

**AMERICANIZATION
AND DEMYSTIFICATION
OF AMERICA**

**21ST CENTURY ROMANIAN PERCEPTIONS
OF AMERICAN CULTURE**

IRINA DAVID

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EDITURA UNIVERSITARĂ
București, 2017

Colecția FILOLOGIE

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Editură recunoscută de Consiliul Național al Cercetării Științifice (C.N.C.S.) și inclusă de Consiliul Național de Atestare a Titlurilor, Diplomelor și Certificatelor Universitare (C.N.A.T.D.C.U.) în categoria editurilor de prestigiu recunoscut.

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

DAVID, IRINA

**Americanization and Demystification of America : 21st Century
Romanian Perceptions of American Culture / Irina David. - București :**
Editura Universitară, 2017
Conține bibliografie
ISBN 978-606-28-0651-4

008

DOI: (Digital Object Identifier): 10.5682/9786062806514

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Editura Universitară
Editor: Vasile Muscalu
B-dul. N. Bălcescu nr. 27-33, Sector 1, București
Tel.: 021 – 315.32.47 / 319.67.27
www.editurauniversitara.ro
e-mail: redactia@editurauniversitara.ro

Distribuție: tel.: 021-315.32.47 / 319.67.27 / 0744 EDITOR / 07217 CARTE
comenzi@editurauniversitara.ro
O.P. 15, C.P. 35, București
www.editurauniversitara.ro

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Why another study on American influence?

The current research study focuses on identifying the main Romanian perceptions of the United States of America, as well as the various ways in which elements belonging to American culture are integrated in the culture of Romania, a country that belonged to the former South-East European Communist Bloc. The research efforts will concentrate on the period after 1989, but references will also be made to previous years, in an attempt to emphasize the connections between past experience and current evolution of attitudes related to American culture, to its impact on Romanian one, as well as of pro- or anti-American feelings. This period was selected due to the fact that the fall of the communist regime and the end of the Cold War generated a radical reconfiguration of America's role in the world, and implicitly of its relations with Europe, especially with the post-communist European countries. The research area will be limited to the field of printed media culture, and the study will try to illustrate how cultural publications in Romania reflect phenomena as cultural Americanization or anti-Americanism.¹

¹ Articles published mainly in the period 2000-2012 were selected from four prestigious Romanian cultural publications: *Dilema/ Dilema Veche (Dilemma/ The Old Dilemma)* – the second title was adopted starting from January 2004, *Observatorul Cultural (The Cultural Observer)*, *România Literară (Literary Romania)*, *Revista 22 (22)*.

In recent years, there have been numerous studies debating the phenomenon of Americanization and its impact on European culture, as well as the European reactions to the increasingly strong influence of the United States throughout the world, which many refer to as American cultural imperialism. If Bark (2007) and Martinelli (2007) focus on emphasizing the differences between Europe and the United States, other authors, such as Crockatt (2003), Hollander (2004), Judt and Lacorne (2005), O'Connor and Griffiths (2006), or Markovits (2007) discuss the way in which these differences create tensions that can lead to the appearance of anti-American reactions in certain European countries. The studies mentioned above are mainly based on a political and socio-economic perspective. There are of course authors that have based their discussion on a predominantly cultural foundation. Kroes (1996), Pells (1997), Epitropoulos and Roudometof (1998), and more recently Beck, Sznaider and Winter (2003) focus on how aspects of American culture have influenced the culture of the European countries.

Romanian culture and the American impact on it are not discussed as a main topic by any of the authors mentioned above. If comments about Romania do appear, they are usually integrated in chapters or subchapters dedicated to the entire post-communist region.² On the other hand, there are few Romanian authors who have written books on Romanian culture in relationship to the American one. The Romanian anthropologist Lucian Boia, who has published lengthy studies on the specificity of the Romanian culture, also discusses the interaction between our culture and the American one as part of chapters dealing with the contact between the

² See Judt and Lacorne (2005) and McPherson and Krastev (2007).

Romanians and the foreigners.³ Another significant contribution to this field was brought by Bogdan Barbu (2006), who wrote a book-length study on Romanian-American interactions. However, the focus of his research is represented by the Cold War period, and no references are made to the post-communist context.

The increasing interest in post-communist reconfigurations, especially in issues such as Americanization, anti-Americanism or Romanian-American cultural interactions has resulted in extremely valuable collections of essays, most of them based on contributions during conferences organized by members of the academia.⁴ The articles published in these volumes address a variety of issues related to Romanian and American cultural environment, as well as to the connections between the two cultures. Although their contribution is undeniable, they provide a fragmented image of the impact of American culture on the Romanian one, as well as of how this influence is perceived. Therefore, I consider my research could fill a gap in the literature, by providing a thorough unitary analysis of the impact that the characteristics of Romanian culture have on the phenomenon of cultural Americanization, as well as on the relevance of cultural Americanization on redefining post-communist Romanian culture.

