

What Culture in European Cities? The Desperate Struggle of European Cultures against the American One

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Abstract: For a long time, American culture has been spreading and replacing other European cultures. This is a significant change. According to the French writer Régis Debray, images are replacing writing, the theme of happiness is replacing drama, and space is replacing time. Additionally, according to the German sociologist Max Weber, Protestantism has made Americans "ascetic inside the world," meaning individuals are solely responsible for their own well-being and success in society. The idea of "collective grace" is suspect. In urban life, there is a void that is filled by tribalism, such as sports, music, and events. Unfortunately, in urban planning, public spaces for people to gather, like parks or public squares, are often neglected. Water and green spaces could be valuable resources in filling this void. However, there is a potential risk of private brands taking over placemaking.

Key words: Culture, urban planning, public squares, green spaces.

1. Introduction

The predominance of American culture is an old story. Around 1900, the French sociologist Tarde warned that the English language was more practical than the French language: simpler grammar, words with an accurate meaning ... (even if the French language was more capable of rendering some nuances). The Austrian author Stefan Zweig wrote "The uniformity of the world" in 1925 denouncing the source: American culture. He gave as examples radio, cinema, dance, fashion ... He described a uniform and boring world. For those preferring the old European culture, like himself, he claimed a kind of retreat [8].

On the opposite, the American sociologist Clooney was enthusiastic about the new civilization emerging in the USA. It relied on education, science and technology, communication... The youngsters were convinced (an argument resumed by Brzezinski). Was proposed to them, the "enlargement of the ego". No doubt, the

American model should be imitated in the entire world, even if there were a few hurdles (the racism against black people, for instance). Later, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote his book on the Technronic society (1971). Again, the young generations are supposed to be enthusiastic about the new information technologies, bringing efficiency and dynamism. The model was poised to be diffused into the entire world, and it was checked. Interesting for our topic, the new information technologies have created new channels for culture (Internet, videogames, podcasts, blogs ...). They have boosted the "cultural industry", a vehicle for American culture.

The French poet Paul Valéry resented and described the end of French culture, but did not understand that the content itself of culture, and its channels, were changing [2]. According to Régis Debray, a French writer and a specialist of Medias, when American culture becomes predominant, images replace writings, happiness is the main theme, not drama, and space replaces time.

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The amateurs of strategic explanation could explain the predominance of American culture by the battle of Midway in 1942. And indeed, those who won during the 2nd World War were proponents of “collective grace” in so a condemnable way (race for Nazis and Nation for Japanese). The most interesting text on the topic remains the Max Weber’s “The protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism”, written in 1905 (and 1920) [7]. According to Weber, the American individual is an “ascetic within the world”. Indeed, the American culture is a mix of protestant ethics and materialist philosophy. The individuals are put to test and have to show their redemption thanks to social success. The player’s qualities (flair, courage, perseverance ...) are praised. The Salute is an individual stake. The role of the Star is admitted, since it is favorable to success. What matters for our topic is that “collective grace” is suspected.

In urban planning “collective grace” explains the nice public squares described by Camillo Sitte [5]. The French architect Viollet Le Duc has written a book “Histoire d’un hôtel de ville et d’une cathédrale” (“History of a city hall and a cathedral”) showing the role of the central square of European cities, where there is the city hall and the cathedral (in catholic countries) [6]. This square symbolizes the unity of the city (through political crises) and the “collective grace”. It was a place for discussion, negotiation, ceremonies and feasts. The previous generation of French architects or urban planning theorists (Poëte, Hénard, Perret ...) kept the role of public squares. But Le Corbusier forgets them. And the public squares (like green spaces) disappear from the plans made today for cities. One can make the hypothesis of an influence of American culture.

The plan of the article is the following:

- We develop on the causes of the predominance of American culture, and the features of this culture;
- The consequences (of the predominance of American culture) in urban planning are described;
- In the conclusion, we pose questions about the

consequences of the disappearance of public squares: (1) what about the “greening” of cities, which could be an opportunity to relaunch public spaces? (2) urban life is more or less tribal, today, and its places are stadiums, sport palaces ... The void of initiatives concerning public squares paves the way to a private role (brands) in place branding.

