

THE EUROPEANIZATION OF AMERICA

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Back during the election campaign, I was on the radio and a caller demanded to know what I made of the persistent rumor that Barack Obama was born in Kenya. "I doubt it," I said. "It's perfectly obvious he was born in Stockholm. Okay, maybe Brussels or Strasbourg." And the host gave an appreciative titter, and I made a mental note to start working up a little "Barack Obama, the first European Prime Minister to be elected President of the United States" shtick for maybe a year into the first term.

But here we are 20 minutes in, and full-scale Europeanization is already under way: Europeanized health care, Europeanized daycare, Europeanized college education, Europeanized climate-change policy... Obama's pseudo-SOTU speech was America's first State of the European Union address, in which the president deftly yoked the language of American exceptionalism to the cause of European statism. Apparently, nothing testifies to the American virtues of self-reliance, entrepreneurial energy and the can-do spirit like joining the vast army of robotic extras droning in unison, "The government needs to do more for me..." For the moment, Washington is offering Euro-sized government with Euro-sized economic intervention, Euro-sized social programs and Euro-sized regulation. But apparently not Euro-sized taxation.

Hmm. Even the Europeans haven't attempted that trick. But don't worry, if that pledge not to increase taxes on families earning under \$250,000 doesn't have quite the Continental sophistication you're looking for in your federal government, I doubt it will be operative very long.

Most Americans don't yet grasp the scale of the Obama project. The naysayers complain, oh, it's another Jimmy Carter, or it's the new New Deal, or it's LBJ's Great Society applied to health care... You should be so lucky. Forget these parochial nickel'n'dime comparisons. It's all those multiplied a gazillionfold and nuclearized – or Europeanized, which is less dramatic but ultimately more lethal. For a distressing number of American liberals, the natural condition of an advanced, progressive western democracy is Scandinavia, and the US has just been taking a wee bit longer to get there. You've probably heard academics talking about "the Swedish model", and carelessly assumed they were referring to the Britt Ekland retrospective on AMC. If only. And, incidentally, fond though I am of Britt, the fact that I can think of no Swedish dolly bird of the last 30 years with which to update that gag is itself a telling part of the problem. Anyway, under the Swedish model, state spending accounts for 54 per cent of GDP. In the US, it's about 40 per cent. Ten years ago, it was 34 per cent. So we're trending Stockholmwards. And why stop there? In Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, government spending accounts for between 72 and 78 per cent of the economy, which is about the best a "free" society can hope to attain this side of complete Sovietization. Fortunately for what's left of America's private sector, "the Welsh model" doesn't have quite the same beguiling euphony as "the Swedish model". But, even so, if Scandinavia really is the natural condition of an advanced democracy, then we're all doomed. And by "doomed" I'm not merely making the usual overheated rhetorical flourish in an

attempt to persuade you to stick through the rather dry statistics in the next paragraph, but rather projecting total societal collapse and global conflagration, and all sooner than you think.

There are two basic objections to the wholesale Europeanization of America. The easy one is the economic argument. The short version of late 20th century history is that Continental Europe entirely missed out on the Eighties boom and its Nineties echo. A couple of weeks back, the evening news shows breathlessly announced that US unemployment had risen to seven per cent, the highest in a decade and a half. Yet the worst American unemployment rate is still better than the best French unemployment rate for that same period. Indeed, for much of the 1990s the EU as a whole averaged an unemployment rate twice that of the US and got used to double-digit unemployment as a routine and semi-permanent feature of life. Germany, the economic powerhouse of Europe in the Sixties and Seventies, is now a country whose annual growth rate has averaged 1.1 per cent since the mid-Nineties; where every indicator – home ownership, new car registrations – is heading down; and in which government agencies have to budget for such novel expenditures as narrowing the sewer lines in economically moribund, fast depopulating municipalities because the existing pipes are too wide to, ah, expedite the reduced flow. Even flushing yourself down the toilet of history is trickier than it looks.

Of course, if you're one of the seemingly endless supply of Americans willing to turn up at the president's ersatz "town meetings" to petition the seigneur to take care of your medical bills and your mortgage and the gas in your tank, the Euro-deal looks pretty sweet. When they deign to work, even the French can match the Americans in hourly productivity. Unfortunately for boring things like GDP, the Euro-week has far fewer hours. There are government-mandated maximum 35-hour work weeks, six weeks of paid vacation, more public holidays, and, in the event that, after all that, some unfortunate clerical error still shows the calendar with an occasional five-day week, you can always strike. The upshot is that, while a working American puts in an average 1,800 hours a year, a working German puts in 1,350 hours a year – or 25 per cent less.

