The Atlantic

The New Comedy of American Decline

Even works of escapism are reckoning with waning national myths.

Apple TV

Ted Lasso is a loud American, but his loudness is a feint.

Story by Megan Garber

DECEMBER 3, 2020 | CULTURE

Last month, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia published its most recent survey of American political life. One of its findings: 66 percent of Americans view their country to be in a state of decline. The survey arrived just after the publication of the latest Social Progress Index, which found that the United States is one of only three countries where citizens are worse off than they were in 2011, when

the index started tracking quality of life. The deterioration is all the more perverse because the failures, in a country as rich as the U.S., are not material, but cultural. They are abdications of moral imagination. As one of the index's advisers put it, in an observation both evergreen and newly acute: "We are no longer the country we like to think we are."

Loss hovers in the American air, the sense of ambient tragedy weaving its way even into works of escapism. In recent months—as a pandemic that was handled with relative efficiency by many other countries has ravaged the United States, and as the American president has waged war on American democracy—two new TV shows have considered the question of what it means to be American. Both have done so in the guise of comedy. *Emily in Paris*, a 10-episode lark about a bubbly American who moves to France for work, premiered on Netflix earlier this fall. It arrived soon after *Ted Lasso*—a 10-episode lark about a bubbly American who moves to England for work—began streaming on Apple TV+.

[Read: Americans are living in an alternate history]

The shows' fish-across-the-pond stories are uncannily similar. In the one, Emily Cooper (played by Lily Collins), a young marketing executive, arrives in Paris after her company buys a boutique advertising firm. In the other, Ted Lasso (Jason Sudeikis) is a coach of (American) football who moves to London to coach *football*, as the rest of the world understands the sport. Both protagonists are optimistic and friendly and absolutely clueless about their new homes. Emily speaks no French; Ted, mystified by boots and lorries, embodies the old joke about two nations divided by a common language. Both Americans are resented, at first, for their ignorance. And yet both are redeemed. The stories are so deeply aligned that both end with scenes soundtracked to that classic work of retrospective vindication: Édith Piaf's "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien."

The American abroad is a well-worn trope; that accounts, certainly, for some of the coincidences. But there's a unified message in the shows' synchronized spin. Both tales read as new versions of an old argument: that one of the most valuable exports America produces is America itself. Emily and Ted, these notably unquiet Americans, win over their doubters through the brute force of their charm. These shows, though, are engaged in a reckoning. They are grappling with

cultural exchange during a time when American exceptionalism, always a myth, looks ever more like a lie.

"First, let me apologize for speaking English. I did Rosetta Stone on the plane, but it hasn't kicked in yet."

That's one of the first things Emily Cooper, newly arrived in France, says to her Parisian colleagues. The line is very much like *Emily in Paris* itself: chipper, absurd, proof of how possible it is to feel real embarrassment on behalf of a fictional person. A hero who moves to France while speaking no French is a choice with obvious practicalities—a French-speaking protagonist, for one thing, would require subtitles. But it comes with cascading effects. *Emily in Paris* goes out of its way to explain why Emily's lack of fluency isn't her fault (she's a last-minute fill-in for an executive who ended up unable to make the move herself). Soon enough, the show is also working to explain away pretty much everything else about her behavior in France, from the romantic to the professional. *Emily in Paris* is a 10-episode-long profession of innocence. She is an agent of chaos; the show, for its part, works to absolve her.

[Read: 'Emily in Paris' is an irresistible fantasy]

Emily is also an agent of blithe morality. An expat who acts like a tourist, she judges everything against the backdrop of her own rigid Americanness. The French approach to customer service? Lacking, she complains. The French way of counting floors in buildings? Weird, she gripes. The way the chef at a restaurant cooks her steak? Incorrect. The way her French colleagues think about love, and professional achievement, and life itself? Wrong as well. Emily meets a neighbor who tells her that he is from Normandy. She replies, with a wide smile, "Oh, I know that beach! *Saving Private Ryan*!"

You might figure that those moments are evidence of a show poking fun at its protagonist's arrogance, or setting the stage for her to grow beyond her initial provincialism. (What does the American-in-Paris trope entail, after all, if not an education?) But: You would be, as I was, mostly incorrect. Poe's law has no place in this world. Emily may come to realize that she likes *pain au chocolat* and scenic runs along the Seine, but that's about as far as her learning goes. Instead, other people change around her. Those in Emily's orbit—her new co-workers,

her new friends, a famous fashion designer who, under Emily's influence, happily renovates his entire aesthetic—all end up learning from her, rather than vice versa. They grudgingly concede that her way (strident, striving, teeming with insistent individualism) is the right way. She is an American Mary Poppins, blown into people's lives on the soft winds of globalization. French critics of *Emily in Paris*, you will be unsurprised to hear, have given it scathing reviews.