Before the publication of this book, some of the ideas presented in it and some of the aspects that are analysed here made the subject of discussions held during international conferences. Previous versions of some sections of the book were published in conference proceedings and in journals⁵.

³ See Boia (2001, 2007).

⁴ See Mihăilă and Pană (2001, 2003, 2007, 2009) and Mihăilă and Oltean (2011).

⁵ See David (2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b) and David and Tălmăcian (2013).

Methodological Approach

The theoretical approach I intend to use in this study is an imagological one. As stated by Joep Leerssen, imagology is the study of national stereotypes, not of national identities, and the imagologist is concerned less with objective facts and more with subjective interpretations of the environment. Consequently, one of the main characteristics of imagological approach is that its purpose is not to issue value judgments on the validity of the identified perceptions. Instead, attention is paid to how stereotypical images about nations are created and to their impact.

According to Joep Leerssen, images are subjective rather than objective representations of reality, which depend more on the context in which they are created than on the real object they illustrate. As a result, national stereotypes provide input regarding the international context, as well as the relationship between the nationality represented and the one that proposes a specific representation (Leerssen 2007). At the same time, they offer insights on specific features of the culture where they were created, as the “representation of cultural relations is a representation of a cultural *confrontation*; and the author's own cultural values and presuppositions are inevitably involved in this confrontation” (Leerssen: Images...; emphasis in the original).

As I will show in the next chapters of the present study, most scholars who describe phenomena as Americanization or anti-Americanism rely on imagological approach. They agree with the fact that these phenomena are centered not around the real geographical, political, socio-economic entity called the United States of America, but rather around America as an imaginary construct, as a flexible product of people’s minds, which is shaped according to

their expectations, needs and hopes. Consequently, positive or negative reactions to American culture offer valuable information about the local contexts where they appear, as well as about global reconfigurations. My interpretation of articles published in Romanian cultural publications has also revealed that debates on aspects related to American society often serve as pretexts, being used as starting points in the analysis of Romanian culture, or on Romania's relationship with other European countries and with the U.S.

Structure of the Book

The present study is divided into four chapters: the first two address the issue of cultural Americanization, and the following two focus on aspects related to European anti-Americanism.

The first chapter – "Globalization, Americanization and Cultural Translation: Post-Cold War Theoretical Reconfigurations" – focuses on cultural interactions between the U.S. and European countries throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the first section of the chapter, the most significant moments which marked shifts in the evolution of these interactions are identified. The first important period analyzed is World War I, when the first official attempts of the U.S. to use strategies related to cultural diplomacy are documented. References are then made to World War II and the Cold War era, when these strategies became extremely manifest. During those periods, American authorities made full use of their cultural, economic and political resources to promote and impose American reforms, as well as to gain the Europeans' allegiance in the fight against the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet threat were marked by global reconfigurations and by efforts to redefine the coordinates of

America's role in Europe and of its relationship both with Western European countries and with Eastern European ones. In the second section, attention is paid to how scholarship in the field of American Studies describes the main characteristics and effects of phenomena as globalization and cultural Americanization in the context of increasingly strong transnational connections. One of the aspects I focus on is related to the various perceptions of globalization, mainly depicted as a threat to local cultural specificity, as a force that would impose uniformity and homogeneity or, on the contrary, as a source of cultural renewal through hybridization. The second approach is based on the idea that any thorough analysis of processes of globalization and Americanization should take into consideration the impact of cultural translation strategies.

Most of the texts I refer to in the second chapter – “Post-Communist Romanian Interpretations of the Impact of American Culture” – emphasize the idea that Cold War perceptions of America, seen by Romanians as a desirable alternative to the communist regime ideologies, have had a significant role in shaping post-communist reconfigurations of Romanian-American relationships. During the Cold War, the image of America gained almost mythical connotations, which to a certain extent are still present in Romanian imagery. Special attention will be given in this chapter to some of the main strategies of Americanization, such as popular culture or the widespread usage of the English language. At the same time, I will try to identify the various reactions that awareness of American influence causes, by focusing especially on how Romanians think Americanization can serve as a tool in the modernization of Romanian society.

