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“Its Complicated”: European Media Discourse on the US From Reagan to Obama

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Media debates after the invasion of Iraq suggested that there was a growing anti-Americanism in Europe and that this contributed to an increasing sense of European identity as representing values that differed from that of the US. But what if this anti-Americanism really was anti-Bushism and how shared are the shared values on the European side when it comes to representation of the US as Other? The articles in this Special Issue focus on the discursive image of the US in the elite media of five European countries at points in time from a particularly frosty Cold War period under President Reagan until six months after the installation of President Obama. Taken together, there are broad similarities in the paradigms and characteristics used to depict the US from the post-Cold War period, especially in French, Finnish, Swedish and German media. Below the surface, however, the narratives reveal that each country’s commentators are mainly interested in the US in relation to domestic concerns or as a prism for its relationships with other countries on the world stage. There is a stark focus on the US presidents as symbols through which the US as a whole is seen. Both Democratic and Republican presidents are likened to Rambo, the “space cowboy”, the “trade and cultural warrior”, or Hollywood “stars”, which could be interpreted as a measure of cultural disdain towards American popular culture and militarism.

Keywords: European identity, elite media, the US, symbols

When Barack Obama became President of the United States, the transatlantic relationship was in fairly bad shape. Not as bad as it had been during late 2002/03, when half of Europe came out against the US plans for an invasion of Iraq, but relations throughout the Bush era continued to be in what some have identified as a crisis. This crisis, according to Tomas Risse (2008), should be understood against the backdrop of the tightly bounded “security community” existing between Europe and the US since the 2nd World War. The use of this term to describe transatlantic relations means more than political and security cooperation, it refers to the deeply entwined

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economic interdependence, and crucially, to the common values
and norms said to stem from a common identity. In other words,
transatlantic relations are not, and never have been, simply a
question of power politics, but are also based on an historically
shared culture. It was the shared culture – of “the West” - that was
called into question. Specifically, the antipathy towards the George
W. Bush administration brought on widespread doubt that common
values such as democracy, human rights, and rule of international
law really were shared. (Risse and Grabowsky, 2008). To understand
the nature of this rift we need perspectives from both politics and
culture.

Clearly, the stream of anti-Americanism books published
from the mid-2000s on the roots, the rise or the reassertion of anti-
American sentiment suggests that many were trying to understand
the complex historical and contemporary basis for what was seen as
a growing alienation to the US (Katzenstein & Keohane, 2007;
Higgott & Malbašić, 2008, Hollander, 2004; Ross & Ross, 2004). The
articles in this Special Issue owe a debt to this literature and, while
some authors refer to aspects of anti-Americanism, our focus has
actually been more on what the image of the US in European media
debates says about their own concerns and their own national or
burgeoning regional identities. As Rob Kroes (1996: 14-15) points
out, much of the European imagery of the US is really a matter of
comparison between the two – high versus low, depth versus
flatness, old versus new, “organic cohesion” vs. disassociation – and
is related to the anticipation or dread felt by Europeans as they saw
their own future related to what was happening in “America”.

At the same time, European countries have had quite
different histories and relationships to the US from the Cold War
until today – relationships that have changed after the fall of Berlin
Wall or after September 11th – as these countries have fallen apart
(Soviet Union) or been put back together (Germany). The question for these authors is not whether anti-Americanism in European countries exists, but how have media debates, commentaries and analyses formulated and constructed the US role in the world at different points along this timeline – and how this relates to various national self-images. Does the US role in the world appear similar or change according to different presidents or national specificities and histories? If the surge in anti-Americanism under Bush has gone over to Obamaforia, was the former simply a glitch in the machinery? An anomaly? And, how shared are the shared values on the European side of the transatlantic community when juxtaposed to the US?

As fodder for identity processes, the media play a key role in the production and circulation of ideas, nurturing local, national and transnational communities’ sense of themselves, often through identifying those who they are not. As a whole, we have seen journalism from a cultural perspective insofar as all journalistic texts are dependent on political, social and cultural narratives that play on national myths and collective memories, which ultimately serve to reify national elites and their relations with other nation-states, especially the United States (cf. Berkowitz, 2011).

