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Convergence in Disguise

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Periodically, certain themes rise out of the collective conscience and become (or re-become) trendy. This applies to "Americanisation." From our mores to our television, from our style of dressing to our political life, from our food to our vocabulary, we others—we Europeans—are becoming more American than our friends across the ocean. In some respects, this is not untrue. It should also be emphasised, as William Safran himself has done, that on the American side, we can remark in return what could be called (but is not called!) "Europeanisation". Yet to tell the truth, the latter has been present from the beginning: on many points, Americans are still very much like the English, undoubtedly more English than Italians, Danish, Germans or French. Would it not be more proper, then, to speak of a convergence rather than of Americanisation?

As is often the case with the United States, the term "Americanisation" (or anti-Americanism, or "un"-Americanism, for that matter) is absolutely ambiguous. It is in no way a concept, that is, a logical system that permits the grasping of reality, an understanding of its totality, the assigning to it of a meaning. The best proof of this is that the word never has the same sense, not today compared to other times, not in one place compared to another. To give just one example which concerns the goal of our study, the Americanisation of political life on the whole is appreciated as positive on the American side, and in general considered as negative on the French side, here taking France from among the many European cases. In the view of Americans, Europeans will begin to resemble the American model and progress all the way to the ideal-

type, as emphasised symptomatically by William Safran. Notice, though, that this evolution is essentially impossible in the American view: if they are *exceptional*, as they have the proud conviction of being, how, then, could we Americanise ourselves? Conversely, taken from the French viewpoint, this Americanisation of political life is not judged as progress—far from it: the French, although fascinated by everything American, are perplexed by what is described as an Americanisation of our political mores.

The meaning itself of the word is a bundle of contradictions. Very often, for example, we confuse Americanisation with technical progress or technological constraints: the impact of television, although differing according to the political system, is often considered a product of Americanisation, whereas it is a product of “modernity” (and not modernisation). Similarly, analysts on both sides of the Atlantic fantasise about the other. It is in this way (may he pardon me) that William Safran writes: “The decisions of [the Constitutional] Council in the domain of civil liberties have served to ‘Americanise’ the Fifth Republic constitution in the sense of ‘inserting’ into that document a bill of rights that the constitution makers of 1958 had failed to include.”¹ The fact is that the 1789 bill of rights is an integral part of the constitution of 1958²—and the Constitutional Council thus did not even have to bother about incorporation. Conversely, one has to remind European readers that the American Constitution of 1787 had purposely forgotten to “include” a bill of rights which was only ratified in 1791 and actually “incorporated” (i.e. applied) starting in 1925 and, in 1989, not completely so.

But then the best of French analysts have their dreams about America, too. Accordingly, Georges Vedel proclaims: “The American spoils system at least has the advantage of brutality: you lay off very casually the people you no longer need. Instead, the rules of courtesy in usage in our Republic lead us to an aggravated spoils system: we lay off people but we set them up elsewhere.”³ Vedel is right in regretting this Americanisation of French administration. But he is wrong on one point: in the United States people are set up elsewhere, too.

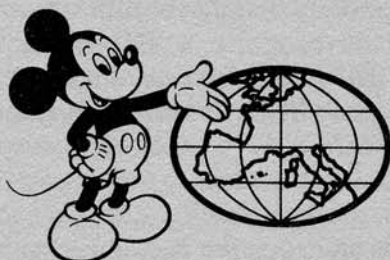
All considered, the term “Americanisation” often undergoes complex evolutions: if there is “Americanisation” it is less in the reality of phenomena than in the perception we have of it. Alain Duhamel is essentially right when he writes: “The Americanisation of campaign techniques ... already establishes four trans-Atlantic characteristics in the French hexagon: excessive use of the media, personalisation, professionalisation and moderation”.⁴ The evolution in

France seems to be following the path adopted long ago by the United States. But we must attune this affirmation and complete it: we often imagine an unrealistic America.

