

Is the US Really a Nation of God-Fearing Darwin-Haters?

By Peter Baldwin

Is it only Europeans who want to save the environment and only Americans who discount Darwin? In the final part of his series on trans-Atlantic differences, American historian Peter Baldwin explains why these stereotypes don't work - and what the real differences between Old Europe and America are.

In a three-part essay for SPIEGEL ONLINE, American historian Peter Baldwin argues that the EU and the US are much more similar than they think. You can read part one of his essay [here](#) and part two [here](#).

In ecological terms, America is thought to be wasteful -- big cars, big houses, long commutes, cold winters, hot summers, profligate habits. Such perceptions of the country have combined with the Bush administration's cozy relationship with the oil industry and its refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol to paint the nation as an environmental black hole. Once again, the numbers tell a different story.

Although oil use per capita is high in America, measured as a function of economic production (in other words, putting the input in relation to the output), it remains within European norms and, indeed, lower than Portugal, Greece, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Iceland.

Between 1990 and 2002, America's carbon dioxide output rose, but per unit of GDP it fell by 17 percent -- a greater reduction than in nine western European countries.

In its output of renewable energy, the US is in the middle of the spectrum on all counts, whether biogas, solid biomass energy, geothermal or wind. American spending (public and private) on pollution abatement and control as a percentage of GDP is bested only in Austria, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands.

Despite the myths of a hyper-motorized nation, Americans own fewer passenger cars per head than the French, Austrians, Swiss, Germans, Luxembourgers and Italians. Per capita, Americans rely on their cars more than Europeans. But adjusting for the size of the country, automobile usage is lower only in Finland, Sweden and Greece.

Similarly, Americans produce a lot of waste per capita, though the Norwegians are worse, and the Irish and Danes are close competitors. But they recycle as well as the Finns and the French, and better than the British, Greeks and Portuguese. Since 1990, Americans' production of waste has scarcely gone up per capita, while in all European nations for which figures are available, there have been big increases -- 70 percent in Spain, almost 60 percent in Italy and over 30 percent in Sweden.

"The Old World developed on the basis of a coalition -- uneasy but understood -- between humanity and its surroundings," the *Guardian* reassures its recycling readership. "The settlement of the US was based on conquest, not just of the indigenous peoples, but also of the terrain." Yet, despite such common European conceptions, American conservation efforts are strong by European standards.

The environmental activist Jeremy Rifkin insists that Europeans -- unlike Americans -- have "a love for the intrinsic value of nature. One can see it in Europeans' regard for the rural countryside and their determination to maintain natural landscape." Actually, the percentage of national territory protected in the US is about double that of France, Britain or even Sweden.

And conventional American farmers are far less chemicalized than their European colleagues. Thanks partly to their use of GM crops, they use pesticides sparingly. The Italians use over seven times as much, the Belgians

even more.

Nationalism & Religion

Despite perceived differences in its economy or care for the environment, perhaps the most fundamental assumed gap between the US and Europe is in values. Americans are said to be nationalistic and religious, while Europeans are post-nationalist and secular. But even here there is reason to doubt the stereotypes.

Yes, Americans are patriotic and nationalistic but, according to the World Values Survey (undertaken between 1999 and 2001), not more than some Europeans. Unsurprisingly, Germans are least proud of their nation, and rather unexpectedly, the Portuguese -- not the Americans -- are most, with the Irish tied for second place.

Granted, Americans are more likely to think that their country is better than most others. But more Portuguese, Danes and Spaniards feel that the world would be improved if other people were like them, and a larger fraction of Americans admits that there are aspects of their country that shame them than there is in Germany, Austria, Spain, France, Denmark and Finland. And the Finns, Danes, Norwegians and Swedes are all more willing to fight for their country than the Americans.

Even on religion, there is reason to question an absolute polarity between the US and Europe. "Religion is palpable in US schools, places of work and public institutions," claims the *Guardian*. "God is invoked by soldiers and politicians in a way that would seem inappropriate in Britain." Puzzling, then, that Britain's head of state is known as the "Defender of the Faith," and the established church has 26 seats in the upper legislature.

