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**Modern European-American Relations  
in the Transatlantic Space**

*Recent Trends in History Writing*

*edited by*  
**Maurizio VAUDAGNA**

Matteo **BATTISTINI**

Elisabetta **BINI**

Alessandra **BITUMI**

Giovanni **BORGOGNONE**

Simone **CINOTTO**

Cristina **IULI**

Marco **MARIANO**

Matteo **PRETELLI**

Edoardo **TORTAROLO**

Maurizio **VAUDAGNA**

*Otto*

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*Maurizio Vaudagna*

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Comitato scientifico:

*Marco Bellingeri, Marcello Carmagnani, Maurizio Vaudagna*

Translator:

*Michelle Tarnopolsky*

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# “The West”, “the Atlantic Community”, and the Place of Europe in American History. Conceptualizations and Historiography

Marco Mariano

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Europe has long been defined by its relationship with the global arena. Its identity, contours and role in the world have resulted from a relational process in which cultural, political and economic connections with other world regions have played a major role, especially in modern times. Views “from the outside in” have been at least as influential as those “from the inside out”.

Since the wave of European expansion and the “discovery” of the Americas in the 16th century, transatlantic relations have shaped Europe’s perception of itself. Europe became the “Old World” in opposition to the “New World” with which it was also enmeshed within the imperial networks spreading across the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> However, in the second half of the 19th century, as both sides of the Atlantic started sharing strategic and economic interests, the transatlantic balance between dichotomy and integration started gradually tilting towards the latter. Exchanges in goods, capital, technologies, imperial policies, culture and ideas made the North Atlantic a distinct unit within the shrinking world of the Second Industrial Revolution. At the turn of the century, the notion of “the West” came into widespread use to signify a sense of “we-ness,” of shared values and interests between the peoples and nations of Northwestern Europe and North America. Another cultural construct – “the Atlantic Community” – came of age in the aftermath of World War II to epitomize the institutional, cultural-historical and strategic dimensions of transatlantic relations. Unsurprisingly, both notions gained common currency during the

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1. J. H. Elliot, *The Old World and the New 1492-1650* (Cambridge, 1970); Antonello Gerbi, *La disputa del nuovo mondo. Storia di una polemica, 1750-1900* (Milano, 1955). On changing European identities, see Federico Chabod, *Storia dell’idea di Europa*, eds. E. Sestan and A. Saitta, (Bari, 1961); Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (Basingstoke, 1995); Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *L’idée d’Europe dans l’histoire* (Paris, 1965); Denis Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* (Edinburgh, 1957); Tony Judt, “The Rediscovery of Central Europe,” *Daedalus*, 199, 1 (Winter 1990), 23-54; and Vera Zamagni, “L’idea di Europa,” *il Mulino*, 1 (1995), 139-47.

so-called “Age of Imperialism” and the rise of the Cold War – two turning points for relations between Europe and the United States and between them and other world regions.

This essay discusses “the West” and “the Atlantic Community” as culturally constructed notions that are crucial for recasting Europe’s place in American history within a global context. In the process, it also sheds light on the role of historians in shaping European identity, since both of these notions took shape in the public sphere before becoming tools of historical analysis, and professional historians were instrumental in their invention and dissemination. Finally, this essay will briefly touch upon the present state of the literature on Euro-American relations in light of the rise of Atlantic history and its transnational turn.

### “The West” and Post-Cold War Transatlantic Relations

Since the 1990s “Western Civilization” has been at the center of a heated debate over multicultural education and the quest for pedagogical reform in ethnically diverse societies. It originated in the United States and quickly crossed the Atlantic, spreading to European countries with a significant imperial past and a growing influx of non-European immigrants.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, as economic and cultural globalization shrunk the world to an unprecedented extent and the end of post-Cold War triumphalism paved the way for a new, troubled phase in international affairs, “the West” became a ubiquitous term in public discourse, usually associated with or opposed to “the Rest.” The term also ceased to refer to an ahistorical entity whose content was to be taken for granted and became a legitimate object of inquiry for scholars of history, cultural studies and the social sciences.

Four major approaches are summarized here.

First, many studies discuss “the West” in the context of the public and scholarly scrutiny of the state of transatlantic relations since the events triggered by 9/11, which caused a rift between the United States and its traditional European allies. Much of this literature discusses whether this is just another episode in a long history of family quarrels or a traumatic symptom of the “end of the West,” i.e., a collapse of the post-World War II order within what is a totally transformed international environment.<sup>3</sup> This debate has also led scholars to enquire more deeply into what has come to be portrayed as a

2. Johnnella Butler and John Walter (eds.), *Transforming the Curriculum: Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies* (Albany, 1991); Darryl J. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (eds.), *The Politics of Liberal Education* (Durham, 1992); and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York, 1992).

3. See, among others, Jeffrey Anderson, G. John Ikenberry and Thomas Risse (eds.), *The End of the West? Crisis and Change in the Atlantic Order* (Ithaca, 2008); Michael Cox, “Beyond the West? Terror in Transatlantia,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 11, 2 (2005), 203-33; Charles Kupchan, “The End of the West,” *Atlantic Monthly* (November 2002), 42-4; David Marquand, “Goodbye the West,” *Prospect*

fundamental divergence between the United States and Western Europe in domestic and international policies, long-term historical trajectories, and fundamental secular and religious values. Works by Robert Kagan and Jürgen Habermas exemplify symmetrical views of the widening gulf between the “two Wests.”<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, a second, relatively small but influential current of texts, mostly by commentators and public intellectuals, has built on the preexisting literature on non-western definitions of the West and has recast the old dichotomy between “the West and the Rest” in light of the civilizational tensions ignited by 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror. In this vein, views of the West “from the outside in” are invariably hostile and prejudiced, shaped as they are by ill-informed, distorted views that illustrate deep-rooted stereotypes about an allegedly soulless, godless, materialistic and imperialist western ethos. Far from envisioning a divided West, this approach highlights fundamental commonalities between the United States and its (mostly European) allies and reinforces Samuel Huntington’s well-known “clash of civilizations” paradigm, which in the 1990s introduced the notion of the West to the academic field of international relations.<sup>5</sup>

