

Are the United States and Europe becoming similar?

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America and Europe are becoming more similar. I will first discuss what Europe is, explain what frame of analysis I am using, and then move to discussing theories of American exceptionalism and whether the United States and Europe are becoming more or less alike.

For the purposes of this article, I will define Europe to mean "The European Union, Norway, and Switzerland." While one could quibble over this definition, it certainly seems accurate to include Norway and Switzerland, and though the boundary between non-EU and EU may be fuzzy it is still less arbitrary than other potential boundaries, and has the added benefit of prior scholarly attention. While this is the ideal form and meaning, I will when expedient use data from the EU and assume it approximates Europe as defined reasonably well.

To keep the scope of this analysis slightly more manageable, I will consider the United States and Europe since the end of the second world war: A white American born then could reasonably have expected to die in this year,¹ this timeframe enables us to understand America and Europe in both the "current world order" and what came before it, and to the extent that America has played a distinctive role in the world it has largely done so, aside from moments like the Monroe Doctrine, after the 2nd world war; the breakup of the colonial empires; the destruction of European human, agricultural, and material capital after the two world wars; and the beginnings of Russian Communism. Stepping into the void left by withdrawing Britain, beaten Japan, backwards China, America did bestride the narrow world like a colossus, a world narrowed by the telephone (1876), the nuclear bomb (patented 1934), and ever-falling shipping costs.

American exceptionalism has been posited to take many forms. I'll begin with a discussion of historical exceptionalism, posited in some ways to have

¹<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005148.html>

come first, and move on thematically. The Tocquevillian hypothesis is that America is exceptional because we have no history of feudalism and aristocracy to overcome. America began in a capitalist era and had no baggage to get rid of.² By contrast, Europe had a long feudal history. However, de Tocqueville was writing in the 1830s, when feudalism was far from gone in Europe. Feudalism in Russia wouldn't be abolished until 1861. So for him, feudalism still had a strong grip on him among others: his father was a nobleman, as was common if not universal for the powerful at the time in post-Revolutionary France.

However, feudalism has not persisted in Europe. As the gap in time between when feudalism, and the nobility, mattered in politics, and the present widens, American distinctiveness falls away. Swiss children born today could never talk with someone who experienced feudalism, much like American children. Therefore, for all that America may be unusual historically for never having been feudal, what small influence this may still have is fading. de Tocqueville says that "the great advantage of Americans is, that they have arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution; and that they are born equal, instead of becoming so." While the contrast might be relevant to former members of the Soviet Bloc, nobody in Britain has seen a democratic revolution in Britain, and the same could be said for most of Northwestern Europe.³

The claim that America is unusual because of its history is closely linked to the concept that America is exceptional because of its tradition of thought. Louis Hartz argues that, unlike Europe, the American community has a liberal tradition. By this, he means a Lockean tradition, one that emphasizes freedom, individualism, and a belief in progress. Americans are "indifferent to the challenge of socialism in a later era", writes Hartz, as they were "unfamiliar with feudalism in the earlier one."⁴ As a result of this liberal tradition, Americans are "less inclined to seek to solve economic and social problems through political action."⁵ At a glance, this question seems relatively simple to solve: we can try to measure how much Americans have relied on the government to solve social problems over time, operationalized as interventions

²While one can certainly dispute the beginnings of modern capitalism, if we define capitalism as "the ability of the wealthy to control and gain wealth from their control of the means of production", and recognize that slaves were means of production, it is hard to say that early America did not at least have some capitalist inclinations.

³Though France is an interesting exception, partially depending on one's views about de Gaulle, I will not spend a large amount of time on it here, except to note that in many ways it is similar to comparable European states and a brief period of non-democratic rule does not seem to have caused permanent damage.

⁴The Liberal Tradition in America, Louis Hartz, page 6

⁵Only in America, Graham K. Wilson, pg 42

into US social life and the size of the US Government as a function of GDP.

