

Unbegrenzte Möglichkeiten: “Amerikanisierung” in Deutschland und Frankreich (1900–1933) [Infinite Possibilities: “Americanization” in Germany and France (1900–1933)]. By *Egbert Klautke*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003. 395 pp. Bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, €42.00. ISBN: 3-515-07941-6.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Fear

Egbert Klautke’s book is a clearly written, well organized, and detailed comparative study of the popular and scholarly debates about Americanization that took place in France and Germany between 1900 and 1933. As if on cue, at the beginning of the “American Century,” British journalist William T. Stead published his long essay, *The Americanization of the World, or the Trend of the Twentieth Century* in London in 1902, and it was immediately translated into French and German. Ludwig Max Goldberger coined a popular catch phrase the next year with the title of his book, *Das Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten* [The Country of Infinite Possibilities] (Berlin, 1903). H. G. Wells took up the theme in *The Future in America* (London, 1906). Even Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/05) was partially inspired by his trip to the United States, where he observed Protestant sects. The American victory over Spain in 1898 and the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 marked the emergence of two new non-European military powers, foreshadowing the potential end of European dominance. Klautke describes the French reaction to the prospect of the new American imperialists appearing on the international scene, pointing out that, unlike the Germans, who were mostly attracted by America’s economic dynamism, the French perceived the Americans as a dangerous new geopolitical rival that threatened to impose “Yankee imperialism” on the world.

In both France and Germany, American economic dynamism represented a vision of a “brave new world” of Tayloristic labor practices and Fordist mass production. The Europeans perceived American society as one in which everyone drove the same cars, dressed alike, and ate the same foods; where individualism was crushed, social hierarchies were leveled, and the dangerously independent “new women” dominated the arts (a situation that was anathema to European male intellectuals). Europeans viewed

with alarm America's unholy attachment to materialism ("crass utility") and money-making; they condemned its superficiality and lack of historical and (high) cultural sense, its mix of sectarian and puritanical religiosity, its crazy jazz music and dance (often described in racist terms by European authors), and its cheap movies that catered to a mass audience. America epitomized for them "a space of projection for social utopias, visions of the future, and political-social debates" (p. 15).

Klautke demonstrates convincingly that French and German interpretations of America (and, by implication, those of other Western Europeans) were remarkably similar. Except during World War I, French and German writings about Americanization paralleled each other to a remarkable degree. By means of this comparison, Klautke performs a particularly valuable service by contextualizing the alleged antimodern, antiliberal, anti-Western, antidemocratic mentality of the Germans alleged by Dan Diner, George Mosse, and Fritz Stern. These historians argue that German intellectuals were imbued with a unique form of cultural pessimism that contributed to the subsequent emergence of National Socialism.

Klautke also traces the shifts in European views of America over time. At first, they considered Fordism a threat that would turn Europe into the machinelike society, devoid of cultural content, depicted in Fritz Lang's movie *Metropolis*. American dollar diplomacy seemed poised to make Europe a takeover target. By the 1920s, both French and German critics were expressing anti-Semitic views, referring to the United States not as "Uncle Sam" but as "Uncle Shylock" (p. 173). Europeans' cultural pessimism fed into their nascent anti-Americanism. In the 1920s, this attitude was largely found on the far right, where, at its most extreme, the "Americanization of Europe" meant the "decline of civilization" (p. 269). The stereotypes of American superficiality, materialism, uniformity, and lack of culture and history, the dismissal of America as a pseudoculture (including the claim that America was a "phenomenon, not a civilization," [p. 296]) evolved into a uniformly censorious outlook. Prior to 1945, European writers rarely discussed the democratic system that formed the core of Americans' self-conception and identity; only after 1945, did its political system begin to be integrated into their discussions of Americanization.

Klautke impressively maintains his comparative perspective, contrasting also euphoric perceptions of America with expressions of skepticism and negativity. However, he might have improved his fine discussion by taking one step back from his fascinating material and concluding with a more analytical summary. Perhaps he could have taken issue with Richard Kuisel's thesis (in *Seducing the French*) that once modernization became divorced from Americanization in their minds after the 1960s, the French were able to accept change more readily. According to Kuisel, Americanization represented the reverse of "Frenchness," the antithesis of reinvented French values. Mary Nolan, in *Vision of Modernity*, also points out how the reception of Fordism in Germany differed according to class and political party: two Germans from different social strata could literally stand inside Ford's giant River Rouge plant and perceive radically different realities. German and French intellectuals were highly selective in their concepts of what constituted Americanization (as illustrated, for instance, in their refusal to take its democratic system seriously until after 1945). Despite their attacks on jazz, it was the most popular form of musical entertainment in both countries during the early 1930s; after the Nazis vilified and banned jazz as ungermanic, Paris became the European center for jazz (p. 317). Adolf Hitler was inspired by Henry Ford; the Volkswagen Beetle would have been unimaginable without the example of Ford's Model T. Hitler admired America's "living space" and its balance of agriculture and industry that in part inspired his uniquely brutal, perverse, and racist vision of a "great continental economy." Hitler was also impressed by Prohibition! In 1926, he proclaimed, "If European states do not soon solve the alcohol question like America, then America will completely rule the world in 100 years" (p. 37). Clearly, the perception of Americanization could differ dramatically among European observers, but what drove this selection process? In two brief discussions about the reasons both for male intellectuals' fear of American (allegedly) feminized mass culture and for the then standard differentiation between (German) *Kultur* and (French) *Civilisation*, Klautke does begin to step back from the material and develop a more theoretical analysis that might help explain how this perception and selection process worked.

Finally, it is not clear whether Klautke believes that Americanization is a discourse or a reality, because he does not discuss the degree to which the German or

French societies adopted the American model (p. 17). He effectively presents Americanization as a projection of the anxieties, fears, and (sometimes) hopes of middle-brow and upper-caste European *Bildungsbürger*—the educated, literate elite who set the tone for broader society. Yet, by the end of the book, I felt I had learned more about the fantasies and fears of the educated middle class in France and Germany than about Americanization. What if working-class voices had been included? Clearly, the fears harbored by this class drove their actions, writings, and behavior, thereby influencing real politics, but Klautke could have spent more time analyzing the social and intellectual space occupied by these *literati*, their *habitus*, that shaped their selective reception of America. After all, it was their perceptions that helped shape the reality of Americanization in Europe.

*Jeffrey Fear is associate professor at Harvard Business School. He is author of Organizing Control: August Thyssen and the Construction of German Management (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); "Diverging Paths: Accounting for Corporate Governance in America and Germany," Business History Review (Spring 2006) (with Chris Kobrak); and many other articles and book chapters. He is currently working on articles about the history of the Schmalenbach-Society, codetermination, and German and American corporate governance.*