The third chapter – “Contemporary European anti-Americanism: A Conceptual Framework” – provides a theoretical

overview of anti-Americanism in Western and Eastern European countries. References are made to recent studies whose authors make attempts to offer balanced definitions of the phenomenon, as well as to list the main sources of anti-Americanism, presented as a largely irrational attitude directed against all aspects of American culture, which is clearly differentiated from objective, balanced, well-argued criticism of specific American policies or actions. A lengthy analysis is dedicated to the comparative study of anti-Americanism in Western Europe on the one hand, and in the former communist countries from Eastern Europe on the other. If in Western Europe the anti-American tradition is a long-lasting one, which has gained strength after the end of the Cold War, the situation is completely different in many East-European countries. Unlike their Western counterparts, members of political and intellectual elite circles in Western Europe openly express their favorable perceptions of America, as well as their willingness to collaborate with American authorities.

The articles to which references are made to in the last chapter of the study, entitled "Anti-American Discourse and Discourse on anti-Americanism in post-Communist Romanian culture", illustrate the largely pro-American inclination of Romanians. The first subchapters focus on perceptions of anti-Americanism abroad. I considered it would have been difficult for me to try to identify the main characteristics of Romanian anti-American-related discourse without first referring to how Western European anti-Americanism is interpreted. Numerous articles were published for instance on extreme manifestations of anti-American feelings, especially after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. The general reaction has been one of complete rejection of the attack, as well as refusal to find reasons that could justify it. Milder forms of

anti-Americanism, which have been for a long time present in European discourse are also seen in a negative light, being described as symptoms of a simplistic approach on American culture and its influence. Regarding Romanian anti-Americanism, it is presented in many of the selected articles as a geopolitical mistake, as Romania's integration in Western structures could be facilitated if closer connections with the U.S. are established and maintained. However, when it becomes manifest, Romanian anti-Americanism is often confined at the level of discourse and is not expressed through violent actions or street protests. One of the main sources of anti-American discourse is represented by concerns with the impact of Americanization. I will try to prove that these concerns do not refer to the entire American culture. Romanian intellectuals are more than willing to embrace the values that have determined the success of American society. What they caution against is the impact of low-quality, mass produced cultural products which are adopted by unprepared Romanians without going through the filter of cultural translation.

CHAPTER 1

GLOBALIZATION, AMERICANIZATION AND CULTURAL TRANSLATION: POST-COLD WAR RECONFIGURATIONS

1.1. American-European Cultural Interactions: A Brief History

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the main perceptions of American economic, political and cultural impact on European countries starting from the end of the nineteenth century, as they are reflected in scholarship in the field. American presence has become an obvious aspect of European social life, as well as reason for concern among European elites especially after World War II. In the post-Cold War period, European worries with the increasingly strong influence of American models have been expressed more and more often. However, many scholars agree that the coordinates of present-day relations between the U.S. and Europe were to a large extent determined in the decades which marked the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.⁶ In the

⁶ In this section of my study I will refer mainly to Pells (1997), who provides an overview of how the U.S. imposed its models throughout Europe. For descriptions of how specific European countries have been affected by and reacted to American influence since the beginning of the twentieth century see Kroes and van Roseem (1986); Lacorne, Rupnik and Toinet (1990); Ross and Ross (2004).

following paragraphs I will highlight the key moments in the evolution of economic, political and cultural relations between the United States of America and European countries, showing how early attempts to export American principles in Europe affected American-European interactions.

In his thorough study on cultural relations between Europe and America – *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* – published in 1997, Richard Pells provides a chronological presentation of how these relationships evolved.⁷ From the beginning of his book, he expresses his disagreement with widespread perceptions according to which before World War II the United States did not represent a force Europe was concerned with and neither the U.S. nor Europe were interested in mingling in each other's affairs. On the contrary, he considers "there was never a moment when the Old World and the New were not politically and culturally intertwined, or at odds over what each meant to the other" (Pells 1997: 2). In his opinion, World War II, whose end marked the rise of America as a global superpower, only served to escalate a situation whose origins can be identified in previous decades. Concerning this issue, Pells states that:

(...) World War II did not represent such a sharp departure from the past. If anything, the war deepened the bonds and accentuated the controversies that had existed between the United States and Europe long before 1945. The issues over which Americans and Europeans argued after the war – whether America should be a model for Europe, the impact on

⁷ For earlier comments made by the author on the influence of American culture in Europe see also Pells (1993).