A third approach has been that of trying to rescue the long-term history of Western Civilization – from its ancient roots to its contemporary developments – from allegedly distorted interpretations and appropriations within the transatlantic world. Since the idea of the West is not only a staple of geopolitical narratives, but also a cultural marker encompassing a broad range of domestic issues, its appropriation is crucial in debates over critical issues like education. In *From Plato to NATO*, for example, David Gress questions how that notion was used in the context of 20th-century liberal America as the foundation of “Western Civ” courses. Gress maintains that the American understanding of “the West” downplayed its Roman and Germanic origins and overemphasized its liberal roots.<sup>6</sup> Such reassessments deal with contemporary uses of the West but seem mostly concerned with setting the record straight and providing a “true” depiction. In fact, they end up reinforcing

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(August 2004); and Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: Why a Crisis of the West Reveals the Opportunity of Our Time* (London, 2004).

4. Robert Kagan, *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York, 2003); and Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West* (Cambridge, 2006). See also Alice Kessler-Harris and Maurizio Vaudagna (eds.), *Democracy and Social Rights in the “Two Wests”* (Turin, 2009).

5. Ian Buruma and Avitai Margalith, *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism* (New York, 2004); Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (London, 2003); and Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York, 1996). See also Victor David Hanson, “Occidentalism: the False West,” *National Review*, 10 (May 2002).

6. David Gress, *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents* (New York, 1998). See also J. M. Roberts, *The Triumph of the West. The Origins, Rise and Legacy of Western Civilization* (London, 1985). Other accounts of the Western Civilization paradigm in the United States include Gilbert Allardyce, “Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course,” *American Historical Review*, 87, 3 (June 1982), 695-725; and Eugen Weber, “Western Civilization,” in Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (eds.), *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton, 1998).



an essentialist approach that reiterates the ideological function of the West without shedding light on its multifaceted, fluid and culturally constructed nature.

The fourth approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the constructed character of the West and related notions like Western Civilization or culture, and exposes how they have both reflected and legitimized imperialist, racist assumptions and policies. These studies share a post-modern sensibility and are indebted to the cultural turn famously exemplified by Edward Said's classical work on Orientalism. However, they also follow rather different routes in their deconstruction of the West, which is seen, respectively, as either a relatively recent invention of European historians and public intellectuals; the outcome of arbitrary uses of geography meant to naturalize what is in fact an artificial construct; or the product of non-western critics who opposed European, and later Euro-American, hegemonic designs in what is now referred to as the "global South."<sup>7</sup>

Each of these four interpretations of the West suggests different understandings of transatlantic relations. The fourth – emphasizing its culturally constructed nature, the influence of definitions "from the outside in" and the ideological implications of its public and scholarly use – can also help shed some critical light on the place of Europe in American history and the role of transatlantic relations in the global context.

### **"The West:" a Historiographical Genealogy**

The modern notion of "the West" originated in absolutist, economically backwards and scarcely secularized 19th-century Russia. As intellectuals debated over "progress" and its impact on Russian identity, a soul-less and artificial imaginary West was pitted against pillars of Russian tradition and self-image like the pre-modern village commune and the sense of spiritual harmony rooted in Orthodox Christianity. In the second half of the 19th century, advocates of pan-Slavism added an assertively nationalist tinge, envisioning a rising Slavic world prevailing over the declining Latin-Germanic world. These uses of "West" and "westernization" allowed nationalists, traditionalists and Slavophiles to reinforce Russian identity by means of an opposition to a European "Other," without

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7. Seminal works include Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993); and Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" in Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1992), 275-317. See also Sophie Bessis, *Western Supremacy. The Triumph of an Idea?* (London, 2003); Alastair Bonnett, *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History* (Basingstoke, 2004); Christopher Browning, Marko Lehti (eds.), *The Struggle for the West: A Divided and Contested Legacy* (London-New York, 2010); Silvia Federici (ed.), *Enduring Western Civilization: The Construction of the Concept of Western Civilization and its "Others"* (Westport, 1995); Carla Pasquinelli (ed.), *Occidentalismi* (Roma, 2005); Chris GoGwilt, *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire* (Stanford, 1995); Martin Lewis, Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997); and Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994).

explicitly challenging the ambiguous European-ness of Russia. This longitudinal, East v. West cleavage fits neatly with the Russophobia spreading through Northwestern Europe at roughly the same time. Orientalist images of a mysterious, archaic and threatening Russia set up against the Christian, liberal and modern values of Latin-Germanic Europe found a respectable intellectual foundation in the works of German historian Leopold Von Ranke and were reinforced by the Crimean War.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, notions of the West and westernization became part and parcel of the dispute over Europe's identity and its historical mission and role in the world before the late-19th-century imperial turn extended and reinforced the hold of western powers over Africa and Southern Asia. However, it was only from the 1880s to the 1920s that "the West" developed into a polysemous term to refer not only to a civilizational bloc and a sense of cultural kinship, but also to a geopolitical unit, the idea of a discrete historical stage in world history, eventually becoming a category of analysis for the study of history and, in Arnold Toynbee's words, "an intelligible field of study." The term acquired these multiple meanings and wider circulation just as several developments threw into question deep-rooted assumptions about the identity of Europe and its place in the world, including the rhetoric and jingoistic propaganda of British New Imperialism; the rise of the US as the leader of the industrial world and a major global power; the collapse of the Russian autocracy and the Revolution of 1917; and, finally, the spread of anti-colonial sentiments and movements across Asia, Africa and Latin America. What ensued was a reconceptualization of Europe, split along an East-West axis and challenged by the Global South. At the same time, Europe's Northwestern regions were recast within a transatlantic framework that included the United States – that North American "Other" against which the European Self was defined (while Central and South America's place in the West was fluid and ambiguous).<sup>9</sup>