As media scholars and political scientists, we hope that the articles from this comparative national study can contribute something to cultural studies scholars with an interest in European and American studies.

A Changing World
Following the large demonstrations across Europe in 2003 against the planned invasion of Iraq – Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida published an article in French and German newspapers
attempting to galvanize Europeans into acting as a counter-weight to the US’s “hegemonic unilateralism”. Europe, the authors argued, now had a second chance to find a new role for itself on the international stage, a role based on European political and cultural heritage, on which a common European identity could be built which distinguished it from the US. Heffernan summarizes these in his review of the article:

“the neutrality of authority (embodied in the separation of church and state); the faith in the power of politics and a relatively benign state to ameliorate the impact of unfettered capitalism; the ethos of solidarity in the struggle for social justice; and the high esteem accorded to international law and the rights of the individual” (Heffernan 2005, p. 573).

After the lessons of horrific wars and colonization, bitter class struggles, and nationalistic atavism, Europe should be able to turn the “wild cacophony of a multi-vocal public sphere” into a genuine cosmopolitan European identity based on these common values. They argued that the Europe-wide demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq could be the beginning of a new European public sphere where these values could be expressed (Habermas & Derrida, 2003).

Alas, many empirical studies both before and after their article, have shown that there are few clear signs of a common European public sphere, although some countries’ media are “more European” than others, and some see a growing Europeanization of issues in the media for certain areas (Wessler, et.al., 2008; Risse 2010). Triandafyllidou, Wodak and Krzyzanowski (2009) found that of all the European crises they studied over many decades, only an external Other (the Muslim world) mobilized national media to speak in similar ways about common European values, prompting the question of whether the US as transatlantic Other could also fill this role.
At the same time, for readers of American newspapers, such as The Los Angeles Times and The New York Times, it is easy to find articles arguing that Europe has become less important to the US under Obama than it had been before September 11th. The allies in Europe are no longer on a pedestal, rivaled only by relations to Japan, as in the decades after 1945. Now, the Europeans are one ally among others, certainly important for the remnants of the “War on Terror,” but only when it directly contributes, such as with troops in Afghanistan. In the economic arena, Europe is overshadowed by China and other large developing economies. So, what is left for transatlantic relations is the prism of shared values and culture – an aspect not lost on Barack Obama whose immediate step upon taking over the presidency was to reassure the world that former notions of democratic values and human rights still applied.

Undoubtedly, however, we live in an era where the material basis of politics, economics and culture are changing rapidly, perhaps even radically, if compared to the Cold War mentality. If the end of the Cold War had left Europeans wondering how to cope with the redrawn borders of its own continent, and the US involvement in it, the attacks of September 11th turned attention to new transnational actors, and to cultural and ideological fissures between the US as the leading “Western” power and Islamic fundamentalism. The fault lines of these relationships and conflicts differ from Cold War relationships – many European countries have themselves radically changed in their orientation with the demise of the Soviet Union.

The common project underlying the articles in this Special Issue focused on the image (in the discursive sense) of the US in the elite media of five European countries at points in time from a particularly frosty Cold War period under President Reagan until six months after the installation of President Obama. At best, we can provide snapshots of media discourses in very different European countries over three decades – nevertheless we claim that these snapshots are evidence of broader recognizable long-running narratives lodged in various (and common) European identities, histories and relationships with the US. How do European elite media construct and cultivate various relationships with the US? Do values, judgments, and prescriptions made about the US role in the world shift or remain the same in different time periods in these countries? Which patterns emerge when the images of the US in the media from Western Europe are contrasted to the images in Russian media?

