Europe and a Globalizing United States: Political Ideals Projected and Counter-projected

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Introduction: Cross-Atlantic Projections

Europe’s identity exhibits a dynamic with that considerable part of the world where its colonial expansion impinged. This has been read back into Europe’s relationship to its more recent colonial and semi-colonial territories via the concept of “orientalism” (Said 1978), and in the wealth of post-colonialism studies emerging with it. By showing America and Europe functioning as each other’s “other,” I will argue that an analogous complex is present in the interplay between Europe’s identity and that of North America.

The concept of marginality shows how this might be so. During its expansionist phase, Europe made many places and peoples marginal to itself: they became areas or cultures where Europe saw itself intruding, steering things, reshaping, pushing toward modern, civilized life, and pushing back what was primitive and backward. And, of all the areas in which Europe made margins of itself, none has run the gamut of possibilities that the North American continent has. Originally, the continent was regarded as territory empty of significant culture, to be peopled by Europeans. These “Europeans” then split from their own place of origin, the “homeland” that had remained their center, and defined themselves as a distinct “European” society. In due course, that society came to be the
dominant center in terms of which Europe itself was marginal. In the twentieth century, another “Europe” returned from across the Atlantic, as it were, to dominate the world, including Europe.

On my submission, the history of those interactions can be divided into two periods, roughly according to who is a margin of whom. One runs to the end of nineteenth century, when the “colonial” relationship on the American side is fully superseded. The United States then ceases to ground its self-identity in its likeness to, or distinctiveness from Europe—including its virtues due to the distance. America is seen less apart, on the margin of a world dominated by Europe; rather, it is the new center. Yet, America continues to define itself to itself in terms originally given to it—or, as I shall argue, “projected” upon it—from Europe, terms that also “belong” to Europe’s self-identity. America took those “European” terms and “counter-projected” them to define itself in the world as “European,” yet different from “Europe.”

Projection, Counter-projection, and Otherness

On this interpretation, numerous politically significant thinkers construed their “home” society with reference to another space, where they chose to see certain possibilities beyond those “at home.” Initially, it was Europeans thinking Europe with reference to North America; but, soon Americans began construing America with reference to Europe. The possibilities might be the realization of some good—sharpening the claim for what could and/or ought to be the case at home, or gratifying the sense that a supposed good from home could or would be instituted at the other site. Or, the possibilities could be a potential bad found in the other site—illustrating what we should avoid or eradicate. In order to envision, advocate, or condemn these possibilities, they are projected in thought to the other location, there to be sketched out freely, thanks to distance. In that sense, North America/United States has been an other for Europe, and vice versa: something distinct, but close enough to matter in defining oneself.1 The other of North America/United States long performed an important function for European thinking: it has allowed Europeans to contemplate how their identity either includes certain, as yet, unrealized virtues, and/or possesses characteristics that deserve to be reproduced. I apply the term “projection” where European thinkers practice this play with the idea of North America/the United States (or Americans mutatis mutandis): for reasons having to do with their own thinking and purposes, they project, beyond the immediate reality they experience, to conditions which may hold or come about in the other society as it is imagined.