There's a canniness to the fact that *Emily in Paris* takes place in the universe of advertising and image management. The show—the latest from the *Sex and the City* creator Darren Star—is selling several fantasies. Primary among them is the notion that Emily can bulldoze her way through France and be celebrated for it. *Emily in Paris* is named for the Instagram account Emily starts when she arrives in her new city: an accidental exploration of Susan Sontag's observations about the predatory nature of photography. And her entire existence in Paris is mediated by the images she "curates." She alchemizes nearly every interaction she has with her new French friends—a night wandering the Marais, a visit to an art installation, a trip to Champagne—into fodder for her marketing campaigns.

Her show does something similar: *Emily in Paris* regards Paris itself not primarily as a place, but as a consumer good. It presents the city, messy and complicated like any other, as a theatrical setting for Emily's adventures. It indulges in what the writer Melanie Hamlett—herself an American living in France—has called, aptly, the "American gaze." After a while, Emily's lack of fluency in French begins to look less like a plot point and more like *the* point: *Emily in Paris* does not speak the language of the place it has chosen to call home. It compensates for its ignorance by shouting, ever louder, in English.

After a while, Emily's lack of fluency in French begins to look less like a plot point and more like *the* point. (Stephanie Branchu / Netflix)

Ted lasso is loud too. but his loudness is, in the end, a feint. That is one of the crucial contrasts between Ted and Emily. Ted *Lasso*, whose story is also rooted in advertising, is an extension of the sketches Jason Sudeikis starred in to promote NBC's airing of Premier League soccer in the U.S.—quirky spots featuring a guy with a thick Kansas accent and an even thicker mustache who is brought on to coach a British soccer team. *Ted Lasso* features the same character: boisterous, clueless, stereotypically American. "Heck, you could fill two internets with what I don't know about football," Ted says in the pilot episode, merrily, during the first press conference he gives as the coach of the (fictional) team AFC Richmond.

One of the best decisions *Ted Lasso* made was to complicate its own caricatures. Ted's ignorance—he was hired by an owner, the show explains, who wants to sink the team—is merely a starting point. The series is the story of how he overcomes it. Ted's most evident feature may be his wide-eyed belief in hope itself (he is, in that, also very similar to Coach Taylor from *Friday Night Lights*, right down to the *clear-eyes/full-hearts*–style BELIEVE poster he tapes above his new team's locker-room door). The quality that most defines Ted, however, is his curiosity. That is how *Ted Lasso*, a show so similar in structure to *Emily in Paris*,

can read so differently from it. Emily's ignorance is existential; Ted's is conditional.

The difference isn't just that *Ted Lasso* is self-aware in a way *Emily in Paris* is not. It's that *Ted Lasso* is nation-aware in a way *Emily in Paris* is not. Ted may not know, at first, about soccer; he knows enough to understand, though, that "American" can suggest failure just as readily as it can suggest virtue. In a care package, Ted's young son, who still lives in Kansas, sends him a bag of toy soldiers—the small, green, plastic ones, frozen in acts of battle. Ted gives them out to his team as inspirational trinkets. He tries to give one of them to Sam, a player from Nigeria who generally shares Ted's positive outlook. "Coach," Sam says, "is it okay if I don't keep this? I don't really have the same fondness for the American military that you do."

"Oh, sure, right," Ted replies. "Imperialism."

"Imperialism, yeah," Sam says. "Thank you, coach."

This is not an exchange you'd likely expect from a cheerful sitcom. But the dissonance gives it even more weight. *Imperialism* punctures the comedy. The show's writers give it the space to do that. Their willingness to run toward what is painful and plain further helps explain why *Ted Lasso* mostly works while *Emily in Paris* mostly fails. *Emily* treats Americanism as a gift to be given; *Ted* understands that, for many people around the world—including many Americans—it has worked in precisely the opposite way. Ted may be, like Emily, an avatar of stateside entitlement; he views that entitlement, however, not as something to be accommodated, but rather as something to be overcome.