We cannot fully understand changing ideas about Europe at the turn of the 20th century if we overlook the centrality of the idea of the Orient. As Said noted:

Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called "the idea of Europe," a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans against all 'those' non Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made

8. Chris GoGwilt, "True West: The Changing Idea of the West from the 1880s to the 1920s," in Federici, *Enduring Western Civilization*, 44-9; Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, 55-62; and Riccardo Bavaj, "'The West': A Conceptual Exploration," *European History Online*, <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/crossroads/political-spaces/political-ideas-of-regional-order/riccardo-bavaj-the-west-a-conceptual-exploration>, (retrieved 15 October 2014).

9. On the metageographical dimension of the transformation in transatlantic relations at the turn of the century, see David Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, Vol. III *Transcontinental America 1850-1915* (New Haven, 1998); Marco Mariano, *L'America nell'Occidente. Storia della dottrina Monroe 1823-1963* (Roma, 2013); and Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny. American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, (New York, 1995).

that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison to all the non-European peoples and cultures.<sup>10</sup>

However, by focusing too narrowly on such a dichotomy we also risk reducing the complexity and dynamic nature of the idea of Europe, which at that juncture was being redefined by its connections to the Atlantic world at least as much as by its opposition to the Orient.<sup>11</sup> In the late 19th century, when the Atlantic was less of a barrier and more of a bridge between the Old World and the New, the emergence of the West in public discourse reflected the anxieties and opportunities arising from the increasing integration and changing power relations between America and Europe. At the same time, its emergence in academia illustrated how definitions of European-ness and American-ness were influencing each other in a significantly different way than had occurred with the oppositional pattern of the past.

While scattered references to the West can be found in several defining works of the 19th century, from Hegel to Marx, one of the first to conceptualize it as a tool for understanding the contemporary world was Benjamin Kidd, a British-civil-servant-turned-social-scientist whose work was widely circulated in turn-of-the-century Britain and the US. In *Social Evolution* (1894), *The Control of the Tropics* (1898) and *The Principles of Western Civilization* (1902) he outlined “our Western Civilization” in bio-political terms as the outcome of “a single continuous growth, endowed with a principle of life, subject to law, and passing, like many other organisms, through certain orderly stages of development.” Though by no means an original or sophisticated thinker, Kidd was able to synthesize and popularize “a blend of popular Darwinism, sociology, and idealist philosophy [that] produced a fascinating fit between the political enthusiasm for the ‘new imperialism’ and *fin-de-siècle* anxieties about cultural and racial degeneration.” When he wrote in 1902 that “we are *par excellence* the military peoples, not only of the entire world, but of the evolutionary process itself,” he was not only linking “Western Civilization” to imperialism and Anglo-Saxon models of racial hierarchy, he was also extending the principles of social evolutionism from the struggle among individuals to the struggle between civilizations throughout world history. While he lacked the intellectual depth of the major thinkers of his age, he anticipated insights later developed by Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, whose work was crucial in turning “the West” into a field of historical inquiry, with relevant consequences for the reconfiguration of the idea of Europe in a transatlantic context.<sup>12</sup>

10. Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

11. For a critical reconsideration of Said’s orientalist paradigm, see Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley, 2001).

12. GoGwilt, “The Changing Idea of the West,” 52-3; Bonnett, *The Idea of the West*, 29-30; and Ixel Quesada Vargas, “Los orígenes de la presencia cultural de Estados Unidos en Centroamérica: fundamentos ideológicos y Usos políticos del debate sobre los tropicos (1900-1943),” in Benedetta Calandra, Marina Franco (eds.), *La guerra fría cultural en América Latina. Desafíos y límites para una nueva Mirada de las relaciones interamericanas* (Buenos Aires, 2012), 67-78.

Spengler's *The Decline of the West* built on Kidd's evolutionary view of the West and recast it into a coherent, comprehensive interpretation of world history. Conceived and written amidst the traumatic events of World War I and the Russian Revolution, it was published in two volumes between 1918 and 1923 in Germany. And while it met with both skepticism and outright hostility among historians, it had sold about 100,000 copies in Germany alone by 1926. In an ambitious attempt to reconceptualize world history, Spengler replaced the traditional, epoch-based linear structure with one based on eight cultures – Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Mexican (Mayan/Aztec), Classical (Greek/Roman), Arabian and Western or European-American – each evolving according to the life-cycle of a living organism. Behind this attempt was a critique of 19th-century parochialism and Eurocentrism:

Thanks to the subdivision of history into Ancient, Medieval and Modern – an incredibly meaningless and jejune scheme which has, however, dominated historical thinking – we have failed to perceive the true position in the general history of higher mankind, of the little part-world which has developed on Western-European soil from the time of the German-Roman Empire, to judge of its relative importance and above all to estimate its direction.<sup>13</sup>

Spengler's long view of history and his gloomy, pessimistic outlook reflected both the recent collapse of imperial Germany and deep-rooted tensions over the idea of Europe that between the late 1910s and the early 1920s were being amplified by World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. In fact, he appropriated arguments of 19th-century Russian Slavophiles to undermine the very notion of Europe as a reliable tool of historical analysis and to expose it as an empty abstraction:

The word Europe ought to be stuck out of history. There is historically no European type ... It is thanks to this word Europe alone, and the complex ideas resulting from it, that our historical consciousness has come to link Russia with the West in an utterly baseless unity – a mere abstraction derived from the reading of books – that has led to immense real consequences. In the shape of Peter the Great, this word has falsified the historical tendencies of a primitive human mass for two centuries, whereas the Russian spirit has very truly and fundamentally divided 'Europe' from 'Mother Russia' with the hostility that we can see embodied in Tolstoi, Aksakov, Dostoyevsky. "East" and "West" are notions that contain real history, whereas "Europe" is an empty sound.<sup>14</sup>

Spengler's civilizational approach remained quite isolated within the historical profession, and his support of autocratic regimes as the most suitable form of government for the West in the declining phase of its life cycle made him a controversial public figure. However, "Spenglerism" became a buzzword in European intellectual circles just as the

13. Quoted in GoGwilt, "The Changing Idea of the West," 51.

14. *Ibidem*, 50.

