without ever having crossed the Atlantic, a Dutch travel agency now offers nostalgic trips down that artery. The road may no longer exist, it re-occurs as a replica of itself, a simulacrum in the great Disney tradition.

The point is clear: generation upon generation of Europeans have grown up, constructing meaningful worlds that they shared with their peers and which crucially drew on American ingredients. Mythical "Americas" have become part and parcel of the collective memory of Europeans. This takes us back to Mitterrand's musings. It seems as if he has fallen victim to a misreading of the way the collective memory of Europeans was built in the post-war period. Why indeed must a collective memory be a matter of, as Mitterrand has it, a country depicting itself in images? Why not admit that the collective memory of national populations is crucially a matter of the appropriation and digestion of foreign influences? One could ignore these only at the peril of centrally imposing definitions of what constitutes the nation. And in fact many of the arguments in favor of the cultural exemption clause, protecting national



cultural identities, seem to betray this narrow paternalist view of the nation and its identity.

Commercial messages have been only one of the transmission belts of American culture abroad. Modern media of mass reproduction and mass distribution, like film, photography, the press, radio, television, sound recordings, have filled the semiotic space of people everywhere with messages made in America. Americans themselves, through their physical presence abroad, in the form of expatriate colonies, of armies, of business men, have equally contributed to the worldwide dissemination of their culture. Yet commercial messages, in the way they transmit American culture, are a particular case. They are not simply neutral carriers, conveying American culture for others to consume and enjoy, but give a particular twist to whatever ingredients of the American imagination they use. A recent illustration of this process can be seen in a commercial message broadcast by CNN, the worldwide cable news network, and paid for by the "Advertising Council" in London. In what is in fact an advertisement for advertising, the point is made that without advertising we all would be worse off, getting less information through the media, whether the press or the electronic media. Advertising is presented as a necessary prop for the continued existence of a well-informed public in a functioning democracy. The little civics lesson, offered by this commercial, ends with the slogan: "Advertising—The Right to Choose."

This blending of the rationale of capitalism and democratic theory is not new. It is reminiscent of what happened in the early 1940s in America. Then, on the eve of America's participation in World War II, President F.D. Roosevelt made his powerful contribution to American public discourse in his "Four Freedoms Speech," a rallying cry in which he called on his countrymen to fulfill an American world mission as he saw it. In all likelihood he had picked up the Four Freedoms as a rhetorical figure in the public domain. The Four Freedoms, as a group of four statues erected along the main concourse of the New York World Fair of 1939/40, had already left their imprint on the millions of visitors to the fair. Working on his final draft of the State of the Union Address, Roosevelt briefly toyed with the idea of Five Freedoms, but clearly he did not want to move away from the popular foursome at the Fair. If he wished his words to reverberate among the larger public, he needed to draw on a popular repertoire that was already established. The link with political views among the larger public was further reinforced through Norman Rockwell's series of four oil paintings, made after Roosevelt's speech, each

representing one of the four freedoms. Using his appeal as an artist who had succeeded in rendering a romantic, small-town view of life cherished by millions of Americans, he managed to give the same endearing touch to Roosevelt's message. Through the mass distribution of reproductions, Rockwell's paintings of the Four Freedoms facilitated the translation and transfer of Roosevelt's high-minded call to a mass audience.

If this is an illustration of American political culture as an element of American mass culture, of political rhetoric as it emanates from the public domain and returns to it, it was unaffected by the rationale of business. If anything had to be sold at all, it was a matter of political ideas; if a sales pitch was needed at all, it was a matter of public suasion, explaining the world to the larger democratic public and calling upon it to take appropriate action. Yet it was not long before Roosevelt's Four Freedoms would be joined by a Fifth, in an advertisement by the Hoover Vacuum Cleaner Company in a 1944 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. It was an illustrated ad in the style of Norman Rockwell. We recognize the setting, the faces are familiar. An old woman, a middle-aged man, and a young girl – "people from the neighborhood." They look upward towards a beam of light; providence, if not the good provider, is smiling upon them. In their arms they hold an abundance of packages, all of them gift-wrapped. This is Norman Rockwell country. With a difference, though: Rockwell's mythical small-town people, carriers of democratic virtue, now appear in the guise of Americans as consumers. Three years after Roosevelt decided that there were four, not five, freedoms, the Hoover advertisement reminded Americans that "the Fifth Freedom is Freedom of Choice." If America had joined the struggle to safeguard democratic values, this implied safeguarding the freedom of choice. By a simple semantic sleight of hand, the (con)text of the advertisement shifted the meaning of freedom of choice: the "signified" was no longer the realm of politics, but the freedom of choice of the citizen in his role as consumer. Thus spheres of freedom smoothly shaded into one another.