America certainly seems to intervene in social life less than European states. A constitutional amendment, and subsequent interpretation, requires that government agencies make reasonable accommodations for religion, and not favor one over others, a great contrast to the current French effort to ban pork alternatives for Muslim and Jewish children.⁶ The American public is skeptical of public health interventions to limit soda consumption, highly cautious about education reform, and generally scoffs at most liberal ideas to improve social issues by government intervention, though with the prominent example of mind-altering substances like alcohol, marijuana, nootropics, and hard drugs.

I now return to the question of the size of the US Government. If that is approaching (assumed relatively static) European levels, then we might say that America is becoming more like Europe. Indeed, US government spending as a percentage of GDP has risen somewhat steadily.⁷ EU spending has been consistently higher, currently averaging 48.1% of GDP.⁸ Swiss Government spending recently has been at present US levels.⁹ This suggests that, in economic matters related to the government, at least, the United States is becoming more similar to Europe.

America is also becoming more similar to Europe in other aspects of its economy, aside from governmental spending. America is unusually low in trade unionization, and it is perceived to have extremely high mobility. America at present does not, in fact, have extremely high mobility relative to Europe: indeed mobility as measured by intergenerational elasticity in the United States, according to an OECD metastudy, is .47.¹⁰ That means that 47% of the relative difference of a parent's income can be expected to be passed on to their child. This is quite high relative to other European countries (Denmark has an elasticity of .15 and even Spain has an elasticity of .32, by contrast), though it is slightly less than Britain's. This is because America's economic mobility fell between the 20s (if not later) and the 50s, hitting British levels at that point, and apparently not changing significantly

⁶To understand islamaphobia in France, one merely needs glance at a newspaper. To understand the scale of anti-semitism, a single anecdote will suffice here. A friend studying in Paris asked her professor if it was safe to go to a particular synagogue. "Yes", he said. "The guards have automatic weapons."

⁷<http://blogs-images.forbes.com/joshbarro/files/2012/04/spending-GDP-chart1.png>

⁸<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6899478/2-07072015-AP-EN.pdf/797f4af9-c37f-4631-8211-5dd0b32fcb31>

⁹<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/switzerland/government-spending-to-gdp>

¹⁰<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/784787325068> fig 1, from Chapter 5 of the OECD book *Economic Policy Reforms Going for Growth*, available <http://www.oecd.org/centrodemexico/medios/44582910.pdf>

since.¹¹ So, while America was once more mobile than Europe, things shifted and are now in a holding pattern. Europe and America seem to be neither diverging nor converging at the moment. America is still unusual in some ways: it is the world's largest national economy, has 128 of the 500 largest companies, and is the 2nd largest trading economy. It's the global center for tech, boasts an unbeaten university system,¹²

The American Constitution, and the federal government that is empowered by it, is exceptional in many ways.¹³ This does not mean that American constitution-writing is exceptional, or that Americans have a distinct attitude towards constitutions: they've made through, on average, three constitutions for every state in the Union. Claims of a distinct American Constitutional Tradition should be regarded with a dubious eye at best.¹⁴

Furthermore, it is not obvious that typical claims of American Constitutional Exceptionalism stand up to scrutiny either. Americans will talk about how federalism is a relatively rare tradition, or a particularly important part of American politics, but in this era of coercive federalism, with a universal drinking age, uniform rules on the legality of same-sex marriage, and according to the federal government at least a nationwide ban on marijuana justified by a very interestingly interpreted commerce clause, it is not obvious that American federalism means much, if anything. At the same time that American federalist traditions are weakening, and the central state is becoming more absolute, European states are dealing with secessionist movements that wish to break away. This convergence towards more intermediate levels of central control from both sides shows that America and Europe are converging on this issue.

Intimately linked with American Constitutional Exceptionalism is American Judicial Exceptionalism. America has an unusually strong and independent judiciary. The modernization and halting democratization of Eastern Europe suggests a convergence to American standards. It's not only in Eastern Europe that these trends can be observed: Britain and Germany have both made recent strides towards strengthening courts that can defend rights

¹¹The End of American Exceptionalism? Mobility in the U.S. since 1850

¹²There may be other countries with top schools comparable to US top schools: Oxbridge can certainly rival Harvard, a Chinese tech university recently beat MIT on a rankings contest, but an American university education at an elite school still holds more meaning than any other country can plausibly claim.

