

Review Essay

Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe. By Victoria De Grazia. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. 586 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-674-01672-6.

Reviewed by Michael French

Given the proliferation of studies of consumption, a comparative and integrative study in this area is to be warmly welcomed. Victoria De Grazia makes a notable contribution with a study that offers a good deal of interest to business historians. In *Irresistible Empire*, she deploys and extends the burgeoning literatures relating to consumption and consumers through a series of transatlantic comparisons. The result is a diverting form of grand tour analyzing the impact of aspects of U.S. affluence, marketing, and consumer imagery on European business systems, societies, and cultures. In broad terms, it is a study of forms of Americanization and imperialism. More specifically, De Grazia evaluates the transmission, diffusion, and reception of particular technologies of marketing and of the rhetoric related to consumption. Above all, the comparative analysis is fluent, thought provoking, and impressive for its command of evidence drawn from Germany, France, and Italy. Both the range and the close argument encourage frequent dips into the extensive notes and bibliography to identify particular sources and connections.

The study draws on materials from business history, retailing, economic and social history, cultural history, and the cinema. Its primary focus is on events between 1920 and 1960, although there are brief reflections on later developments. In summary, the central argument is that the "Market Empire" of the United States exerted a fluctuating, but ultimately effective, pressure that reshaped European societies in its own image. This pressure was applied directly, through imports of branded goods, advertising, and business systems, as well as indirectly, through the diffuse power of example. Thus, De Grazia highlights a type of informal and consumerist imperialism through which American business and consumer values achieved hegemony by defining the modern

way. Such cultural force, she argues, undermined the strength of European bourgeois cultures. De Grazia identifies the American empire as characterized by a potent self-confidence and by an invasive impact on other markets and cultures. Its commercial and social energy is attributed to a combination of trade, state power, and the diffusion of U.S. civil society overseas. The latter element receives particular attention for its contribution to the establishment of American practices and principles as hegemonic. In developing this theme, the author emphasizes the degrees of fluidity and flexibility with which other national cultures were incorporated, superseded, or reworked without triggering enormous resistance. This outcome, she argues, was achieved by establishing freedom of consumer choice and democracy as interchangeable concepts that were accepted as appealing alternatives to older cultures and values. With such advantages, U.S. consumerism achieved a peaceful revolution against Europe's bourgeois cultures and traditions of militarism. In many ways, the study provides a counterpart to Gary Cross's *An All-Consuming Century*, which analyzes the appeal and force of consumption within the United States.

Although the preceding outline summarizes De Grazia's thesis, her case studies and vignettes reveal more complex processes of adaptation. Eight aspects of twentieth-century consumption are presented, plus the general ways in which consumers have been portrayed, in order to develop the thesis. The first six chapters concentrate on the 1920s and 1930s, beginning with an analysis of the Rotary Club's American roots and its international expansion, particularly into Germany. The Club's original aim of promoting male fellowship is portrayed as evolving by the 1920s into an organization geared toward encouraging active participation in civic life as a set of universally applicable values. Such American concerns appealed particularly, it is argued, to a German bourgeoisie that was anxious about its domestic and international status in the Weimar Republic. An ethic of service provided a means for members of this class to assert their domestic social leadership and even to resist some of the American influences on popular culture. The transmission and reception of Rotary ideals are explored further in a deft and thoughtful section on the translation and use of language. This discussion poses intriguing questions about the ways in which bourgeois culture was shaped, but it does not clarify the extent of U.S. influence on the German middle class. The Rotary Club is not compared directly

with alternative, domestic, stimuli, though De Grazia emphasizes the rich associational culture among members of Dresden's bourgeoisie. It would be interesting, for example, to consider the role of professional notions of service and expertise, say in medicine or the law, and the extent to which they reflected transatlantic influences.

In chapter two, such connections are explored in relation to philanthropy and statistical analysis of standards of living, using as its basis an International Labour Organization study of U.S. and European costs of living that was promoted and funded first by the Ford Motor Company and then by Edward Filene's Twentieth Century Fund. De Grazia concludes, in orthodox fashion, that Europe's lower incomes and fragmented markets impeded the development of American-style levels of consumption, but her overview is less significant than her discussion of the political dimensions to defining living standards. Alternative approaches to consumption are explored through a discussion of European socialist and cooperative perspectives on incomes, expenditure, and consumption. As in other parts of the book, the emphasis on the early 1930s creates imbalances that might have been offset by closer attention to the fragility of U.S. or European norms and experiences during this decade. Thus, the uneven spread of U.S. affluence between the wars is understated, as is the resulting diversity of the Americans' own consumer cultures and perspectives on consumption. Greater consideration might have been given to consumerism's emerging, but still frail, standing within the New Deal political spectrum compared to, say, the influence of producers or even of the labor movement. In the latter case, U.S. society was moving closer to European tendencies, reflecting the influence of immigrant groups. Similarly, the discussion of European consumption and consumer politics does not demonstrate how these trends evolved over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an oversight that detracts from the author's consideration of earlier American influences and understates the diversity of European consumer cultures, notably the strength of the cooperative movement and the role of women as consumers. As a result, the "ideal types" of U.S. and European consumption appear as "snapshots" from the period between the wars, and the focus on bourgeois culture, though nuanced, is too narrow.