Hypermediatisation

The concept that there is an excessive use of the media in campaigning implies that no part of the electoral campaign can exist without the "media". This is only partially true. In France, candidates continue much more than in the United States to conduct a classic campaign: meetings, working the crowd, posters, activism of supporters. And these tactics pay off, as shown, for example, in the French municipal elections of 1989: "Coming out of the first round, the Socialist candidate claimed to trail his adversary by 500 votes. These he conquered one by one in a week. Door to door, apartment meetings, supermarket visits, discussions with local economic decision-makers: nothing was neglected. A methodical, persevering field campaign that mobilised a part of those who had abstained from the first round and allowed him ... to take it away with a 116 vote margin."⁵

The almost exclusive weight of television in America is largely counterbalanced in France by the press and by radio. Some of the most interesting political debates take place elsewhere than on television. Those which do take place on television are undoubtedly more instructive than their counterpart in the United States which have nothing to do with debate except their name. What is more (and fortunately, if this value judgement is allowed), political advertising in France is still barred from radio and television, even on private channels. In spite of the surrounding pseudo-liberalism, this anti-democratic bias has not yet been introduced in France; anti-democratic both because it favours the wealthiest and the incumbents⁶ and because *de facto* it excludes the press which in the United States is less and less authorised to question the candidates. During the electoral campaign, "journalists covering Mr. Bush [became] increasingly concerned about their limited access to him. ... Michael Dukakis ... [began] to mimic Mr. Bush's methods".⁷ Why these restrictive practices? "Candidates want to present their own version of the issues; reporters often ask challenging questions that can upstage the candidates' media events on the evening news."⁸ The consequences are immediate: "Instead of incisive, adversarial coverage, they have retreated into a bland and passive style of reporting that, during electoral campaigns, tends to focus far less on issues than on tactics and polls, and that favours candidates



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who best satisfy television's show business appetites. Too often, the press has functioned as merely a stenographer to power."⁹

In France as well, politicians attempt *news management*—but this does not always hand them success: numerous electors (most notably among the Socialists) have not forgotten how the “moving” televised plea of current Prime Minister Michel Rocard in 1978 at the time the defeat of the left had been “rehearsed” several times before; nor did they forget the ridiculous behaviour (under the pressure of image-making consultants) of the then prime minister, Laurent Fabius, in his debate against Jacques Chirac on the eve of the 1986 legislative elections. Yet French journalists, contrary to the commonly held

view, often show more irreverence and insistence than their American colleagues. In France, the caricature (including on television) is particularly impertinent and a source of daily delight for millions of citizens. As our American friends themselves recognise, a "Bébête-Show" (which made first page honours in *The Wall Street Journal*)¹⁰ is hardly imaginable across the Atlantic. Here, its audience is incredibly large. To this we can add, finally, the role of the *Canard Enchaîné*, a satiric newspaper which has no equivalent overseas.¹¹

In the end, perhaps there is an excessive use of the media in France, but it still remains more "diversified", just as the adversarial relationship is more real than in the United States. When Mitterrand expressed his discontent over the stock market scandal implicating one of his friends, the press did not hold back: when George Bush expressed his discontent to Dan Rather (January 1988), no one dared ask him any more questions on the Iran-Contra affair.

Personalisation is unmistakable. More than any other characteristic, however, it is the result of a double phenomenon which really has little to do with the United States: on one side, it can be explained by the election by universal suffrage of a president with real powers. It is not a recent phenomenon in France, if we recall the Second Empire and Napoleon III who, all things equal, essentially remained a prince-president who needed plebiscites to stay in power. On the other, the civilisation of the image in which we presently live actually allows us to appreciate the man beyond all the staging: the candidate controls less than ever the impression he makes, because it is not enough to lose weight (Le Pen), speak Creole (Barre), file one's teeth (Mitterrand) or wear hi-tops (Chirac) to seduce the un pitying eye of the camera. One is what one is, and the electorate cannot be fooled—even less so than before.