¹³The US Federal Government, contrary to popular belief, is not empowered solely by the Constitution, see *U.S. vs Curtiss-Wright Export Corp.* However, in domestic affairs the government is only allowed to act for the goals and through the methods permitted by the US Constitution, and in international affairs it is constitutionally unexceptional in allowing the head of state to act as necessary for the good of the nation.

¹⁴American Constitutional Exceptionalism Revisited, Versteeg and Zackin.

like America's supreme court.¹⁵¹⁶ Meanwhile, though the US still refuses to accept the authority of the ICC, American courts are increasingly willing to at least reference international law.

"For the past 25 years, America has utterly dominated great power politics. Increasingly, it lives in a contested world".¹⁷ In this way, American foreign policy is becoming more like Europe's. While Hollywood used to dominate world cultural production, with movies like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Casablanca* serving as missionaries in a foreign field, proclaiming the worth of American values, now other countries increasingly produce more content for domestic and international audiences. While American military might, much like Roman cavalry once did, used to rule the world, increasingly the United States is forced to rely on diplomacy and economic incentives, much like Europe is used to. Part of this shift in American power is that problems are increasingly global: seas would rise in response to higher CO2 levels regardless of what threats America might make. Similarly, the international financial markets that regard war as leading to a dangerous risk of defaults on the national debt cannot be managed by unilateral force, which is part of why sword and shield have become less attractive as solutions. Instead America will try to hold up a mirror, tinted with American values, to convince other countries to agree with American positions. Of course, these messages rarely contain an honest word in the entire document: American foreign policy is exceptionally hypocritical.

Though the effectiveness of force has declined in the modern era, Americans are still some of the most likely in the world to believe that military force is sometimes necessary.¹⁸ Partly, this is because they see foreign policy more frequently in moral terms, as the struggle of free nations against tyranny, as protecting four freedoms in the world or the Western hemisphere from European colonial domination or whatever the latest cause is. Speaking of that exceptional hypocrisy, the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed America's

¹⁵Some wits may question the efficacy of SCOTUS in protecting rights, pointing out *Bowers*, *Slaughterhouse*, and *Korematsu*. However, *Bowers* was overturned, *Slaughterhouse* is still technically law but its gutting of the privileges and immunities clause has been effectively overturned by the expansion of the equal protection clause, and while *Korematsu* is still law it was a justification of a presidential action unopposed by any politically relevant group: no other institution would have protected the rights of Japanese-Americans. SCOTUS may not be an infallible defender of rights, but a wavering defender is better than a nonexistent one and it is this at least partial defense that other countries have moved towards.

¹⁶Wilson, *Only in America?*, pg 120-121

¹⁷The New Game, *The Economist*, October 17th 2015

¹⁸Usula Hackett, *Lectures on the Government and Politics of the United States*, delivered in the Oxford Examination Schools.

protection of the Western hemisphere from European domination, and proceeded to coin the term banana republic. America condemns the murder of children in Iran without banning it locally, while academics supported by the state decry anti-sodomy laws in Singapore less than a decade after *Lawrence vs Texas*. In this respect, America can expect to become more like Europe, as increasing global distrust and awareness will force it to either preach less or practice more if it hopes to have any authority.

In conclusion, America and Europe are becoming more similar on a variety of axes. Some of this is America becoming more European: less dominant on the world stage, less religious, and so on. Some of this is Europe having a longer democratic tradition to match America's. In Eastern Europe, to quote Lipset, "The United States is less exceptional as other nations develop and Americanize".¹⁹ This convergence is not shocking to those who are willing to engage in a certain amount of economic determinism, and predict that any deviations will be corrected in the long run.

¹⁹<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/1996-03-01/american-creed-does-it-matter-should-it-change>