It's tempting to assume these are deeply ingrained cultural differences. "It's The Good Life, full of fun, seems to be the ideal," as the Gallic crooner Sacha Distel smoothly observed. But, in fact, until the Seventies Americans and Europeans put in more or less identical work hours. What happened is that the Protobamas of the Continental political class legislated sloth, and, as is the way, the citizenry got used to it. Indeed, the proposed European Constitution enshrines leisure as a constitutional right. Article II-31: "Every worker has the right to limitation of maximum working hours, to daily and weekly rest periods and to an annual period of paid holiday." There's no First Amendment or Second Amendment, but who needs free speech or guns when life is one gentle swing in the government hammock?

When American commentators notice these numbers, it's usually to crank out a why-oh-why-can't-we-be-as-enlightened? op-ed. A couple of years back Paul Krugman wrote a column asserting that, while parochial American conservatives drone on about "family values", the Europeans live it, enacting policies that are more "family friendly". On the Continent, claims the professor, "government regulations actually allow people to make a desirable tradeoff - to modestly lower income in return for more time with friends and family."

As befits a distinguished economist, Professor Krugman failed to notice, that for a continent of "family friendly" policies, Europe is remarkably short of families. While America's fertility rate is

more or less at replacement level – 2.1 – seventeen European nations are at what demographers call “lowest-low” fertility - 1.3 or less - a rate from which no society in human history has ever recovered. Germans, Spaniards, Italians and Greeks have upside-down family trees: four grandparents have two children and one grandchild. The numbers are grim, and getting grimmer. The EU began the century with four workers for every retiree. By 2050, Germany will have 1.1 workers for every retiree. At Oktoberfest a decade or three hence, that fetching young lad in the lederhosen serving you your foaming stein will be singlehandedly propping up entire old folks’ homes. Except he won’t. He’ll have scammed and headed off to Australia in search of a livelier youth scene, or at any rate a livelier late-middle-aged scene. And the guy taking his place in the beer garden won’t be wearing lederhosen because he’ll be Muslim and they don’t like to expose their knees. And, come to think of it, he’s unlikely to be serving beer, either. The EU would need at least another 50 million immigrants – working immigrants, that is (they’re not always, especially with Euro-welfare) – to keep wrinkly old Gerhard and Jean-Claude in the social programs to which they’ve become accustomed.

To run the numbers is to render them absurd: It’s not about economic performance, public pensions liabilities, entitlement reform. Something more profound is at work. Europe has entered a long dark Oktoberfest of the soul, drinking to oblivion in the autumn of the year, as les feuilles mortes pile up all around.

Let’s take the second part of Paul Krugman’s assertion: These “family-friendly” policies certainly give you “more time”. For what? High-school soccer and 4-H at the county fair? No. As we’ve seen, kids not called Mohammed are thin on the ground. God? No. When you worship the state-as-church, you don’t need to bother showing up to Mass anymore. Civic volunteerism? No. All but extinct on the Continent. So what do Europeans do with all that time? Do they paint, write, make movies? Not so’s you’d notice. Not compared to 40 years ago. Never mind Bach or even Offenbach, these days the French can’t produce a Sacha Distel or the Germans a Bert Kaempfert, the boffo Teuton bandleader who somewhat improbably managed to play a critical role in the careers of the three biggest Anglophone pop acts of the 20th century – he wrote “Strangers In The Night” for Sinatra, “Wooden Heart” for Elvis, and produced the Beatles’ first recording session. If that sounds like a “Trivial Pursuit” answer, it’s not. Eutopia turned out to be the trivial pursuit; to produce a Bert Kaempfert figure right now would be a major accomplishment Europe can’t quite muster the energy for. “Give people plenty and security, and they will fall into spiritual torpor,” wrote Charles Murray in *In Our Hands*. “When life becomes an extended picnic, with nothing of importance to do, ideas of greatness become an irritant. Such is the nature of the Europe syndrome.”

The key word here is “give”. When the state “gives” you plenty – when it takes care of your health, takes care of your kids, takes care of your elderly parents, takes care of every primary responsibility of adulthood – it’s not surprising that the citizenry cease to function as adults: Life becomes a kind of extended adolescence – literally so for those Germans who’ve mastered the knack of staying in education till they’re 34 and taking early retirement at 42 (which sounds a lot like where Obama’s college-for-all plans will lead).

Genteel decline can be very agreeable - initially: You still have terrific restaurants, beautiful buildings, a great opera house. And once the pressure’s off it’s nice to linger at the sidewalk table, have a second café au lait and a pain au chocolat, and watch the world go by. At the Munich Security Conference in February, President Sarkozy demanded of his fellow

Continental, “Does Europe want peace, or do we want to be left in peace?” To pose the question is to answer it. Alas, it only works for a generation or two, and then, as the gay bar owners are discovering in a fast Islamifying Amsterdam, reality reasserts itself.