[Read: Dwight Schrute was a warning]

That applies, too, to the individualism that has done so much to shape, and threaten, American culture. *Ted Lasso* starts with an American who has failed upward—a handsome, straight, white dude, brought in to be a leader in a sport he knows nothing about. It ends up, however, telling the story of a team coming together against the odds. Every main character in *Ted Lasso* begins as a tired trope that warms into something else. There's Ted himself, a coach who, it turns out, reads extensively, loves puns, and has an encyclopedic knowledge of musical

theater. There's Nate (Nick Mohammed), the team's meek kit manager, who reveals himself to be a whiz at field strategy and a wise observer of human psychology. There's Roy (Brett Goldstein), the team captain, whose volcanic anger disguises his anxiety over aging in a sport biased toward the young. There's Jamie (Phil Dunster), the cocky rising star, who seems soulless but isn't. There's Keeley (Juno Temple), his girlfriend, who seems ditzy but isn't. There's Rebecca, the team owner, who seems icy but isn't. (Hannah Waddingham, a star of the British stage—also known to American audiences as the "shame nun" from *Game of Thrones*—gives an especially stellar performance in the role.)

Soccer, in *Ted Lasso*, doubles as a moral and a metaphor: Each player has something valuable to contribute. Each person, on the field and off, is deeper and weirder and better than they initially seem. And each operates with a sense of collective destiny. *Ted Lasso*, its title notwithstanding, is an ensemble comedy—and that fact, basic and all-encompassing at once, makes all the difference.

THE PREMIERES OF *TED LASSO* AND *EMILY IN PARIS* coincided with the arrival of another exploration of national chauvinism. Season 4 of Netflix's *The Crown* explores Britain in the 1980s: austerity, Margaret Thatcher, Diana and Charles, the Troubles. *The Crown*, like the sitcoms, engages in subtle acts of genre subversion. It presents as drama, epic and grand, but often reads as horror. The fear is particularly prevalent in the latest installment of the show, which acknowledges how easily anxiety can operate as a national mood. One of the conceits *The Crown* has carried from season to season is the constant presence of ticking clocks, in offices and living spaces alike: inescapable reminders that time is its own kind of villain. No one, not even—especially not—a queen in the 20th century, can elude it.

[Read: Margaret & Diana & Elizabeth & Nancy]

Through its psychodramas, *The Crown* does what *Ted Lasso* and *Emily in Paris* attempt to do through their comedies: It explores the dissolution of arrogant mythologies. Everything the Windsors do is aimed at the preservation of those myths in the face of blunt-force reality. Queen Elizabeth's coronation claims to portray a person being made into a god; aware that the monarchy is also a matter of public opinion, the Windsors air the ceremony on television. Princess

Margaret cannot marry the man she loves, because his status as a divorcé punctures the fantasy that the royal family is somehow purer than any other family. The residents of Buckingham Palace understand all too well that the institution that has elevated them is built not only of physical goods—gold, gems, genes—but also of belief. Monarchy, *The Crown* suggests, is a faith-based initiative.

The Crown has proved popular among American audiences. You can attribute some of that, certainly, to the American fascination with monarchy, and to the fact that our founding fables defined Americanism as a rejection of all that *The Crown* portrays. You might also attribute some of that popularity, though, to *The Crown*'s overt acknowledgment of national embarrassment—to its exploration of what it feels like, day after day, to suspect that the ship you are on is steadily sinking.

[Read: 'The Crown' takes the shine off Queen Elizabeth's reign]

It's notable, in that context, that one more element *Emily in Paris* and *Ted Lasso* have in common is both shows' deep interest in the meaning of teams. Emily is constantly telling her colleagues, as they resist her, that "we're on the same team." (She also, at one point, says, "There's no *i* in *team*"—only to be reminded that there definitely is an *i* in *equipe*.) In *Ted*, of course, the teamsmanship is literal. But one of the key elements of the show is that Ted doesn't ultimately care about winning. He cares deeply about the fate of his team, and about the individual people who make up AFC Richmond. But winning as an end in itself? No. Ted has already made his peace with losing. He accepts the decline. That is how a comedy premised on a mistranslation of *football* can operate, at its edges, as an elegy.

Ted Lasso is an American show about a team fighting to keep its place in the Premier League. The metaphor in all that is unmistakable. The fact that the show's language is comedy makes the message all the more poignant. *Ted Lasso* is breezy and fun and full of heart, but its easy escapisms are also uneasy ones. They are mordant, but they are mournful too: *We are no longer the country we like to think we are*.