The American observer of Europe is often baffled at European claims to secularism since official expressions of religion are so public and yet -- apparently -- so taken for granted. A 10th-century depiction of the crucifixion, for example, is part of every Danish passport, regardless of whether its bearer is -- as many nowadays are -- a pious Muslim.

American church attendance and religious belief is not off the European scale if one compares it with Europe's Catholic regions. A smaller percentage of Americans consider themselves religious than the Portuguese and Italians. Proportionately fewer Americans say they believe in God than the Irish and Portuguese.

Moreover, sociologists tend to explain high American church attendance as the outcome of market as much as spiritual forces. Greater competition has led to a richer variety and higher quality of offerings, while Europe's state-monopoly religions struggle to provide for their citizens' spiritual needs. Thus, if the issue is thus of supply and less of demand, the contrast between Europe and America may not be between religious and secular mindsets but, rather, between how -- if at all -- largely equivalent spiritual needs are fulfilled.

This is certainly a conclusion suggested by looking at attitudes to science across the Atlantic. Without question, Americans are more likely to believe in Creationism than Europeans. The modern American creationist, interestingly enough, no longer takes scripture as sufficient reason to believe the Biblical account of the origins of the world. The debate is, instead, conducted on the turf of science, with creationists attempting to argue the fine points of the age of the fossil record, suggesting that orthodox evolution has gaps as a seamless explanation, and otherwise indicating their acceptance that the modern world speaks the language of science.

The realm of scientific quackery in Europe, on the other hand, is much wider than in the US. Consider the sway of self-evidently daft positions like anti-vaccinationism among the Hampstead *Bildungsbürgertum* or the equally irrational rejection of the fruits of scientific reasoning, like the anti-GM (genetically modified) movement. In several European nations, astrology is more widely believed in than in the US, and homeopathy is relied upon much more often in Europe.

So if Americans are, on the whole, more religious than most Europeans, it does not follow that they have less overall faith in science. Societies with a strong faith in science can also have strong religious beliefs. True, proportionately fewer Americans firmly agree with the Darwinian theory of evolution than any Europeans other than in Northern Ireland.

But, in other respects, Americans believe in the Enlightenment project of human reason's ability to understand and master nature. They fall in the European middle ground in approving animal testing to save human lives. Perhaps most tellingly, more American pupils agree with the statement that science helps them understand the world than in any European nation other than Italy and Portugal.

The Individual vs. The State

They may be scientific, then, but Americans are also thought of as die-hard individualists who live in a society of sharp elbows and an ethos of live and let live. They are imagined to be unusually anti-governmental in their political ideology -- practically anarchists, by European standards.

Yet a Pew Foundation survey in 2007 found that proportionately fewer Americans worried that the government had too much control than did Germans and Italians, with the French at the same level and the British just a percentage point lower. And a higher percentage of Americans trust their government than all Europeans, except only the Swiss and the Norwegians -- although no people, truth be told, demonstrates much faith in their elected representatives.

But talk is cheap, and these findings may indicate desire as much as reality. The trust of Americans in their state apparatus can be measured more concretely by their willingness to pay taxes. Unlike many Europeans, Americans pay the taxes required of them. Only in Austria and Switzerland are the underground economies as small. Tax avoidance is over three times the American level in Greece and Italy.

The archetypal Montana survivalist so beloved of the European media -- holed up in his shack and determined to resist the government's impositions -- is as uncharacteristic of America as the Basque or Corsican separatist -- ready to kill for his cause -- is of Europe.

The Real Difference

These are just a few examples of how the presumed chasm dividing the Atlantic is not, in fact, nearly as deep as opinion among the chattering classes and their mouthpieces believes. Why, then, does this notion persist -- even though a sober look at its empirical basis suggests that it is an inverted pyramid, a lot of conclusions perched on flimsy premises?