In 2003, the IMF conducted a study of Eurosclerosis and examined the impact on chronic unemployment and other woes if the Eurozone labor market were to be Americanized – that’s to say, increase participation in the work force, reduce taxes and job-for-life security, etc. The changes would be tough, but over the long-term beneficial. But it’s too late for that: What’s “changed” is the disposition of the people: If it’s unsustainable, who cares? As long as they can sustain it till I’m dead. That’s the second and most critical objection to Europeanization: It corrodes self-reliance very quickly, to the point where even basic survival instincts can be bred out of society in a generation or two. In *America Alone*, I cited a headline that seemed almost too perfect a summation of a Continent where entitlement addiction trumps demographic reality: “Frenchman Lived With Dead Mother To Keep Pension.” She was 94 when she croaked, so she’d presumably been getting the government check for a good three decades, but hey it’s 700 euros a month. He kept her corpse under a pile of newspapers in the living room for five years, and put on a woman’s voice whenever the benefits office called. Since my book came out, readers send me similar stories on a regular basis: “An Austrian woman lived with the mummified remains of her aunt for a year, Vienna police said Wednesday.” In Europe, nothing is certain except death and welfare, and why let the former get in the way of the latter?

It’s interesting that it never occurred to the IMF that anyone would be loopy enough to try their study the other way around – to examine the impact on America of Europeanization. For that, we had to wait for the election of Barack Obama. Which brings us to the third problem of Europeanization: What are the consequences for the world if the hyperpower embarks on the same form of assisted suicide as the rest of the west? In quite the wackiest essay *Foreign Policy* has ever published, Parag Khanna of the Brookings Institution argued that the European Union was now “the world’s first metrosexual superpower”. And he meant it as a compliment. Mr Khanna’s thesis is that, unlike the insecure American cowboy, Europe is secure enough in its hard power to know when to deploy a little sweet-smelling soft power. Seriously.

The EU has become more effective—and more attractive—than the United States on the catwalk of diplomatic clout... Metrosexuals always know how to dress for the occasion (or mission)... but it’s best done by donning Armani pinstripes rather than U.S. Army fatigues... Even Turkey is freshening up with eau d’Europe... Stripping off stale national sovereignty (that’s so last century), Europeans now parade their ‘pooled power,’ the new look for this geopolitical season.

Brand Europe is taking over... Europe’s flashy new symbol of power, the Airbus 380, will soon strut on runways all over Asia...But don’t be deceived by the metrosexual superpower’s pleatless pants—Europe hasn’t lost touch with its hard assets...Europe’s 60,000-troop Rapid Reaction Force will soon be ready to deploy around the world... Just as metrosexuals are redefining masculinity, Europe is redefining old notions of power and influence. Expect *Bend It Like Brussels* to play soon in capital cities worldwide.

And on and on, like one of those pieces an editor runs when he wants to get fired and go to Tuscany to write a novel. The Airbus 380 is a classic stillborn Eurostatist money pit, the Rapid Reaction Force can’t deploy anywhere beyond a Europe Day parade down the Champs Elysee,

and given that the governing Socialist caucus on the Brussels city council already has a Muslim majority I doubt they'll be bending it themselves that much longer. This is the logical reductio of the Robert Kagan thesis that Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus. It's truer to say that Europeans are from Pluto, which was recently downgraded to "dwarf planet" status. A dwarf superpower doesn't have policies, it has attitudes – in part, because that's all it can afford. An America that attempts Euro-scale social programs would have to reel in its military expenditures. After all, Europe could only introduce socialized health care and all the rest because the despised cowboy across the ocean was picking up the tab for the continent's defense. So for America to follow the EU down the same social path would have huge strategic implications for everyone else, not least Europe. We would be joining the Continentals in prancing around in Armani pinstripes and eau d'Europe as the bottom dropped out of our hard assets. And Putin, Kim Jong-il, the mullahs et al might not find the perfume as heady as Mr Khanna does.

Even in its heyday – the Sixties and Seventies - the good times in Europe were underwritten by the American security guarantee: The only reason why France could get away with being France, Belgium with being Belgium, Sweden with being Sweden is because America was America. Kagan's thesis – Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus – will look like paradise lost when the last conventional "great power" of western civilization embraces the death-cult narcissism of its transatlantic confreres in the full knowledge of where that leads. Why would you do anything so crazy? Ah, but these are crazy times: Europeans are from Pluto, Americans are from Goofy.

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