And they still do. The Hoover Company may have chosen to use language popular at the time, and to speak of a Freedom. The CNN message is cast in the language of rights, reminding us of our Right to Choose (again playing on the political ring that the phrase currently has). In either case what we see happening is the commodification of political discourse. The language of political ideals, of rights and freedoms, is being hijacked in order to dress purposeful commercial action in stolen clothes. Whether dressed as a freedom or a right, a commodifying logic appears in pure form, unconnected to any particular product. Yet it is a logic we met

before in particular cases, which tied the promise of freedom to cigarettes or soft drinks. It is a logic that commodifies, and pedestrianizes, political ideals by putting them in the service of commercial salesmanship. In that sense, we seem to have struck upon just another instance of the vulgarizing impact of American culture, corroborating a point made by so many European critics of American mass culture.

Yet this is not the whole story. The very slogans chosen by sales departments, affirming our "Freedom of Choice," or our "Right to Choose," are semantically unstable and may well convey a message different from that the salesmen had in mind. A word like choice, when left unspecified, sits uneasily astride the divide between the political and the economic spheres. "Freedom of Choice" in particular may well read as the "Choice of Freedom," a simple inversion that may well put political ideas into the heads of an audience that is addressed in its role as consumers. Paradoxically, then, advertising stratagems cooked up by commercial sponsors may well have the effect of a civics lesson, if not of a subversive and anti-authoritarian call. Precisely there, it seems, lie the secrets of the appeal that so many American commercial messages have had, domestically as well as abroad. Exploring frontiers of freedom, of children rebelling against parental authority, of sexual freedom, of freedom in matters of taste and in styles of behavior, American consumer goods have been instruments of political and cultural education, if not of emancipation. Generation upon generation of youngsters, growing up in a variety of settings in Europe, West *and* East of the Iron Curtain, have vicariously enjoyed the pleasures of cultural alternatives conjured up in commercial vignettes. Simple items like a pair of blue jeans, Coca-Cola, a cigarette brand, thus acquired an added value which helped these younger generations to give expression to an identity all their own. They have been using American cultural language and have made American cultural codes their own. To that extent they have become Americanized. To the extent, though, that they have "done their own thing," while drawing on American cultural repertoires, Americanization is no longer the proper word for describing what has gone on. If anything, those at the receiving end of American mass culture have adapted it to make it serve their own ends. They have woven it into a cultural language, whose grammar, syntax and semantics—metaphorically speaking—would still recognizably be French, Italian, or Czech. All that the recipients have done is make new statements in such a language.

There are more instances of such recontextualization. Surrounded as we are by jingles, posters, neon signs, and billboards, all trying to convey

their commercial exhortations, we all at one point or another ironically recycle their repertoires; we quote slogans while bending their meaning; we mimic voices and faces familiar from radio and television. We weave them into our conversations, precisely because they are shared repertoires. Used in this way, two things happen. International repertoires become national, in the sense that they are given a particular twist in conversations, acquiring their new meanings only in particular national and linguistic settings. Secondly, commercial messages stop being commercial. A de-commodification takes place in the sense that the point of the conversation is no longer a piece of merchandise or a specific economic transaction. In this ironic recycling of our commercial culture we become its masters rather than its slaves.

Many things have happened along the way since American mass culture started traveling abroad. American icons may have become the staple of a visual *lingua franca* that is understood anywhere in the world, yet their use can no longer be dictated solely from America.

For one thing, as we saw before, it is clear that European commercials made for European products may draw on semiotic repertoires initially developed in and transmitted from America. Yet, in a creolizing freedom not unlike America's modularizing cast of mind, Europeans in their turn now freely re-arrange and recombine the bits and pieces of American culture. They care little about authenticity. T-shirts produced in Europe are as likely to say "New York Lions" as they are "New York Giants."<sup>8</sup> What is more, American brand names, as free-floating signifiers, may even be de-commodified and turned into carriers of a message that is no longer commercial at all. Admittedly, the T-shirts, leather jackets and baseball caps, sporting the hallowed names of Harley Davidson, Nike or Coca-Cola, still have to be bought. Yet what one pays is the price of admission into a world of symbols shared by an international youth culture. Boys or girls with the word Coca-Cola on their T-shirts are not the unpaid peddlers of American merchandise. Quite the contrary. They have transcended such trite connotations and restored American icons to their pure semiotic state of messages of pleasure and freedom. Within this global youth culture, the icons youngsters carry are like the symbol of the fish that early Christians drew in the sand as a code of recognition. They are the members of a new

<sup>8</sup> As pointed out in a piece on US Pop Culture in Europe, by Elizabeth Neuffer, in the *Boston Sunday Globe* of October 9, 1994, 22.

International, geared to a post-modern world of consumerism rather than an early modern one centered on values of production.