“European tragedy” of total war and totalitarianism was calling into question the very idea of Europe and undermining the primacy of “Western Civilization”. This sense of impending crisis also served as the backdrop for the most ambitious attempt ever made to conceptualize the place of “the West” in world history. Arnold Toynbee’s 12-volume *A Study of History* (1934-1961) is a sweeping account of the rise and fall of approximately thirty “civilizations” seen as discrete units defined mostly by a common religion and a textual literary tradition whose life cycle is the outcome of the ability of “creative minorities” (i.e. the political and intellectual elites) to respond to natural and social challenges.

As a British intelligence officer during World War I and a delegate to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Toynbee was a close observer of and participant in the major international events of his time. Like Spengler, he saw the Russian Revolution as proof of an intra-European civilizational divide. He also warned against the double threat of the “internal and external proletariat” – the disaffected Western and non-Western masses motivated not by economic self-interest but rather “a consciousness – and the resentment which this consciousness inspires – of being disinherited from [their] ancestral place in Society and being unwanted in a community that is [their] rightful home.” He also questioned the heuristic value of the idea of Europe, which he saw as a “misnomer” artificially bundling the West together with Eastern Orthodoxy. In fact, he went even further to expose the geographic determinism inherent in the distinction between Europe and Asia, which he dismissed as devoid of historical significance: “The historian cannot lay his finger on any period at all, however brief, in which there was any significant cultural diversity between ‘Asiatic’ and ‘European’ occupants of the all but contiguous opposite banks of a tenuous inland waterway.” Finally, he echoed Spengler in his effort to provincialize the West, which he saw as just one among many civilizational blocs in world history. In fact, he explicitly challenged the Hegelian principle of the “unity of history” that postulated a singular and linear process culminating in 19th-century Western Europe. In his view, this was a misconception “to be explained by the persistence of three other misconceptions: the ego-centric illusion, the catchword of the ‘unchanging East,’ and the misconception of growth as a movement in a straight line.”<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Spengler, however, Toynbee also outlined a dynamic, forward-looking idea of the West that was devoid of any racialized connotation, emphasized interaction with other world regions and was based on cultural and moral progress. In his view, Western culture’s open-ended, inclusive character allowed it to create a multicultural synthesis that signaled both its triumph and its extinction:

The past histories of our vociferous, and sometimes vituperative, living contemporaries – the Chinese and the Japanese, the Hindus and the Muslims, and our elder bothers the Orthodox Christians – are going to become a part of our Western past history in a

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15. Quoted in Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, 43, 127.

future world which will be neither Western nor non-Western but will integrate all the cultures which we Westerners have now brewed together in a single crucible... By making history we have transcended our own history.<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, this monumental work, intended as a critique of parochial Eurocentric views of history, only wound up reinforcing the essentialist narrative of the rise of the West that had started taking shape in the late 19th century. After World War II, the text became part of Cold War ideology and significantly affected the teaching and writing of history, especially in the United States. Although Toynbee's work has now lost favor among scholars of world history, in the aftermath of World War II his fame both inside and outside academia was remarkable. In America, 300,000 copies were sold of an abridged version of the first six volumes of *A Study of History* published in 1947 and 7,000 copies of the 10-volume set had been sold by 1955. He achieved instant celebrity status in the press while lecturing in American colleges. In March 1947, he made the cover of *Time* magazine, which marketed his opus as "the most provocative work of historical theory written in England since Karl Marx's *Capital*" in a cover story that received about 14,000 requests for reprints. The following year, *Life* magazine celebrated the text as "one of the most ambitious chores the human brain has ever undertaken."<sup>17</sup>

The enthusiasm of Henry Luce's magazines and the interest of the American public in the ponderous, not very accessible volumes of *A Study of History* were in many ways a result of the Cold War. Toynbee's American tour took place just as the Truman Administration announced its intervention to replace struggling British forces in Greece and Turkey. The outbreak of the Cold War provided a very hospitable climate for a long-term, quasi-scientific explanation of world history that was global in scope, methodologically anti-Marxist, based on civilizational blocs built around religious traditions and the result of a challenge-response mechanism led by "creative" elites. The *Time* story, written by Communist-turned-Catholic-conservative Whittaker Chambers who within a year had risen to national fame for accusing State Department official Alger Hiss of being a Soviet spy, was published just as the Truman Doctrine was being proclaimed. Indeed, Chambers linked Toynbee's work to the international crisis underway in the Eastern Mediterranean, which he portrayed in characteristically apocalyptic terms as no merely political or military crisis, it was a crisis in Western Civilization itself. It meant that the United States must take over from Britain the job of trying to solve the problem of contemporary history. The United States must, in Britain's place, consciously become what she has been, in