Grooming for the part

Professionalisation: the term is ambiguous. Of what type of professionalisation and of which actors are we speaking? If by this we understand that politicians are in general and on the whole more competent and better suited in their domain than, for instance, a half century ago, this seems accurate: their technical knowledge (notably in economic matters) is superior to what it was in another time and their speech is less demagogic and better adapted to their audience and to the "cold" medium, according to the McLuhan formula, which television is. This said, one could support the argument, and not without

reason, that the evolution has been the reverse in the United States: after several terms, the methods of choosing candidates which Americans have retained do not seem to favour access to the presidency for the best.

If, on the other hand, professionalisation suggests that the candidates are “groomed” by communications professionals (polls, posters, television, meetings) who sell a candidate just as well as they sell a bar of soap, then there has indeed been an Americanisation of our electoral campaigns. Bad soap, however, does not sell for long, and politicians seem more and more aware of the limits of purely technical advice. Is the question so much one of “Americanisation”, then, or is it more so the effects of “modern techniques”?

Moderation: the French are evolving more towards consensus and even realism (what politician would be credible if he claimed to be able to resolve unemployment with a waive of a magic wand?), and the problems that tore apart the Fourth Republic (private schools, Europe, decolonisation) seemed to have lost their intensity. However, these questions can resurge with violence (private schools in 1984 and even universities in 1986, not to mention New Caledonia in 1988): the French have remained divided—often even diametrically opposed—on a great deal of themes, a function of their ideological identification. The electors of Jean-Marie Le Pen are a very suitable example of, among other things, the abstentionists who reject the political game and only participate in order to oppose it.

Conversely, can we be sure that Americans are as “de-ideologised” as certain analysts believe? As far as public opinion is concerned, this is false. Already in their excellent study of twenty years ago on *Participation in America*, Sidney Verba’s and Norman Nie’s data showed that activists were less aware of the serious social problems than the rest of the population, less worried about the difference in income between the rich and the poor, less interested in state intervention in social problems and less concerned about equal opportunity for black Americans.¹²

Ideology and *cohabitation*

Undoubtedly, American opinion is not Marxist: for example, 90 per cent believe that private enterprise as it functions in the United States is the best economic system imaginable in the developed countries.¹³ However, opinion was hardly affected by the propaganda of Reaganism, and on the whole, it has

even shifted more to the left in the last decade. If, fundamentally, it remains ideologically conservative (less state, more individual initiative), programmatically speaking, it is progressive (the state must aid the poorest and regulate market anarchy). This explains how two thirds of Americans questioned in Roper polls think that the state must provide health care (73 per cent), protect the environment (72 per cent), encourage economic development (70 per cent) and provide decent jobs (63 per cent). On the other hand, according to those polled, it is not really the role of the state to promote the arts (20 per cent for, 73 per cent against).¹⁴ State aid, though, is solicited in all domains: the state must considerably (48 per cent) or only slightly (39 per cent) support firms' efforts to export their products;¹⁵ poverty should be regulated by the state (85 per cent) or by private initiative (15 per cent).¹⁶ Health, education, transportation, environment, racial problems: there is hardly any domain where state intervention is not considered indispensable. Regulation itself, despite Reagan's proclaimed intentions, is perceived as a necessity. It seems indispensable for the state to regulate industrial pollution (88 per cent), monopolistic practices (80 per cent), sanitation and security (72 per cent) and even fairness and equal opportunity in the workplace (63 per cent).¹⁷

But is not the state the nuisance that prevents the system from functioning properly? It is a fact that over ten years the percentage of those who think that the state "does not do enough" has not stopped rising.¹⁸ The American electorate is therefore quite "ideologised", and divided along ideological lines.