2. Predominance of American Culture: Its Causes and Features of This Culture

Let us consider strategic explanation, the Régis Debray’s theories and the Max Weber’s one:

2.1 Strategic Explanation

The British general John Fuller, who commanded the British Tank Corps during the 1st world War, was also a theorist. He thought that some battles have had an important role in the history of the Humanity (or the Western world), because the outcome favored a new civilization. That of the victorious side replaces that of the won side. He wrote the book “The decisive battles of the Western world and their influence”, on the topic. But according to Régis Debray, the “soft grips” are more uneasy to explain than the “hard grips” [2]. However, the outcome of an important battle is interesting: during the battle, luck has its role, but after the battle he won, the winner chooses a story to fix the meaning of this event. During the 2nd World War, the Americans and their allies won foes believing in a “collective grace” (the German Nazis and the Japanese nationalists), while themselves supported the individual liberty. At the time of the battle of Midway (1942), it was needed to stop the advance of the Japanese army through the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, towards Australia, Africa and India. The Americans were outnumbered, in soldiers and material. The Japanese planes were technically good. Their soldiers were efficient. The Americans succeeded thanks to luck:

- They were able to intercept and understand the Japanese communications. So, they knew the plan of

the Japanese navy concentrating at the island of Midway. On this island there was an American basis. In a message they knew the Japanese could intercept and understand it, they simulated a failure of desalinisator, in Midway. Then, when they intercepted a Japanese message warning to provide the Japanese fleet with boilers, they were sure that the goal of Japanese was to attack the island. Also, according to the Japanese plan, their ships were scattered in the Pacific Ocean;

- The Japanese carriers were defective. Sometimes, overcrowding on the deck prevented planes from landing. Supplying the planes was made not on the deck, but below, making a fire in case of a bomb breaking through the deck, more devastating;
- By chance an American reconnaissance plane saw a Japanese carrier, isolated, the Kuryu. It was attacked by American planes and sunk.

Finally, the Japanese lost four carriers and the Americans only one. It was an American victory. After, each side having to replace ships and planes which have been destroyed, the American arsenals were more efficient than the Japanese ones.

2.2 Régis Debray's Theories

Image replaces writing, the theme of happiness replaces drama and space replaces time:

- Images replace writing in what is produced and provided by the cultural industry. Image influences, not text. The USA is the country of cinema. The image shows the playground. The players discover themselves (and cannot change anything, it is predestination). At the opposite, the European cultures describe the invisible, the psychological, the Egos. For instance, in the French novels written between the two World Wars, the main character indefinitely hesitates between evil and good, or faith or indifference to God. Since an American writer, Allan Edgar Poe, invented the detective novel, an enigma is at the center of (almost) every story. The consequence is that any reflection on ethics is concealed (according to the German

sociologist Siegfried Kracauer). But as far as the complexity of reality is respected, attention paid to the playground can be interesting and useful (for instance, awareness to the role of probabilities, is possible). But with television, this condition no more exists. The reduction of reality is phenomenal (doubling). Appears what the French sociologist Baudrillard called "hyper real". Take the example of westerns. Masterpieces like "The heaven's gate" (Michael Cimino) or Cimarron (Anthony Man) did not meet success. They were "acid" or "revisionist" westerns. They showed the role of "greediness" (the word used by the American Nobel Prize of economics Stiglitz) in the conquest of the West. But Bonanza, a TV series was an extraordinary success: 431 episodes, during 14 years. Bonanza says nothing interesting on Americans or history of America. It remains that when image replaces writing, an extraordinary dynamism appears, in particular because of "hybridizations" [3]. There are many: cinema/song, cinema/music, cinema/television, cinema/videogame, painting/fashion, cinema/urban scenography, etc. The channels for cultural products have multiplied: Internet, podcasts, blogs, technologies producing an "immersion" etc.;

