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Essay

Josef Joffe

America and Europe: Vive la différence!

It's decline time again in America, like every 20 years or so.

Last time round, in 1988, the doomsayers got everything right — except the name of the country. For it was the Soviet Union which collapsed while the United States went on to savor its “unipolar moment.” This time it is a consumptive greenback, shrinking credit, soaring gas and two wars with no V-Day in sight in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Now let's look across the Atlantic where Europe used to strike Americans as one huge Disneyland with real castles and wondrous shopping arcades, like H&M (for the kids) and Hermès (for the Kerrys).

Today, the Manolo is on the other foot, or, more apropos, in the other shopping bag. Over the last eight years, the euro has almost doubled in value against the dollar. It used to be the Japanese who bought Fifth Avenue dry; now it is those Euro hordes and even Russians! They even come to buy their own stuff — Prada, Zara, whatever — which usually costs a lot more in Milan than in Manhattan.

So what do the Europeans have the Americans don't? Above all, more time. At home, Barack Obama could never pull in 200,000 as he did in Berlin in July.

Does that mean Berliners are a soft touch for soaring platitudes? Hardly. Like all big-city folks, they are snotty seen-it-all types. But they have lots of free time on their hands. Unemployment in the German capital runs to 14 percent, about twice the national rate. Like most West Europeans, Germans enjoy much more R-and-R than Americans, who work 400 hours (10 weeks!) more per year.

These Calvinist work habits (which have infected American Catholics and Jews as well) mark the basic difference between America and Europe. When Americans come to Europe — heck, when Europeans come to Europe, as I did on my Italian vacation that took me from coldish, Lutheran Hamburg to Todi and Perugia — we all fall for the same wondrous thing: tasteful leisure.

Leisure has disappeared in America. Americans don't just hang out any more; we “network.” When they go to the ball game, it is for “quality time” with the kids, not for the bliss of a lazy afternoon. Work and non-work have become a single seamless thing in 21st century America.

This is why we, Europeans as well as Americans, love sitting in a café on Perugia's Via Mazzini. The pizza is richer at Domino's and the lettuce is crisper at Denny's, but we happily drop two hundred bucks for a so-so meal for six. Why? Because we can stay and stay; no waiter will accost us with that atrocious question: “Are you still working on your carbonara?” Food as work — this is just one step short of the end of Western civilization.

Bella Italia, bella Europa — chock full of Peruginos and Massacchios, Dürers and Matisses, where

the Barolo practically comes out of the faucet, where the women dress to kill even for a date with the copy machine. Dallmayr and E. A. T. will drive you into Chapter 11, but the starch-apron ladies in the Munich fancy-food store just pull off the heist more suavely than their co-conspirators on Madison Avenue.

There is that endless diversity stretching from Lisbon to Lodz — the food, the architecture, the history. And the high-speed trains that cover the 180 miles between Hamburg and Berlin in 90 minutes. And the Metros, autobahns and buses — all immaculate.

So why isn't everybody hyping Europe, like they are rhapsodizing about China and India as new masters of the universe?

It's the economy, stupid. Europe's has practically ground to a halt, with Germany's actually contracting. No, it's not 7 or 10 percent eternal growth for Euroland, as it is for “Chindia.” And this is no accident, comrades, as the Soviets used to say. Europe's life-style is to America's like slow food is to McDonald's. It's a two-hour lunch versus pay, gulp and back to work.

Europe has chosen *gemütlichkeit*; America wants to re-invent itself once a month. “Which is better?” is like asking, “Is it warmer in the summer or in the city?” Though Europe and the U.S. share so much of modernity — from burgers to baseball caps, from soaring divorce rates to spreading ghettos — they have written very different “social contracts” for themselves.

The European contract favors stability and disfavors change; it prefers egalitarian outcomes to untrammelled opportunity. Hence the stark difference in public spending. In the EU, the government grabs about one-half of GDP, in the U.S. it is only 37 percent (which also pays for two wars these days).

So, the state taketh, and the state giveth, which creates a vicious but cozy circle. High levies and dense regulations brake growth and kill jobs, but high welfare, financed by rising payroll taxes, make life on the dole quite tolerable.

Universities boast open admission and no tuition, but not a single German university has made the World's Top Fifty compiled by Shanghai's Jiao Tong University. Thirty-five of them are American, as are eight of the Top Ten.

Protecting its industrial past, Europe perfects old technologies; hence the Mercs, the first-rate medical and tool-making machinery, not to speak of the perfume, the haute couture and the haute chocolate. But it is in America where the kid from Russia goes to invent Google. It is also in the U.S. where my best students at Stanford have names like Kim and Zhou. The “new new thing” will surely be Made in U.S.A.

America is invention, Europe is perfection. America is a house built from drywall and two-by-fours; Europe is massive stone piled up for eternity, like our friend's borgo in Todi, whose origins date back to

Etruscan times.

You can knock down the flimsy drywall and build a new house to suit your new needs. Or just leave for a new life, as Americans have done since they ran from Ireland or the Pale. But your castle is forever.

Like economics, like politics. Outside of Britain, proportional representation is the rule. The result is the same everywhere: no clear majorities, hence multi-party coalitions. Such governments are balance-of-power systems that generate stalemate.

There is neither a Reagan nor a Thatcher in Continental Europe's past, and there won't be in the future. It's just Berlusconi following Prodi following Berlusconi. Please spare us the surprises, is the silent prayer of Europe's electorates. And "no power to nobody," is the hidden imperative.

"No power" also means no forays abroad for booty, duty or glory. Europe, the locus of every significant war since the Greeks wiped out Troy, has become as aggressive as a sloth. And why not? 300,000 American troops protected it during the Cold War, and even today there are 70,000 strewn across the Continent as a nice reinsurance policy.

Call it self-indulgent if you must. But for a European who remembers his continent's self-destruction in two world wars, a "look ma, no arms" policy looks quite rational. As long as the U.S. takes care of the world's nasty business.

So is it warmer in the summer or in the city? Why not both? The summer is Europe: gemütlich, warm and reassuring. The city is America: speed and chance, sound and fury, novelty and reinvention.

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