The ruling elite, on the contrary, has shown for a long time a stronger consensus than has public opinion, on the whole. Most notably in the area of foreign policy, a unanimity in effect is found among the American leaders where there are divisions in public opinion. The point has been reached where changing one's political party is relatively easy and frequently done, to the memory of no one: from Wayne Morse to Don Riegle, from Strom Thurmond to Ronald Reagan, the examples abound. In only less than half of the votes made by Congress do we find a simple Democratic majority opposed to a simple Republican majority. This kind of partisan indiscipline is just unimaginable in Europe. This means that the representatives respect a minimum of political discipline even less than the electors. As James Reston noted about one of the frequent periods in the last few years during which the president's party was a minority in Congress and still the legislature and the administration cooperated rather easily all the same, in decisions which affect the lives of citizens and national security, a Republican administration and a Democratic

Congress, despite some partisan splits, did not diverge on the conduct of national affairs.¹⁹ Actually, as observed subtly at the time by François and Claire Masnata: "Just because two parties have an identical conception of the world does not let one conclude that there is an absence of ideology.... The American parties are parties which together defend a particular ideology".²⁰ This perfect definition can otherwise be applied perfectly well to certain French parties like the UDF and the RPR.

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Reagan—if, indeed, ideologues do exist, then he is one, or at least in his rhetoric—did not modify the already high ideological level of the American elite. On the contrary, on some points he even weakened unanimity: on some points, that is, but not concerning foreign policy, which still remains the domain of bipartisanship. In spite of pseudo-opposition over Nicaragua, for example, Congress fears and hopes to avoid the spread of communism in Central America just as much as the presidency. Disagreement arises over tactics, not over objectives. Congress, however, on this subject will never abandon sending humanitarian aid to the Contras, no more than, despite its opposition to the war in Viet Nam, did it refuse a single dollar for the continuation of that war; at the most, it will occasionally obtain a compromise.

On the other hand, however, Reagan notably created fractures in the core of the elite over the individual rights of Americans: on abortion, school prayer, increasing poverty among the marginal groups or the death penalty, for example. The irony on this matter is that the federal government is largely powerless on most of these issues. But it is a fact that the failed nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court was achieved by a strictly partisan vote,

attributable to the ideological divisions that he stirred. Could this be a case, then, of the "Europeanisation" of the United States?

Electoral and elite origins

In *Les chênes qu'on abat...*,²¹ André Malraux confides that General de Gaulle told him in 1960: "Algeria will remain French as France has remained Roman. Have not our American friends remained European, and profoundly so, no matter what they think? And if there is profound "Europeanity", it is difficult to see how there could be any "Americanisation" of Europe, especially in the political realm.

The Americans have always believed in "American exceptionalism", and yet their political regime is profoundly marked by its European origins. Whenever brought up, though, Americans have the tendency to insist on their exceptionalism, that is to say, on their not being European. Taking a closer look, however...

Americans claim, for example—and end up believing—that they acquired universal suffrage before any other people. "The United States ... for the most part of its history, has been a mass participation society Since federal elections were instituted at the end of the 18th century, and particularly since the introduction of widespread manhood suffrage in the first third of the 19th century",²² have written the authors of a remarkable series of essays on the history of American elections. Even V. O. Key, a harsh critic and foe of commonplaces opens a chapter on the electorate saying that "broad popular suffrage is, then, a constant that conditions both the method and the substance of American politics".²³ Clearly, this matter has to be approached with more attention to its nuances.

At the end of the 18th century, for instance, only the representatives at the Federal level were elected by universal, direct suffrage—and the franchise is still far from being universal. According to the best estimates,²⁴ in a population of 3.5 million, voters for the state conventions that had to ratify the constitution of 1787 numbered around 160,000. To be entitled to vote, not only did one have to be male and white, but there was a property requirement, as well. In France, to vote for the *Etats Généraux*, the pre-revolutionary parliament, in 1789, one only had to pay taxes, and indeed the turnout was proportionally stronger than in the USA.

Similarly, it has been repeatedly written that, starting in the second half of the 19th century, all white males were enfranchised. This is also true for countries like France, where there would be no turning back. In the US, on the contrary, towards the end of the nineteenth century, several laws limited the actual exercise of voting itself, including for whites. Most of the time, blacks were the visible target of these laws, but among the victims there were also social groups considered "dangerous".²⁵

Not until the decade 1960-1970 did blacks, and the poor whites, as well, become full citizens, and therefore freely eligible to vote. It is only in this rather recent time that, several decades after Europe, the objective limits to the voting rights represented by the poll tax, the literacy test and the residency requirements would disappear. Could this be considered another example of the "Europeanisation" of the American electoral system?