- The theme of happiness replaces drama. American culture is obsessed with happiness. It is the stake in individual life. Americans are players. There are winners and losers and happiness is the reward for winners. The drama displays the fragility of happiness. It is concealed. The drama shows characters moved by passions. The passions determine the goals of characters. The playground shows the abilities of the players. Their player's qualities are put to test. Any civilization brings some answers to existential questions. An American knows what he (she) has to do in his (her) life: to play, to win and to be rewarded by happiness;
- Space replaces time. Americans have a short history. Also, there was a breakthrough at the end of the 19th century, when the powerfulness of the USA (at the scale of the world) appeared, and the American society

changed. So, the questions on American history are almost questions on the present. Some disdain for “collective grace” is displayed: the justification is more success in the present than some identity coming from History. Also, the space is the tool of economic success (too much, when the precautionary principle should be understood and chosen). Space is the means of success (to mobilize networks) and the sign (diffusion through networks). Space is at the start and at the end of any project. One has to find means taking into account the spatial division of labor (at the world scale). And the outcome has to be diffusion through networks, at the world scale.

2.3 Max Weber's Theories

The American (the Protestant) is an “ascetic within the world”. That is to say, he (she) looks for signs that he (she) is a God’s chosen one. These signs are displayed when social success thanks to work occurs (Weber, 2003). The paradox is that a stark religion (that of Luther and Calvin) triggers pragmatism and materialism. In the same vein, Americans appreciate democracy because only those who have proved their value deserve trust. Also, Americans appreciate meritocracy. Finally, there is a single source, the Protestant ethics, of pragmatism, acceptance of democracy and meritocracy.

3. Effects of American Culture on Urban Planning

Culture does not explain all. We all know that political passions exist in America. So, the tableau (pragmatism, democracy, meritocracy) is less clear. But culture explains the “model” which is born in the USA and is imitated everywhere.

When “collective grace” as a great aspiration / inspiration disappears, what is the impact on urban planning? It remains a “focused space”, while the urban life takes the form of tribalism:

The “focused space” allows an idiosyncratic knowledge for inhabitants. Common mental atlases are

possible. Anybody can be understood by another person, when he (she) speaks of location, travel from a place to another one etc. There are landmarks, visible and known by all the people [4]. The mobile phone has upgraded this ability (habit of describing where one is ...). A landmark is “focal” (anybody thinks about the landmark, when it is needed to give explanations on a location). To travel in a city, it is necessary to be able to give or understand explanations on it.

Urban life takes the form of tribalism. Crowds are gathered to attend “events”. Are concerned sport, music, ceremonies ... Nice places (like the public squares of the past) are not needed. It is possible in fields (like the famous Woodstock Festival, in the USA, in 1969), in streets (Avenue des Champs Elysées, in Paris at Christmas), in stadiums, in nightclubs, dancing halls, sport palaces (or simply in a café). An event is a spectacle formatted by experts in urban scenography. The nice places inherited from the past can be used, but they are changed in a décor. Indeed, one can do without them.

Possible remedies could stem from water (in the city) and greening of the city. At the opposite, a risk is placemaking taken over by private brands:

3.1 Water

For many years, water in the city is considered an opportunity to have pleasant places where people can gather, walk, discuss or have a drink or dine. One can quote many examples: banks of the Seine and Canal de l’Ourcq in Paris, or the famous “river” (Cheonggyecheon) in Seoul. More, these places are fresh in Summer, in these times of global warming. Water in the city appears as a kind of “device”, like arcades or fountains, which favors the meeting of people. It remains that there are not many places with water (rivers, lakes...) in the cities.

3.2 Greening

Often “green corridors” are created thanks to old railway tracks which are no more used. Some are in

cities, other in the countryside. Those in cities allow people to walk in a pleasant décor, or rest. So, the greening of cities, which is desirable because of the global warming, allows new places where people can meet. Otherwise, one can plant trees alongside avenues which embellish them. But trees can also be planted in gated communities. In the same vein, shared gardens are pleasant to look at but are not accessible. And there are not many old railway tracks in the cities. Like water, greening can help to “fill the void” when “collective grace” has disappeared from our culture and public squares are no more in the plans of new quarters. But it is not enough, if one recalls the massive use of public spaces in the past, in European cities.