16. Quoted in Bonnett, *The Idea of the West*, 33.

17. *Time*, 17 March 1947; *Life*, 23 February 1948. On the influence of Toynbee in early Cold War America, see Richard Crockatt, "Challenge and Response. Arnold Toynbee and the United States in the Cold War," in Dale Carter, Robin Clifton (eds.), *War and Cold War in American Foreign Policy, 1942-1962* (New York, 2002), 108-129; and Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1991), 55. See also George Kennan, "The History of Arnold Toynbee," *The New York Review of Books*, 1 (June 1989).

reluctant fact, since the beginning of World War II: the champion of the remnant of Christian civilization against the forces that threatened it.<sup>18</sup>

While the public use of Toynbee's work was obviously instrumental to Cold War domestic ideological warfare, his civilizational outlook struck deeper chords with American historians. The notion that America was the leader of a larger, western/Christian world region encompassing parts of Europe – and that the connections between the two shores of the North Atlantic should therefore be a major focus of historical research – resonated among these scholars and is partly what led to the reconsideration of Europe's place in American history. In fact, in the aftermath of World War I American historians of Europe started making the case for a closer look at transatlantic connections and transnational civilizational units. In 1922, the medievalist Charles Homer Haskins said in his AHA presidential address:

European history is of profound importance. We may at times appear more mindful of Europe's material indebtedness to us than of our spiritual indebtedness to Europe... Whether we look at Europe genetically as a source of our civilization, or pragmatically as a large part of the world in which we live, we cannot ignore the vital connections between Europe and America, their histories ultimately being one.<sup>19</sup>

It is no accident that before World War I Haskins had played a major role at Harvard in structuring the "Western Civilization" course, which in the interwar years was included in the curriculum of other elite institutions like Columbia and the University of Chicago and after World War II became a staple in the teaching of history on American campuses.<sup>20</sup> The rise of the "Western Civ." paradigm undoubtedly carried exceptionalist and nationalist connotations. Indeed, it was instrumental in depicting post-World War II American global power as the natural, inevitable outcome of a meta-historical trajectory originating in the Mediterranean during the Classical Age and later developing in Western Europe. American world historian William H. McNeill captured this teleological and nationalistic view of history when he wrote that

Humanity has fumbled through the centuries toward truth and freedom as expressed in modern science and democracy, American style ... Meaningful history is the record of the progress of freedom and liberty; and the place where it happened was Greece, Rome, Western Europe and latterly the United States.<sup>21</sup>

18. Quoted in Crockatt, "Challenge and Response," 113.

19. Quoted in Volker Berghahn and Charles Maier, "Modern Europe in American Historical Writing," in Anthony Molho and Gordon Wood (eds.), *Imagined Histories. American Historians Interpret Their Past* (Princeton, 1998), 395-6. For the full text of Haskins address, "European History and American Scholarship," see <http://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/charles-homer-haskins>.

20. Eugene Weber, "Western Civilization," in Molho and Wood, *Imagined Histories*, 207-8; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 310-14.

21. Quoted in Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 313.

At the same time, the stress on transatlantic connections and continuity, rather than opposition, *vis-à-vis* the legacy of European history ran counter to established historiographical traditions that either postulated an oppositional relationship between the United States and Europe or emphasized the self-sufficient, insular character of American history and downplayed its international and transnational ties. In sum, the West as a category of historical analysis was by and large a European invention that crossed the Atlantic and was adopted in the American historical profession at a time when two world wars not only stressed the geopolitical relevance of Europe for American national security but also revealed insular historiographical approaches and parochial grand narratives of the American past.

### **“The Atlantic Community” and Atlantic History, Old and New**

During the interwar years, the notion of an “Atlantic community” was also forged to make sense of the changing dynamics of transatlantic relations and their role in a global arena transformed by total war. Like “the West,” it originated in the public arena and was later adopted by historians and, to a lesser extent, political scientists. It is also a narrated concept because it encompasses two notions that have multiple, contested meanings. The term “community” does not imply an institutional framework the way similar terms like “partnership,” “association” or “alliance” do. Instead, it conveys the idea that there are organic, identitarian ties between its members, as exemplified by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies’ classic definition of a close-knit, traditional *Gemeinschaft* versus a loose, secular *Gesellschaft*. However, the same term has different connotations in other languages, and the way in which it is commonly used does not necessarily reflect the scholarly definition of “community” as opposed to “society.” Similarly, the term “Atlantic” is subject to different uses and interpretations, loosely defining both a geographic region and a set of cultural-historical, socio-economic and strategic assumptions usually associated with “the West.” It evokes an “imagined geography” as part of an “imagined community” that performs “a legitimizing function for institutions, political movements, and asymmetric power relations operating within the transatlantic relationship.”<sup>22</sup>

However, while “the West” is no longer a useful tool of historical analysis for professional historians due to its highly charged ideological implications, the epistemological status of “the Atlantic Community” is somewhat more ambiguous. In the aftermath of World War II in both the United States and Western Europe several historians from different sub-disciplines focused on the long-term origins and constituent features of what was

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22. Valérie Aubourg and Giles Scott-Smith, “The Transatlantic Imaginary: Constructing the Atlantic Community during the Early Cold War,” in Valérie Aubourg, Gérard Bossuat, and Giles Scott-Smith (eds.), *European Community, Atlantic Community?* (Paris, 2008), 14.



being referred to in the public discourse as the “Atlantic Community,” thus providing it with scholarly credibility. In the last twenty years, the emergence of a new Atlantic history paradigm has dismissed the Atlantic Community notion as a Cold War by-product. On the other hand, it has also raised new questions about the long-term trajectory, spatial contours and global connections of the early modern Atlantic world. In so doing, it has also spurred a new approach to the 19th- and 20th-century Atlantic. In fact, references to the Atlantic world, space, basin, corridor or system are common currency among scholars of early modern, modern and contemporary history alike.<sup>23</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this essay to determine whether the Atlantic Community is a purely ideological construction, a useless product of “NATO history,” or a legitimate tool/object of historical inquiry for scholars investigating transatlantic connections in the contemporary world. What matters here is how the literature that adopted or contested the Atlantic Community concept helped problematize the early modern Atlantic as a distinct geo-historical unit and, consequently, reinstated Europe in American history. From this vantage point, the commonalities of old and new Atlantic history are at least as relevant as their differences. What follows is an attempt to shed light on these shared traits, which have been relatively overlooked, rather than to reiterate the obvious differences. Doing so helps problematize the quest for an Atlantic approach to 19th- and 20th-century transatlantic relations, as the closing remarks will show.