The Politically Correct Elite Press and National Identity

We are acutely aware that analyzing the elite press in the digital age is somewhat anachronistic – the role of the press in public discourse has undergone major change in the last decades, especially with the advent of the Internet. Yet we do insist that there is something to be said for studying elite media in public discourse because of their leading role as purveyors and reifiers of common ideological baggage about “our” nation’s place in the world, who our “friends” and “enemies” are, how foreign events should be understood, and what “we” should do next. While the popular media also do this,

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2 We wish to thank the Swedish Research Council for funding this project.
3 Certainly tabloids also do this, but they often have fewer articles on foreign countries and therefore we can expect much less explicit discussion of the US’s role in the world. Tabloids in the different countries chosen here have different roles and status,
especially in that most nationalistic arena of sport, the elite media have set the standards for politically correct ways of interpreting the world. They devote considerable resources to analyzing world events, and see themselves as arenas for discussing world issues on an equal level with world rulers. The relationship between politics and culture is a complex one, which we cannot explore fully here. Suffice to say that we do not underestimate what appears to be a major issue when it comes to any media image of the US, namely the complex ambivalence with which the US is often viewed, i.e. the often highly critical views of the US as a superpower and its role in CocaCola globalization, side by side with an appreciation of the self-made man ideal, the fascination with celebrity and the latest trends in science, consumer and popular culture. What the authors here do is to identify how these ambivalences are trotted out by journalistic commentators in relation to various events, symbols (such as US presidents), policies and individuals over the years.

Since the focus of the study was to identify stability and change in the images of the US and how these are formulated, we chose time periods that were not peak news events, but events significant enough to spark analysis, commentary and debate about the US role in the world. We therefore avoided the years of momentous changes like the fall of the Berlin Wall, and instead selected a couple of years later, when we hoped the effects of the changes itself would be more visible. We avoided the year the US and its allies invaded Iraq, the year of the largest pan-European

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4 See Hollander (2005), Ross and Ross (2005), Katzenstein & Keohane (2007);
anti-missile protests, and we avoided as much as possible the earliest hype around President Barack Obama.\(^5\)

The five countries included as articles in this issue were chosen based on the fact that they have different relationships to the US. Due to its geographic fate, Finland was forced to keep its distance from the US during the Cold War, but in the 1990s it became an enthusiastic EU supporter. While Sweden also became a EU member in this time period, it was with much less enthusiasm. Generally, the Nordic regional power has despite its “non-aligned” position attempted to act as “moral superpower” on the stage of world opinion, while having closer cultural ties to the US through emigration. France and the US have a long history of being both rivals and allies – more than any other country epitomizing the aforementioned ambivalence to the US. Like Sweden, France has a track record of favoring multilateralism and the international rule of law. Germany, as both the country closest to the US, as well as an engine at the core of the European Union, went through great changes with its reunification and its new role in the aftermath of the Cold War. It should be noted that despite these variations in relationships to the US, none of these countries were involved in the US-led invasion of Iraq. Finally, the study includes the Soviet Union/Russia, which has gone from being the arch-enemy of the US to being a partner in the ‘War on Terror,’ while elements of their power rivalry and mirroring of each other still remain. Adding the various Russian media images of the US over time gives us the possibility to compare the images in Western European media with each other as well as with a non-western European country.

\(^5\) The time period for Obama was much shorter than the others and was conceived of as simply an indicator of continuation or change in views of the US after the Bush Administration.
With all this in mind, we expected that the elite media in Germany, Finland, France and Sweden, - as well as in Russia – would be more critical of the US under George W. Bush, motivating this with their fundamental differences in values from an increasingly religious, unilaterally war-like and inwardly fragmented United States. This scenario means that something like a basic common European view of the US can be discerned, whereby the elite media’s images of the US are similar, as well as the problems, solutions and the people associated with the US. If these similarities are more about European common identity than just anti-Bushism, they should continue into the Obama era.