There are many ironies here. What is often held against the emerging international mass, or pop culture, is precisely its international, if not cosmopolitan character. Clearly, this a case of double standards. At the level of high culture, most clearly in its modernist phase, there has always been the dream of transcending the local, the provincial, the national, or in social terms, to transgress the narrow bounds of the bourgeois world, and to enter a realm that was nothing if not international: the transcendence lay in being truly "European," or "cosmopolitan." But clearly what is good at the level of high culture is seen as a threat when a similar process of internationalization occurs at the level of mass culture. Then, all of a sudden, the defense is not in terms of high versus low, as one might have expected, but in terms of national cultures and national identities imperiled by an emerging international mass culture. There is a further irony in this construction of the conflict, contrasting an emerging global culture seen as homogenizing to national cultures seen as havens of cultural diversity. In the real world, of course, things are different. There may be a hierarchy of taste cultures, yet it is not a matter of higher taste cultures being the more national in orientation. It seems to be the case that this hierarchy of taste cultures is itself transnational, that indeed there are international audiences who at the high end all appreciate Beethoven and Bartok, or at the low end all fancy Madonna or Prince. Yet in a replay of much older elitist tirades against low culture, advocates of high art see only endless diversity where their own taste is concerned, and sheer vulgar homogeneity at the level of mass culture. They have no sense of the variety of tastes and styles, of endless change and renewal in mass culture, simply because it all occurs far beyond their ken.

Allow me one final observation. From the point of view of American mass culture traveling abroad, in many cases the exploration of cultural frontiers is taken to more radical lengths than anything one might see in America. Whereas sexual joy and freedom are merely hinted at in American commercials, where Coca-Cola at best holds the promise of more intimate intercourse in its vignettes of rapturous boys and girls, on the beach, in boats, floating down rivers, European posters and TV commercials often are more explicit.

There is a brooding, erotic Italian wallposter of a macho guy, bare-chested, standing astride a scantily clad, sexually aroused young woman crouched between his legs.



Photograph by the author

She wears a crown reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, there is an American flag. The commercial is for the one piece of clothing on the man's body, his pair of blue jeans. Similarly, in the Netherlands, in a poster and TV campaign sponsored by the government, inviting (in small print) people to become organ donors and to wear a donor codicil, we see a young couple making love, both naked, she sitting on his lap, curving backwards in rapture. The text, in large print, reads: "Give your heart a new lease on life." Pasted across the country, on railway platforms, on bus stops, the poster must have made visiting Americans bashfully turn their heads away. To them the campaign would not appear as the outcome of a process of Americanization taken a few daring steps further. Nor for that matter would another poster campaign, again sponsored by the Dutch government, on behalf of safe sex. Graphically, for everyone to see, couples are shown, taking showers or engaged in similar forms of foreplay. Shocking stuff indeed, but nor is this all. Yet another frontier is being explored, if not crossed: in addition to hetero couples, gay couples are shown.

Admittedly, these poster campaigns no longer convey commercial messages, although in fact the Dutch government, in order to get its

messages across, has adopted advertising techniques and in fact uses advertising billboards, rented, one assumes, at the going market rate. In a sense we have come full circle. Where the Hoover Company advertisement drew on republican language to claim the freedom of the advertiser, we now see advertising space being reclaimed for statements *pro bono publico*. If democracy is a marketplace, it has become inseparable from the economic market. It is in fact one indivisible and noisy place with cries and calls vying for the public's attention, echoing back and forth. The perfect illustration of this was being pasted all across the Netherlands, in January 1995. A huge poster, produced by a Dutch advertising agency solely for the Dutch market, advertised the Levi's 508, yet playfully drew on American political language for its commercial message.



Photograph by the author

What the poster shows is the lower part of a half-nude male torso, covered from the waist down by a pair of jeans. Intertextuality abounds. The poster was reminiscent of famous album covers such as the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers*, designed by Andy Warhol, or the Bruce Springsteen album *Born in the USA*. But there is more. Playing on the classic version of the Four Freedoms the poster rephrased them as follows: freedom of

expression, freedom of thought, freedom of choice, and—Levi's 508—freedom of movement. The third freedom, as we have seen, already makes the transition from the political to the commercial; the fourth, political though it may sound, is meant to convey the greater room of movement provided by the baggier cut of the 508. The picture illustrates the point by showing the unmistakable bulge of a male member in full erection, casually touched by the hand of its owner. Clearly, the semiotics of American commercial strategies have been taken to lengths, so to speak, that are inconceivable in America. America may have been less embarrassed in exploring the continuities between the political and the commercial, Europe later on may have been more daring in its pursuit of happiness, graphically advertising it all across Europe's public space.<sup>9</sup>

For indeed, as European examples, from the political and the economic market place, serve to illustrate, the logic of a choice of freedom knows no bounds, once set free from controlling American standards of taste and decency. As is a *lingua franca's* wont, it moves in a realm of free creolization, where the controlling authority of a mother culture no longer holds. Americanization then should be the story of an American cultural language traveling and of other people acquiring that language. What they actually say in it, is a different story altogether.

<sup>9</sup>In this connection it is of interest to point out that the campaign for the Levi's 508 was produced by a Dutch advertising agency solely for the Dutch market. The video for the 501 that I referred to earlier was made by a British agency for the European market.