3.3 Place Branding Could Be Taken over by Private Brands

Since “collective grace” has deserted the fabrics of the city, the void, when placemaking is concerned, could be fulfilled by private brands.

Let us quote two current examples in France.

Vendôme is a nice, mid-sized city, which owns the brand “Vendôme”. There is a brand “Vendôme”, which is a branch of a large firm, LVMH (Louis Vuitton) in the sector of luxury. The city has sold the brand “Vendôme”, in the leather goods, to LVMH, for a small sum of money. There was a controversy... The episode does not matter very much, but it shows the fear that a firm which has influence, in a city, could take over the place branding (or the placemaking, to use a more blatant word). Indeed, LVMH has restored an old historical building in Vendôme to put in it a workshop, and will have a second workshop built in the city. About 400 jobs are concerned. This explains the influence of the firm in the city.

The village of La Gacilly, in Britain, is the birth place of Yves Rocher, the founder of a large, multinational firm in the sector of cosmetic. He was the mayor, and currently his son is the mayor. The brand is everywhere in the village: a museum (house of the brand), a photo festival in the streets, a botanic garden, a hotel, a

restaurant... There are also industrial buildings, with jobs. Indeed, to visit La Gacilly is to be immersed in a Yves Rocher customer experience. Here there are explanations: a huge dissymmetry between the size of the firm (turnover of 2.5 billion of euros) and the size of the village (4,000 inhabitants), the personality of the founder Yves Rocher, who was a wise entrepreneur and a politician. But there is an excessive stranglehold on the city. The story is not new. In the past, firms have built cities for their workers, near the workplace. Often, they were in advance of social legislation, in fields like health, old age insurance, education of kids... There are many examples in various sectors: chocolate, shoes, heaters etc. The criticism was paternalism. Today, the stranglehold has another form. A firm can take over the placemaking because it is able to mobilize resources like experts, artists, architects ... and financial means. Also, it has a project: to strengthen the image of the firm, to provide the customers with a new experience. The criticism is no more paternalism. It is an excessive stranglehold: the city is no more able to make choices when placemaking is concerned. The strategic priorities of the firms have changed: in the past it was to manage the workforce, today it is marketing and to build the firm's image. So, the possible stranglehold on a city and its decisions, has changed.

4. Conclusion

The hypothesis of the paper is that “collective grace” is an aspiration which has vanished, when American culture has spread. But there is no void: it is replaced by a “collective trance”, more tribal. The consequence on urban planning is that urban aesthetics is neglected. Let us quote an expert, Denis Baupin, who has been a city councilor in Paris: “If you speak of urban aesthetics, you make the people laugh” [1].

There are remedies, water, greening, but they are insufficient.

The placemaking escapes from the hands of the populace. Let us quote an example in France. Etretat is a nice little city in the North of France. The city was

shown in a TV series¹, which was a great success. The consequence was a flow of visitors, the city was overcrowded, the capacity of the car parks was not enough etc. The inhabitants were furious ... It shows that the placemaking is not in the hands of the inhabitants since it was taken over by a TV chain².

However, the quality of the urban landscape, the preservation of some habitus of the inhabitants, remain stakes in some cities. Take the example of the “dark stores” (these American words are used in France). They are large premises, in big cities, in general at the ground floor, without windows. They are not shops. There are no customers entering and going out. There, are stored the goods that deliverymen take, then bring to the home of the customers of “quick commerce”. They allow customers to order and have the ordered goods a quarter later. The criticisms of inhabitants are that they spoil the urban landscape, trigger disturbances (noise during the night) and make the little shops (grocery, butchery, drugstore ...) disappear.

This recalls the criticisms raised by the platforms like Airbnb, accused of triggering a rise of the prices of

flats, the closing of little shops, spoiling the urban landscape etc.

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¹ The TV series was about a very popular character of the French literature, Arsène Lupin.

² In the same vein, when photos of a site posted on Instagram, become very popular, the day after there is a flow of visitors wanting to see this site. It is undesired by the population.