A second scenario expected was that the media discourse in these countries reflected the preoccupations and identity of their own countries in relation to the US. There is much previous research to support such an outcome, from evidence of nationally specific news reporting on the same events (Cohen, et. al. 1996; Robertson, 1992; Chin-Chuan Lee, et. al. 2000; Wallis & Baran, 1990; Riegert, 2010; De Vreese, 2001; Rossler, 2004) to the resilience of national media structures, political culture and forms of collective identity (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Curran & Park, 2000; Morris & Waisbord, 2001; Hellman, 2006; Robertson, 1992; 2000; 2001). This is because, as we noted at the outset, the media provide the symbolic spaces for identity formation, and identity processes in modern societies are cultivated through various national and local media. State-centric views of the world have therefore tended to dominate through “a fixed, very narrow, and very stable repertoire of descriptive, discursive techniques” (Ekecrantz, 2004: 62) that journalists’ narratives draw on to produce cultural myths about their own society compared to others (Riegert, 2004; see also Billig, 1995). Since European states are increasingly tied to the regional and global processes of commodification, deregulation, and
competition there is reason to believe in an emerging transnational journalism, or at least a regional one. However, since few studies compare media over time, many questions pertaining to the relative change and stability of national media narratives of “us” in contrast to various “thems” have not been fully explored. Contrasting the discourses on the US in four Western European countries with the discourse in Soviet Union/Russia says something about the regional aspects of journalism.

Towards a Common European Outlook?

There are then a number of reasons why the image of the US in European elite media would be more similar in the 21st century, than during the second half of the 20th century. Judging from the articles in this issue, the Finnish, French, German and Swedish media co-vary over time according to broad brush-strokes. Least similar are they during the Cold War in 1984, when the US was associated with superpower balance and where, of course, the different countries’ relationships with the US were very clearly marked. But from 1994 onward there is broad similarity in the four countries in their focus on the economy, the interpretation of the US as the engine of the global economy (for good and for bad), and the worry over US “passivity” in the war in Bosnia. In 2004, it is criticism of US unilateralism and signs of anti-Americanism that dominate, but in 2009 all five countries’ media give positive evaluations of US signals of multilateralism and dialogue, while announcing varying degrees of skepticism or admiration of President Obama’s ‘star power’ and mastery of the media.

This means that the European elite media are not growing more negative towards the US in general, despite the confluence of negativity between the European countries during the reign of the
George W. Bush. For one, the Russian media were the exception in 2004 in that they were quite positive to George W. Bush personally, and if slightly less so, even to President Clinton as a partner in various ventures, for reasons that perhaps only the Russian position in the world can explain. This points to a greater problem with establishing negativity toward the US – it does not say very much.

The most similar nations regarding their consistent skepticism or mistrust of the United States are Russia and France. However, their media discourses have nothing else in common than the need to identify France and Russia in contrast to, and superior to the US: the US becomes the yardstick by which journalists and commentators judge their own country’s ambitions on the international stage and for prescriptions of what it should do. This means that the media images of the US blend seamlessly into discussions of liberalism and multiculturalism in France and the Russian problem of “terrorism” in Chechnya. For these two countries – the We is more important than the Them.

Unlike the other European countries, but like Finland, which also went through major economic upheavals after the end of the Cold War, the Russian media discourse in 1994 was characterized by a preoccupation with the national self, economic hardship and problems at home. This, and the freewheeling newspaper explosion, meant that the Russian discourse on the US was mildly interested, and as noted above, quite benevolent; whereas the US hardly registered as newsworthy for the Finnish papers in 1994. The focus was instead on the Finnish accession to the EU, how Europeans dealt with (or not) the war in Bosnia, and to aspects of the world

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6 Some authors see signs of anti-Americanism during this period, although it is questionable whether a fluctuation in European ambivalence towards the US can be said to constitute an anti-American “predisposition”, which is what Hollander (2004) and others take to be the difference between critique of the US and “anti-Americanism.”
economy, such as the US “trade war” with Japan. In 2004 and 2009
the Russian media appears to have interpreted the US according to
whether certain representatives (i.e. President Bush) could be
counted on to keep out of Russian affairs and help promote a high
price of oil. In other words, the discourse went from being highly
rhetorical and emotional, describing the US as “morally decrepit”
(1984) to a more pragmatic and less ideological one after the Cold
War – although always seen through a lens of suspicion, and as an
obstacle to Russian aspirations.