For one thing, the European press wants the juicy, titillating low-down. And America certainly dishes that up. It is not a culture accustomed to putting its best foot forward. Is there another nation that washes its dirty laundry so publicly? British tabloids aside, is there one where the seamy underbelly is more readily proffered for inspection? Hence that genre of such fascination to the European chattering classes: the tedious travelogue by the sophisticated European -- whether Bernard-Henri Lévy, Jean Baudrillard or Borat -- observing American yokels and reporting back with the smug assurance of superiority to other sophisticated Europeans.

Moreover, Europe's various cultures are ones still steeped in the lore of national stereotypes and quite happy to wring from them whatever elixir can be had.

Who can forget Edith Cresson, Mitterand's prime minister, who was convinced that no Frenchman was gay, while the English were all limp-wristed poofs? Or consider the extent to which no Europeans -- however otherwise politically correct -- can be shaken in their conviction that the Roma really are shifty and thieving.

Having a trans-Atlantic whipping boy is convenient and serves politically useful purposes, especially if there is little else that you can agree on. The purveyors of anti-Americanism in Europe appear to have rediscovered the truism that nothing unites like a common enemy.

And the Bush administration played into their hands by serving up caricatures by the spadeful. It will be interesting to see how the European pundits deal with Obama once he does something they do not like. While Bush could be portrayed as an ignorant cowboy, which of the available stereotypes will they dare lambast Obama with?

Here, we come to the grain of truth to the Atlantic divide. If there is anything that most separates American society from Europe, it is the continuing presence of an ethnically distinct underclass. Even as other outsiders have successfully assimilated, the tragic resonances of slavery in the black urban ghettos of America continue to prevail.

Indeed, take out the black underclass from the crime statistics, and American murder rates fall to European levels, below those in Switzerland and Finland, and even squeaking in under Sweden. Child poverty rates, which are scandalously high in the US, fall to below British, Italian and Spanish levels if we look at the figures for whites only. PISA scores for American whites (ranking secondary school proficiency, in this case, for combined science literacy in 2006) come above every European nation other than Finland and the Netherlands.

This is not meant to excuse the atrocious negligence with which the problems of racism have been dealt in the US. But it does suggest that, far more than any grand opposition of worldviews or ideologies, it is the still unresolved legacy of slavery and its tragic modern consequence that distinguishes -- to the extent anything does -- America from Europe. Whether Obama's election will mark a turning point in this respect remains to be seen.

And if it is this distinct urban underclass that most separates the US from Europe, Europeans should pay notice. In this respect, their societies are rapidly becoming more like America's. Europe's birthrates have plummeted, and immigration continues unabated. It is a demographic certainty that an ethnically and religiously distinct lower class in Europe will grow in the decades to come.

Perhaps Europe will turn out to have been lucky. Having instituted universalist social policies, highly regulated labor markets and redistributive fiscal policies in the belief that they were all -- so to speak -- being kept "in the family," Europe may weather the expansion of its social community. On the other hand, it may be that the social fabric will fray.

No one is arguing that America is Sweden. But neither is Britain, Italy, or even France. And since when does Sweden represent "Europe" -- at least anymore than the ethnically homogenous, socially liberal state of Vermont does America? Europe is not the continent alone, and certainly not just its northern regions.

With the entrance of all the new EU nations, it has just become a great deal larger. These new entrants are not just poorer than Old Europe. They, like Europe's many recent immigrants from Asia and Africa, are religious, skeptical of a strong state, unenthusiastic about voting and allergic to high taxes. In other words, from the vantage point of Old Europe, they are more like Americans.

And so, as Europe expands, the argument made here for western Europe -- that the differences across the Atlantic have been exaggerated -- will become irrefutable.

A note on sources: The data in this essay comes mostly from a handful of organizations that devote significant efforts to presenting internationally comparable figures: the UN, UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, the IMF, the World Bank, Eurostat, the Sutton Trust, the World Values Survey, the ILO, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the International Association for the Study of Obesity, the World Resources Institute, the International Energy Agency, the International Social Survey Programme and, above all, the OECD.

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