And could one say that the US is still lagging behind as far as the origin of the elite is concerned? If we consider the top position in the state structure (head of the executive or cabinet members, congressional leaders and members of the Supreme Court) we still find that these jobs go mostly to white protestants. For instance, only one Catholic—and a white one—has been president. Only Protestants—and whites—have headed the Supreme Court. In France, from Léon Blum to Laurent Fabius, along with René Mayer, Pierre Mendès-France and Michel Debre, several Jews have been head of government. Similarly, since the creation of the Constitutional Council in 1958, twice it has been headed by a Jew (Daniel Mayer and Robert Badinter).

France has frequently drawn from among the minorities for representatives and leaders: blacks (the former president of the Senate Gaston Monerville, for instance, or ministers of the Republic such as Houphouët-Boigny, Senghor or Dr. Bambuck); Protestants, such as the present prime minister, Michel Rocard, Moslems, Polish, Vietnamese, atheists and even Communists.... From this point of view, the most under-represented have been women both as elected or voters—but then, are they not a majority in the country?

The Americanisation of the political mechanism in France is quite frequently the result of commonplaces. As far as the state is concerned, everybody knows that it is less present and less active on the other side of the Atlantic, and this belief is so strong that its presence is not felt even when it is there.

Benevolent donors

The renovation of the Louvre Museum in Paris has been considered a case of the application of an "American" model, because this renewal follows the line of the "rediscovery of the market". "Compared to the Americans 'pro's', the French museums are still in the infant stage"²⁶, it has been written, but it suffices to have a bureaucrat with some historical future to prove that if there has been imitation, it has been by the Americans, for "the use of the artistic heritage for commercial purposes was one of Colbert's ideas".²⁷ But many believe that what is being imitated in France is the private ingenuity of the US. Thus a French journalist, Anita Rudman, wrote that "American museums benefit from many donations but not from state support".²⁸

This observation is quite meaningful since it assumes that the situation in France is the opposite one—state subsidies but no private support. Absolutely wrong: on the occasion of the opening of the renovated Louvre, an exhibition presented some 350 masterpieces (among them Rembrandt's "Berthsabeer" and Ingres' "Le bain turc") donated to the museum in the two centuries of its existence. And these objects are genuine donations since, as *Le Monde* has written, "not included in the exhibition were items from those that who had given in to the temptation of donation.

No charity with ulterior motives here"²⁹, since "the Louvre is not based on the shrewd system of fiscal deduction like its rival, the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art". Not only is there in France a genuine private patronage of the arts, but the American patronage is less private than in France. It is the government that encourages donations with a policy of favourable tax treatment. What about the minor role of the state in America?

Americanisation frequently is found also in the interpretation of phenomena more difficult, in reality, to ascertain. For instance, as far as the relationship between business and politics is concerned, the US should be seen as less corrupt than France (which has still to be proved), the system of financing the campaign with public funds supposedly having corrected this relationship.

In reality, the limited improvement that has actually taken place is not due to the recourse to public funds, but to the fact that a trick has been found to allow the candidates for the presidency to take advantage of private donations. To



respect the law, all the private person who wants to help a candidate has to do is give the money to the political party. A leading American expert of election financing, Herbert Alexander, has thus forecast that this “soft” money adds up to more than the public funding (\$46 million for each candidate in 1988).³⁰ Instead, little interest has been aroused by a very positive “Americanisation” of France due to the compulsory publication of election revenue and spending, as well as that of the revenue and wealth of public office holders. This lack of attention is regrettable—it is so rare that the French actually imitate the positive aspects of American life.

Pas d'état?