As expected, the French media discourse is much more
stable, if ambivalently so, in various time periods. The US is mainly
interesting to the extent that it can help the French realize their
global political and cultural aspirations. Like the Russian media, the
US is the unambiguous Other, a foil through which “we” define
ourselves as the “better” universalist, the better multilateralist, the
better secularist and the better diplomat. The superiority of the US
militarily, economically and especially culturally is problematic,
since it undermines European traditions of the rule of law through
international institutions, cultural diversity, and protecting
individual freedom from the excesses of particularism (i.e. in
minority communities). In this way, the media discourse is starkly
reminiscent of the previously described arguments by Habermas
and Derrida on the characteristics of Europe and how these should
be the foundation of a united European identity.

Sweden and Finland, both small states and new EU members
during the mid-90s come across differently. The major difference is
that while the US to Swedish elite media is the “prime mover”, the
driving engine of all things political, economic and cultural on the
international stage, the US plays a much less dominant role in the
Finnish media – even during the later periods when the press is
freed from the constraints of Soviet “friendship”. Whereas Sweden
is, like France, ambivalent alternatively admiring and criticizing the US, advocating the need for a counter-weight to its global power, Finland’s geostrategic position enforces its own logic on the media discourse – from the “balance” achieved through the practice of borrowing US and Soviet commentators, to the European turn, to the criticism of Bush and the chorus of wonderment at Obama – the Finnish media appear to join the European media discourse on the US without explicit recourse to Finnish national identity.

Only in Germany do we find the US depicted in the familiar terms we would use for friendship, family or love relationships. Despite the wide-spread popular discontent with the US as seen in the anti-missile movement of the 1980s, the US is still depicted as a trustworthy guarantor of security in the bitter months of the Cold War, one who was willing to negotiate and compromise. In fact, it is only during the George W. Bush period that the elite media in Germany began to talk understandingly of the waves of anti-Americanism. While it is cautioned that this refers more often to the policy than to the country itself, President Bush himself is described as a “liar”, inconsiderate, irrational, an idiot, and “morbidly hated” around the world. Parallels can be found with Sweden and France in the alternating admiration for the US as a masculine role model and the continuing calls for more multilateralist approaches and emphasis on international law – yet nowhere near the same extent as the other two.

These various national media discourses are reflective of each era’s Zeitgeist - commenting, analyzing and explaining how events fit into the spirit of the time. There is a stark focus on the US presidents in all the five European media as symbols and prisms through which the US as a whole is seen. Incidentally, the use of symbols such as Rambo, the “space cowboy”, the “trade and cultural warrior”, or as Hollywood “stars” for both Democratic and
Republican presidents could be interpreted as a measure of cultural
disdain towards American pop culture and militarism as the
preferred solution to the problems of the world.

It is clear that the moves of the Bush Administration are seen
to justify a level of critique in which growing anti-Americanism is
defined as “understandable”. This also recalls older European
narratives about the US that have to do with a wanton (immature,
individualistic) unilateralism and naïve self-confidence (in military
power) rather than diplomacy as the solution to problems in the
world; and a similarly naïve belief that capitalism is the panacea of
the world’s economic problems, despite the negative effects of
economic and cultural globalization.

When this critique is most evident, the Russian media do not
conform to the underlying Western European narrative of
prescribing more multilateralism. From the short Obama period,
however, we see again similar lines – all five countries’ media are to
varying extents cautious in their appraisal of the new Obama
administration – from the praise and wonder of the German and
Finnish commentators, to the greater skepticism of Swedish,
Russian and French media.

The big picture is that after the Cold War, all five countries,
especially the Western European ones, have similar main paradigms
and characteristics associated with the US presidents. Below the
surface, however, these various countries’ media are most interested
in how all this affects their own relationships with other countries
on the world stage, or issues that happen to be important at that
time domestically. Some of these narratives are reminiscent of each
other and some are unique. This should not be surprising since the
US as the Other must be mirrored slightly differently if indeed the
Other is “those who are not.”
References