Atlantic history took shape at a time when both historiographical currents and historical events spurred a reconceptualization of transatlantic relations. As British historian of the early modern Atlantic world William O’Reilly wrote:

Clearly there is something cohesive about the Atlantic zone. The Columbian exchange and resultant exchanges are strikingly different to anything seen in the Arab and Chinese trade in the Indian Ocean in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In observing centralizing themes in history, we often think of three principal categories: the state, the economy and the culture. All three have been the core of ‘Atlantic’ studies and all three can be seen to bind parts of the Atlantic together in interconnective webs. The premise of

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23. For useful discussions on the origins, state of the art and new directions of Atlantic history, see David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (eds.), *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York, 2002); Bernard Bailyn, “The Idea of Atlantic History,” *Itinerario*, 20 (1996), 19-44, later expanded in *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, 2005); Donna Gabaccia, “A Long Atlantic in a Wider World,” *Atlantic Studies*, 1, 1 (2004); Allison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *American Historical Review*, 111, 3 (June 2006), 743-44; Jack P. Greene, Philip D. Morgan, “Introduction,” in *Atlantic History: A Critical Reappraisal* (Oxford, 2008); William O’Reilly, “Genealogies of Atlantic History,” *Atlantic Studies* 1, 1 (2004), 66-84; Emma Rothschild, “Late Atlantic History,” in Nicholas Canny, Philip Morgan (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World 1450-1850* (Oxford, 2011); Bertrand Van Ruymbeke, “L’histoire atlantique aux États-Unis: la périphérie au centre,” *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, [online] Workshops, online since 19 September 2008; and Marco Mariano and Federica Morelli (eds.), “European Perspectives on a Longer Atlantic World,” *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, [online] Colloques, online since 27 June 2012.

Atlantic history, then, can be accepted for those reasons which an ‘Atlantic community’, to use Walter Lippmann’s phrase of 1917, shared after 1492 . . . Atlantic history is rooted, by many supporters, in the world of the 1920s and after and in the writings of Walter Lippmann, Fernand Braudel, Jacques Godechot and of Robert Palmer.<sup>24</sup>

Lippmann’s 1917 evocation of an Atlantic Community with common roots and vital interests made its grand entrance in the historical profession in 1945, when AHA President Carlton Hayes used his presidential address to make a case for an Atlantic approach to American history as a much needed remedy for the “intellectual isolationism” that he saw as “the result of ignorance, of self-centered absorption in local or sectional concerns, and of nationalist propaganda.” In his view, the prevailing historiographical framework that “detached Eastern and Western Hemispheres” was “unrealistic, contrary to basic historical facts, and highly dangerous for our country at the present and in the future.” Lamenting the decades-long “tendency to turn away from European themes and to concentrate upon strictly American” ones, and the “narrowing specialized training of our universities” resulting from “intellectual isolationism,” Hayes dared to call into question the impact of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” on American historiography, as indicated in the provocative title of his address “The American Frontier – Frontier of What?” For Hayes, a scholar of European nationalism, the answer was obvious: the American West was not the “western frontier of the eastern United States” but rather the frontier of European civilization, which had informed “the Atlantic Community” and differentiated it from other civilizations. “Of such an Atlantic community and the European civilization basic to it,” he argued, “we Americans are co-heirs and co-developers, and probably in the future the leaders.”<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the rejection of narrow parochialism implied situating the national past within a specific world region, rather than in a spaceless global context. For Hayes there was no such thing as a “world civilization,” and recasting the relations between America and the world in these terms, which had “already passed from the fictional titles of high school textbooks to the solemn pronouncements of statesmen,” amounted to “a leap from myopic nationalism to starry-eyed universalism.”

Echoes of nationalism and presentism were evident in Hayes’ address. His call for an Atlantic historiographical outlook reflected current disputes among advocates of Atlanticism, globalism, and hemispherism/isolationism over the place of the United States

24. O’Reilly, “Genealogies of Atlantic History,” 69-70.

25. Carlton Hayes, “The American Frontier-Frontier of What?,” *The American Historical Review*, 50, 2 (January 1946), 198-216. On Hayes, see Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 12-4; Carter Jefferson, “Carlton Hayes,” in Hans A. Schmitt ed., *Historians of Modern Europe* (Baton Rouge, 1971), 15-34. On the importance of religion to pre-Cold War Atlanticism, see Emiliano Alessandri, “The Atlantic Community as Christendom: Some Reflections on Christian Atlanticism in America, circa 1900-1950,” in Marco Mariano (ed.), *Defining the Atlantic Community. Culture, Intellectuals, and Policies in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (New York-London, 2010), 47-70.

in the postwar world order.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, his outlook was clearly the expression of a Eurocentric view of American history that marginalized those groups who were not part of the “Western Civilization canon” like non-white immigrants and blacks. “We used to know that we were Europeans as well as Americans, that we were not Indians or a people miraculously sprung from virgin forests like the primitive Germans described by Tacitus, but modern Europeans living in America on a frontier of Europe. All our white ancestors on this continent knew they came from Europe,” wrote Hayes with some sarcasm regarding the exceptionalist and somewhat Europhobic tendencies stemming from the frontier thesis. On the one hand, his narrative of (white) America as a fragment of a “Greater Europe” rejected American pre-war “nationalism” understood as an exclusive concern with all things American with an emphasis on the American *sonderweg*. On the other hand, it also wholeheartedly embraced the rising nationalist outlook that called for the global projection of America’s power in the aftermath of World War II. Finally, Hayes’ approach to history considered the nation-state as the major unit of historical analysis while sidelining social forces and non-state actors.