Europe of American products and investments, the influence of Hollywood and other manifestations of America's mass culture, the need for Europeans to resist the 'Americanization' of their societies – were all very much a part of the transatlantic dialogue in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Pells 1997: 1-2)

According to Pells, the origins of the concept "Americanization" can be traced to the first half of the nineteenth century. Referring to the type of influence America exercised at that time, as well as to the European elites' ambivalence concerning American models, he states that in a first stage "the word referred to America's mechanical inventions and technological ingenuity, phenomena that both intrigued and repelled Europe's statesmen and intellectuals" (Pells 1997: 7). Later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans became more concerned with the increasing economic and cultural impact of the U.S. in Europe. From an economic standpoint, one could not ignore the penetration of American exports due to American mechanization and mass production, leading to high-quality products sold at lower prices than the European companies could afford to offer, nor the increase in investments, the opening of subsidiaries, or the acquisition of factories in Europe by American companies (Pells 1997: 9). This process, which started in late nineteenth century, became even more obvious after the end of World War I. From a cultural perspective, Pells shows in his study that elements of American and European popular culture were also present on both sides of the Atlantic prior to the 1920s, starting from the late nineteenth century. By World War I, the spread of popular culture icons was even further facilitated due to new forms of communication such as the radio or

the phonograph. During this period America's technological innovations which were used as instruments in the diffusion of popular culture were supported by state authorities, aware that the entertainment industry would give them the opportunity to promote a specific set of values and social principles throughout Europe (Pells 1997: 13).

A significant contribution Pells brings to the discussion of America's cultural impact in Europe is in my opinion his comments regarding the initial stages of American cultural diplomacy. An extremely important moment is represented by the creation of the Committee on Public Information in 1917. One of the main purposes of this committee was to convince the Americans that America's participation in the war was necessary for preserving international stability, and at the same time to promote the American values of democracy among European audiences. The main instruments used for this aim were dropping posters, pamphlets, or leaflets behind enemy lines, distributing President Wilson's photographs and speech texts, or creating special places where Europeans could get access to American texts. Due to the extremely manipulative and propagandistic agenda and strategies of the committee, it did not have the desired impact in the U.S. and it stopped its activity in 1919. However, as Pells notices, the strategies chosen were successful in Europe, and they represented a valuable precedent for similar actions during and after World War II (Pells 1997: 8).

In the prewar period, American foundations⁸ played an important role in encouraging intercultural exchanges between American and European intellectuals, functioning as:

⁸ The examples Richard Pells refers to are: Rockefeller, Guggenheim, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Commonwealth Fund (Pells 1997: 22).

(...) the channel through which Americans were able not only to learn about but to domesticate the latest European ideas. Constructing a network of personal and professional relationships among intellectuals and academics on both sides of the ocean (which turned out for many of the Europeans in the 1930s to mean the difference between life and death), the foundations helped to close the cultural gap between the continents. (Pells 1997: 22)

Further in his study he argues that “the philanthropic foundations were responsible not just for the rescue of individual European scholars and scientists, but for the general migration of European culture and civilization to America” (Pells 1997: 31). He also states that the American government was willing to take advantage of the presence of intellectuals to fulfill its military and diplomatic objectives, but both this tendency and the idea of using culture as a tool in foreign policy were not customary to American policy prior to the 1930s, although several European countries such as France, Germany, Britain or Italy were already making full use of these strategies (Pells 1997: 31-33).

However, the support provided by American authorities to encourage the spread of American values and to prove the superiority of the American model became extremely obvious during World War II. In 1942 the American government launched the radio service Voice of America, which could be heard in Europe, as well as the Armed Forces Radio Network, initially aimed at soldiers, but which gained the civilians’s interest as well. Also, in the summer of the same year the Office of War Information was created (Pells 1997: 34). Apart from functioning as means of informing the population, they also served a cultural purpose. Referring to Voice of

America – the VOA and to the Office of War Information – the OWI, Pells states that:

The picture the agencies painted was meant to be attractive and reassuring. Its purpose was to help Europeans better understand and appreciate America's values and institutions so that they might more easily accept America's benevolent rule. (Pells 1997: 35-36)

After the end of the war, the attributions of the Office of War Information were transferred to the Department of State, which also took over the running of the Voice of America, whose activity was also reduced. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily mean that the American government gave up completely the concept of using its power to achieve cultural aims and to influence European societies (Pells 1997: 36).

After World War II, America's domination in the relationship with European countries that were struggling to recover morally and economically became extremely obvious, the Americans presenting themselves "both as conquerors and as custodians" (Pells 1997: 38), as "the guardians of democracy on the one hand and of Western civilization on the other" (Pells 1997: 38). In order to gain the collaboration of Western European countries in the war against the Soviet Union, the United States understood the necessity to use not only its economic, but also its cultural power. According to Pells:

It was clear that in the battle for the allegiance of Western Europe, the United States would have to commit not only its armies and its wealth, but all its cultural assets as well. Thus, the marriage of American culture and American diplomacy,