Strangely enough, Americanisation is frequently not seen in the cases when it seems to be an actual phenomenon: a lack of perception that would be interesting to comprehend, but as yet has not been explained. This Americanisation has positive, but also negative aspects, if such a value judgement is acceptable, as we believe it should be. On the negative side, one could point out the politicisation of the top bureaucrats in France and the development of the spoils system: on the positive side, the development in the last thirty years of the control of the constitutionality of laws. The last phenomenon would be worth an in depth analysis, in order to compare it with a similar development in the US in the first thirty years of its constitution, and to assess the effect of this fundamental change of direction in the French tradition, from the rule of parliament to the rule of the constitution.

But here the question can be raised again: is this Americanisation or just modernisation? And if there is an Americanisation, does it affect reality or just the image of reality? The concept of the role of civil society, the preferred toy of French politicians in the last years, has been dealt with in a way that shows a total ignorance of the American situation. The *homo americanus*, much more than the European, is stuck in a web of public constraints that is related to his mores (for instance his sexual practices) and his beliefs, namely religious. But the fact that this intrusion in the most private domain comes from the individual states suffices to make it irrelevant to French eyes. In the US as in France, the federated state is not considered as being part of "l'Etat" (in the full and French meaning of the word) and barely seen as being under the jurisdiction of the sovereign powers. To public opinion, it appears as a kind of administrator of inter-personal relations inside the society. Thus a large section of public interference is ignored under the pretext that it is decentralised, and the French can thus dream of a model of non-interference by the state that has nothing to do with reality.

In conclusion, the Americanisation of French political mores can be found mostly in the minds of our journalists and opinion leaders, whose knowledge of the US is frequently very scarce. God preserve us from primary elections American-style, suggested by some conservatives that refuse to acknowledge the true reasons of their defeat in the presidential election of 1988 and keep attributing it to their divisions. Undoubtedly, Europe has adopted some American electoral techniques. But they have been adapted to the spirit typical of each European polity. Our "modernity" in this respect is our own.

We have also "Americanised" a certain number of our ideas. It is indeed relevant that this change in our conceptual endowment is based often on a conception of America that is frequently untrue. The modification of our ideological universe is real, and is quite a deep one. But this "Americanisation" of ideas might well be the result of the only real, very real, Americanisation—and a rather disturbing one: the Americanisation of our languages, and possibly their eventual disappearance. This means the Americanisation of the channel through which our system of ideas and of perception of reality pass. As if the American language were a perfectly neutral channel (namely, neutral in its vision and conception of political facts), we do not see the impact of accepting words and concepts such as *liberal*, *radical*, *state*, *non-voting*, *people*, *administration* and *civil rights*, just to name a few.

But as for that phenomenon of Americanisation, it would be chauvinistic (and possibly very French) to dare mention.

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- ³ - Georges Vedel, "Neuf ans au Conseil Constitutionnel", *Le Débat*, May-August 1989, p. 55.
- ⁴ - Alain Duhamel, *Le Monde*, March 29, 1988.
- ⁵ - Jean-Pierre Bedei, "Michel Delebarre: Dynamiser Dunkerque", *Vendredi*, March 31, 1989.
- ⁶ - In the United States, the percentage of incumbents reelected to the House of Representatives has not stopped rising: in 1988, it hit a record 98.8 per cent. In 20 per cent of the cases, the candidate was either unopposed (67 cases) or had minor opposition, i.e. a third party (22 cases). In the French Chamber of Deputies, this kind of situation just does not occur; on average, the incumbents who run for reelection are defeated in more than a quarter of the cases.
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- ⁸ - Ibid.
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- ¹² - Sydney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), P. 298.
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- 25 - Cf. Marie-France Toinet, "La participation politique des ouvriers américains à la fin du XIX^e siècle" in Marianne Debouzy, *A l'ombre de la statue de la liberté*, (Paris: University of Vincennes Press, 1988), pp. 282-330.
- 26 - Anita Rudman, "Les musées ouvrent boutique", *Le Monde*, April 1, 1989.
- 27 - Claude Soalhat, in *Le Monde*, April 1, 1989.
- 28 - Anita Rudman, op. cit. a "donation" is a gift that allows the donor to avoid inheritance tax.
- 29 - Philippe Dagen, "Honneur au cousin Pons", *Le Monde*, March 31, 1989.
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