However, for all its shortcomings characteristic of its time, Hayes’ attempt to reinstate Europe in American history was also part of a larger effort to de-provincialize and internationalize American history that was not limited to scholars of European history. When Columbia University historian and journalist Allan Nevins wrote that a “nationalistic” interpretation was being replaced by an “international view, treating America as part of a great historical civilization with the Atlantic at its center, as the Mediterranean was the center of the ancient world,” he captured a moment in which, according to Peter Novick, “both Americanists and Europeanists joined in arguing that ‘the Atlantic community’ was the appropriate framework for both American and Western European history.”<sup>27</sup>

Hayes concluded his 1945 address by urging American historians to embrace three major research paths: “cultural history,” seen as that which “most profoundly affects American relationships with the world;” a focus on the “continuity of history” as a much needed counterweight to the obsession over “newness and uniqueness of the New World and our nation;” and, finally, “comparative history” seen as a tool for broadening American historians’ grasp of the past as well as “the surest means of diminishing racial, political, religious, and national prejudices.” All three of these motives informed another classic Atlantic studies text, Robert Palmer’s *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, a two-volume comparative study of the American and French revolutions focusing on their shared ideological features. Palmer insisted that both revolutions had to be set against the backdrop of the “*idées maitresses*” of the Atlantic civilization encompassing the triangular space

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26. Marco Mariano, “Remapping America. Continentalism, Globalism, and the Rise of the Atlantic Community, 1939-1949,” in Mariano, *Defining the Atlantic Community*, 71-87.

27. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 311.

of Europe and the Americas, and that they were both informed by an understanding of “freedom” that was characteristic of the Enlightenment.<sup>28</sup>

Palmer’s imposing text is now relatively forgotten in the historiographical literature on revolutions. To the extent that it offered mostly broad, synthetic overviews of well-known political events and intellectual currents, it is safe to say it was hardly innovative even in its own day. His contemporaries were also less than enthusiastic about his work in general. In the climate of the early Cold War years, he was often charged with providing scholarly ammunition for the Atlantic Alliance. At the 1955 Tenth International History Congress in Rome, Palmer presented a paper on “Le problème de l’Atlantique” with Jacques Godechot, a French scholar and the author of *Histoire de l’Atlantique* (1947) who had just spent one year as a visiting scholar at Princeton. Their effort to historicize the Atlantic Community was based on a detailed analysis of the inner dynamics and constituent elements of the early modern Atlantic world (trade routes and communications, the structure and influence of the British Empire) as well as on the East-West binary. In fact, they argued that in the second half of the 18th century the Atlantic was *one* civilization because it had been “able to create a society more liberal and dynamic than that of the East of the old continent.”<sup>29</sup>

The more hostile reactions to the paper were prompted by ideological and methodological motives. Eric Hobsbawm, a young Marxist historian, attacked it for ignoring the economic and social dimension of historical change and quipped that the Atlantic world might as well be defined as the place where “witches were systematically persecuted and burned.” However, the generally cold reception to Palmer and Godechot among both European and American historians should not be dismissed as ideological warfare pure and simple. In fact, it had deeper roots in the respective intellectual landscapes and historiographical traditions of both sides of the Atlantic.

On the one hand, Palmer’s concern with transatlantic connections and his focus on the Atlantic as a shared revolutionary space challenged the influential Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution as the peculiar, indeed exceptional, event that had triggered not only the fall of the *Ancien Régime*, but also the rise of the social classes that would eventually lead to the Revolution of 1917. On the other hand, Palmer also questioned liberal views by pitting the revolutions that took place in Britain and North America between the late 17th century and the late 18th century against the Revolution of 1789. As he argued, the former laid the foundations for the rise of democratic institutions, constitutional orders and the rule of law, while the latter paved the way to social and political radicalism and, ultimately, to a cycle of violent changes and autocratic reactions. Finally, Palmer’s Atlantic Community framework

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28. Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800* (Princeton, 1959-1964).

29. Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 26.

also challenged American exceptionalism. Historians of the influential “consensus school” have regularly portrayed the American Revolution as a peculiar, quintessentially American event based on ideological, not class-based, motives; an event whose trajectory testifies to the unique relationship between America and “democracy,” as if the latter were incompatible with the European model of nation building. At the other end of the academic spectrum, radical historians have more recently lamented the un-revolutionary character of the social forces and interests that prevailed in 1776 and have tried to rescue from oblivion forgotten, dissenting currents of the Revolutionary Era and the Early Republic.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, Palmer’s attempt to overcome national divisions met with widespread skepticism not only because it was labeled “NATO history,” but also because it challenged prevailing exceptionalist, nation-centered views on both sides of Atlantic. In doing so, however, his work also sparked numerous studies in Atlantic history that paved the way for a new generation of Atlanticists in two respects, both of which have been somewhat overlooked.<sup>31</sup> First, his comparative approach to revolutions in the modern world and his emphasis on the ideological commonalities between France and North America in the broader context of revolutionary socio-economic change spanning from the shores of the Atlantic to the Ottoman Empire, China and Japan, stimulated further inquiry into the tension between the Atlantic and the global scale. Second, by grounding his idea of an “Atlantic Civilization” on the shared political culture of the Enlightenment, Palmer set its demise in the early 19th century when the homogeneity of the Atlantic world as he knew it had come to an end. Interestingly, this periodization was reinforced by scholars of the new Atlantic history in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, the International Center for the History of the Atlantic World founded by Bernard Bailyn at Harvard in 1995 focuses on the period between 1500 and 1825. Moreover, the online discussion list H-Atlantic was built around a similar periodization and most works in this subfield rarely deal with the 19th century.