The comparative analysis works better in chapter three, where retailing is evaluated by considering department stores, chain stores, and small independent shops.

Edward Filene reappears in the mode of a transatlantic tourist, philanthropist, and advocate of “modern” distribution. His annual routine between the wars is reminiscent of Andrew Carnegie’s fondness for spending his summers in Europe advising political and social elites on how best to mend or improve their ways. The department-store literature is more easily located in the context of its development from the 1870s, so the discussion is less constrained than in the first two chapters. De Grazia argues that, in Europe, department stores embodied social divisions and had less impact on middle-class consumers, though consideration of studies of British stores might have suggested more diverse influences. Small European shopkeepers are depicted as retaining certain competitive advantages, based on their local presence and their willingness to provide credit to less affluent customers, so the chain stores made little impact. Here the comparative analysis is balanced and effective, although it overlooks the greater complexity in U.S. consumption documented in Lizabeth Cohen’s work, which tracks the slow penetration of chain stores into the ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago during the 1920s. In the British case, chain stores were more influential, especially in the grocery trade, and had absorbed ideas from American practice for quite some time.

The next chapter is more innovative, comparing European trade fairs, primarily those held in Leipzig, with American promotion of branded goods. By showing how marketing systems varied according to types of product, De Grazia broadens the discussion of marketing very effectively. Since the discussion terminates in the mid-1940s, the role of trade fairs in marketing and diffusing technologies during the cold-war period is not considered. Extension of the discussion to include this topic might have provided additional insights into the commercial and political qualities of trade fairs and marketing, thereby testing the character and impact of Americanization in great depth.

Chapter five extends the marketing theme by assessing corporate advertising in the form of European reactions to J. Walter Thompson’s arrival on the continent in 1927. De Grazia depicts European advertising as initially backward and limited but then becoming effective and responsive. One example of European transformation was the refashioning of poster advertising as an innovative medium. The blended impact of images and consumption is also taken up in a chapter on cinema, which describes the dual threat in Europe of American technology and imagery, as a commercial and

technical exemplar and as a showcase for lifestyles, commodities and values. In response, European film industries tried regulatory barriers, or in the case of Nazi Germany, active state promotion of the domestic film industry. Indeed, each of the first six chapters closes with the onset of fascist regimes, which are referred to, variously, as examples of nondemocratic perspectives on consumption, of the limitations of autarky, and of the impact of war, rationing, and militarism. Although each theme raises important issues, the place of consumption in fascism and war presents difficulties, especially since the war years and the American military presence are not discussed.

The last three chapters move into the postwar era and, therefore, are more successful in identifying short-term and long-term tendencies as the cold war and European affluence emerged to complicate features of the earlier landscape. In chapter seven, European welfare reforms, such as those prompted by the Beveridge report in Great Britain, and notions of citizenship are presented as very different from contemporary American attitudes. De Grazia makes this case by citing literature on the politics of productivity and consumption, but she might have dwelled more on the continuation of rationing and shortages in Europe during the 1950s, when immediate consumption was held down in favor of investment. Her earlier careful dissections of the extent and meaning of bourgeois culture and affluence in the 1920s are not repeated for the 1950s. The evaluation of postwar retailing works more smoothly in continuing the themes of working-class reliance on smaller shops for credit as barriers to the self-service supermarket. This time, the initiatives of American investors, notably the Rockefellers, and European entrepreneurs are explored in an illuminating fashion for the 1950s. If obstacles to change are highlighted for retailing, the final chapter emphasizes an increasing European enthusiasm for major consumer durables as incomes rose. In this case, more use might have been made of the literatures on U.S. multinationals since 1950 to identify the timing and extent of their influence. De Grazia stresses the increasing influence of American women as rational and astute buyers, reflecting and reinforcing a growing female autonomy that challenged prevailing European notions. Again the context of postwar developments would have benefited from more discussion of women's activism and their rhetorical place in the earlier consumer movements in

Europe. The book does not engage to any great extent with the sources and impact of reform movements and the counterculture in either the United States or Europe.

The conclusion notes the incorporation of American institutions and products within European consumer cultures and offers the “slow food” movement as evidence for the persistence of alternative models of consumption. In addition, the author detects a loss of U.S. dynamism beginning in the 1970s, as the country’s competitive advantages diminished, firms from other nations moved into the U.S. market, and globalization generated new cultural conflicts.

Overall this is an impressive and thought-provoking study that should be of interest to many business historians. Its comparative approach is a major strength. At times, the emphasis on the period from 1920 to 1940 limits the portrayals of U.S. and European consumer cultures and encourages a neglect of more direct forms of imperialism. The argument for the force of American business and culture is undercut in many of the case studies that reveal European cultures as more resilient than described, or often as simply not sufficiently affluent to imitate American consumerism. This suggests that European consumer cultures underwent a more gradual transformation, at least until the notable acceleration that occurred in the mid-1960s, and that their roots were stronger before 1920 than De Grazia suggests. Given the book’s range, specialists may well find flaws in the treatments of particular themes, but it nevertheless offers a fascinating and significant advance in the treatment of this subject. The comparative and integrative approach reaps rewards and challenges others to test its claims and to locate their own findings across a similarly broad canvas.

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