In sum, the “old” Atlantic history that built on the “Atlantic Community” concept during the early postwar years and the “new” Atlantic history that has challenged it since the 1980s share significant commonalities in space and time. First, they both originated mostly in American academe as an attempt to de-provincialize American history and situate it within a larger space centered on the Atlantic. Second, they both placed the rise and fall of the Atlantic world within the trajectory of early modern history. These observations prompt a few closing remarks on the current state of the study of transatlantic relations in the modern and contemporary world.

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30. Simone Neri Seneri, “Le rivoluzioni di Palmer,” and Peter Onuf, “Democrazie, rivoluzione e storiografia nel mondo contemporaneo,” *Contemporanea*, 10, 1 (2007).

31. Bailyn, “The Idea of Atlantic History;” O’Reilly, “Genealogies of Atlantic History.”

## The History of the Atlantic World after the “Atlantic Community”

Scholars of Atlantic history new and old have helped in significant, if very different, ways to reinstate Europe in colonial and early modern American history. At the same time, they have been unable or unwilling to investigate the peculiar dynamics, constituent elements and spatial contours of the Atlantic world in the 19th and 20th century. It is as if the methodological or ideological rejection of the idea of the Atlantic Community as a tool for studying transatlantic relations prevented the modern and contemporary Atlantic from being recognized as a distinctive unit of historical analysis.

In fact, 19th-century history has been reframed within a global, not Atlantic, context. Studies in the history of economic globalization have singled out the 1820s and 1830s as the starting point of an era in which the so-called transportation revolution laid the foundations for the 20th-century integration of world markets. Seminal works by Christopher Bayly, Jürgen Osterhammel and Emily Rosenberg have stressed the worldwide reach of economic, social, cultural and political connections, thus reinforcing the assumption that the rise of globalization in the modern world led to the decline of the peculiarities and strength of transatlantic connections.<sup>32</sup>

To be sure, works focusing on American history from a transnational perspective have illuminated the resilience of transatlantic links and flows. Thomas Bender's *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (2006) and Ian Tyrrell's *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (2007) show how Europe came to play a very significant role in the making of America throughout the 19th century as a crucial trading and financial partner; the source of mass migration flows that provided cheap labor and spread dissenting political ideas; and, finally, as a model of empire-building that was both feared and imitated. In this light, the Old World was both a threat and a resource for the New. Far from a relic of a distant colonial past, Europe's place in American history has been reassessed as a major driving force behind the rise of the United States as a global power. However, this reinterpretation has been driven more by an impulse to transcend the national framework and write a history “beyond borders” typical of the transnational turn than by the desire to deliberately reconfigure American history in the Atlantic context in terms of space.<sup>33</sup>

32. Kevin H. O'Rourke, Jeffrey G. Williamson, “When Did Globalization Begin?,” *European Review of Economic History*, 6 (2002), 23-50; Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: Global Connections and Comparisons 1780-1914* (Oxford, 2004); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München, 2009); and Emily Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting, 1870-1945* (Cambridge, 2012).

33. See also, among others, Sam Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: the Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville, 2010); Timothy Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville, 2009); and Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2011).

Finally, important texts have recently shed light on aspects of Euro-American relations from the late 19th century onwards like social and economic policies, technological and managerial models, popular culture and entertainment, social reform, and intellectual networks. However, as Thomas Bender has noted, “the U.S. academy may admire but does not recognize as Atlantic history the Atlantic studies of Mary Nolan, Victoria De Grazia, Volker Berghahn” and others.<sup>34</sup>

Only in very recent years has the reconsideration of the spatial and chronological contours of Atlantic history led to the quest for “a long Atlantic in a wider world,” that is, a reconceptualization of Atlantic studies that takes into account both the increasing relevance of the northern over the southern Atlantic throughout the 19th century after the demise of slavery and the slave trade, and the growing interconnectedness between the Atlantic space and other world regions that is peculiar to the contemporary world.<sup>35</sup> While empirical research on this long, globally connected Atlantic is thriving, a corresponding theoretical paradigm is still in the making. Two modest suggestions in this regard are offered here by way of a conclusion. First, scholars of 19th- and 20th-century Atlantic history need to come to terms with two subfields that have been largely ignored if not deliberately contested: political and diplomatic history. Far from being the top-down approaches almost entirely focused on institutions, decision makers and white men that they once were, these fields have been dramatically updated in their own way over the last two decades and can hardly be left out of the picture. Second, fears that conceptualizing and researching the contemporary Atlantic as a specific geo-historical unit – whose relationship to the early modern Atlantic world is defined by long-term continuities and pivotal breaks – amounts to writing “NATO history” should be overcome once and for all by a new generation of historians unencumbered by the ideological legacy of the 20th century.

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34. Thomas Bender, “Positionality, Ambidexterity, and Global Frames,” in Nicolas Barreyre, Michael Heale, Stephen Tuck, and Cécile Vidal (eds.), *Historians Across Borders: Writing American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2014), 172. See also, among others, Volker Berghahn, *American Big Business in Britain and Germany: A Comparative History of Two “Special Relationships” in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2014); Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2005); David Ellwood, *The Shock of America: Europe and Challenge of the Century* (Oxford, 2012); James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought: 1870-1920* (Oxford, 1986); Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890-2010* (Cambridge, 2012); and Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, 1998).

35. Donna Gabaccia, “A Long Atlantic in a Wider World.”