



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Source: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Jul., 1961), pp. 578-590

Published by: [Council on Foreign Relations](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20029512>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 01:12

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THE UNREAL AMERICA

By Julián Marías

A NATION, needless to say, is a very complex reality. But this too obvious fact should not lead us to forget that a nation is also a very simple reality, and that this is the condition of its unity, of its being *one* country. “Ces grands corps que sont les nations,” said Descartes—“Those great bodies which are nations.” That is true; they are great, sometimes huge bodies; but they are at the same time, perhaps primarily, “characters” or “persons.” Their unity is a personal one, both for themselves and for others. The representative character of societies—of all societies, each in its different way—is essential and cannot be disregarded or obscured by the fact that it often takes an unusual form. Each type of society or country—city, commonwealth, nation, empire—has its own way of being one, and therefore of being personal and representative.

For a long time, the country was identified with the King, its personal symbol, and Goethe was aware that the “Vive la nation!” of the dying soldier at Valmy in 1792 was the beginning of a new era. Diplomacy has been a substitute for this personalization, and its full development was a consequence of the vanishing of kings or at least the fading of their splendor. The personal representative of a nation has been, especially in the nineteenth century, a convenient symbol, and diplomatic meetings and conversations were and still are means of simplifying and personalizing the highly complicated and somewhat abstract relations among nations. The role of Benjamin Franklin in creating the early image of the United States in Europe—as an individual substitute for both national tradition and royalty—was extremely important and had far-reaching consequences. In our own time, the American expression “good-neighbor policy,” so influential in political practice, reflects the attitude of a people who are conscious of and sensitive to their relations with the family living next door or across the street; and this awareness is by no means less effective than statistics, polls and other ways of ascertaining the elements that constitute the reality of other countries.

When nations have been known to each other for a long time, a “national image” begins to develop. Or rather several images of

each—how many depends on the homogeneity and channels of communication between countries. These images are an important factor in the shaping of the world. European nations have been watching each other from their birth on the common soil of Europe, and it is difficult to trace their mutual images to their sources. The great French historian, Paul Hazard, in “*La crise de la conscience européenne*,” thought that these images were shaped by the end of the seventeenth century; I had thought them older, but perhaps Hazard was right. Around that time the relations among European nations may have reached a point at which their mutual images became fixed—frozen into stereotypes, despite the many historical changes which followed. A similar phenomenon can be found in individual life: fellow students may keep a fixed image of each other that preserves the features of the college years. The eighteenth-century image of Germany as a dreamy, idyllic country of poets and philosophers lasted for more than a century and was hardly shaken by Bismarck and Krupp. The “merchant” view of England has gone unimpaired through centuries of British history. As for Spain, an image coined in the late sixteenth century still prevails in the mind of the average man throughout the world, mixed, curiously enough, with a romantic cliché: Carmen superimposed on Philip II.

The European image of the United States was very schematic during the first half-century of its independence; it became considerably blurred later, mainly after the Civil War, but American isolationism made this comparatively harmless and immaterial. Until a few decades ago the United States was a closed space, within which a new, powerful country was being made and a new way of life attempted. Today, everything is changed: the foreign image of the United States—now much involved in the world—is reflected back to America and becomes a part of the image of itself. Meanwhile, people abroad are dealing with the United States in terms of their image of it, though this may bear little resemblance to an American’s idea of himself and his country, or, for that matter, to that of other foreigners. One can hardly be surprised if language seldom has the same meaning for people who are thinking of quite different things.

Unless there is a common assumption, language, instead of providing real communication, is misleading. Normally, we say only what seems necessary, counting on the context in which our words

are uttered to speak for itself and tell its part, which is often the most important. If the speaker mistakes what his listener is assuming, he omits what should be said and fails to convey what he means. When this is the rule, dialogue becomes a comedy of errors, which in hard times such as ours may turn out to be a tragedy.

These difficulties are particularly serious for the United States. The images of European countries, for all their shortcomings, have grown slowly and in continuity; Europeans have been living together for centuries, fighting among themselves with hatred, love, rivalry and admiration. The image of the United States is in most cases a haphazard one. Until recently, information has been very scarce because of distance and lack of real interest; there have been only scattered moments of concentrated attention, like spotlights focused on its face. In recent times, there has increasingly been too much information, often contradictory, of unequal reliability, from many sources, dating from different periods of time.

On top of this, the American people's own image of the United States has not been especially clear. The nation's growth has been so fast that it has been nearly impossible for the American mind to keep pace with the development of the country, with the avatars of its many-sided and changing reality. And since one's own national image is partially made up of foreign images, like reflections in a mirror, the average American is further confused by the inconsistent and mostly inaccurate reflections of himself that he is receiving from abroad.

II

Most Europeans, including cultivated people, have little knowledge of the United States. First of all, the total amount of information acquired by them between the War of Independence and World War II was incomparably less than that coming from their neighbors in Europe. Second, the increasing presence of the United States in Europe since 1945 made it difficult to assimilate and interpret correctly so many impacts, to fit them into the old, rather vague image. And third, the structure of the United States is so different from that of the European nations that any information may be taken out of its proper context, and accordingly misinterpreted. The more a foreigner thinks he knows about America and the Americas, the more he is likely to misrepresent

them—unless he has really experienced the United States and has had an adequate background for understanding news and isolated facts. This is the hazard faced by all institutions, agencies or services devoted to the indiscriminate spreading of piecemeal information.

One of the most mistaken assumptions is that the United States is a “country” or “nation” very much like those of Europe. The Federal Government and its various ingredients, the relations between Washington and the states, the meaning of the capital city to the nation, the role of the press, the function of uniformity and diversity, the weight of politics and partisanship in American life, publicity and criticism, the measure of state control of society—all these have little similarity to the corresponding institutions and situations in Europe—or elsewhere. The reader of news concerning the United States is often puzzled and sometimes bewildered because he automatically sets them against a European or Latin American background and fails to see what they really mean in their own context.

This can be demonstrated if we take as examples a couple of particularly significant and revealing aspects of American life. One of the most striking features of the United States is the wide publicity given to, and open discussion of, facts and problems that in other countries are seldom matters of common information or judgment. For example, the American Government never fails to report the launching of satellites and missiles to the widest possible audience—whether they are successes or failures. Charges against the United States or its Administration, including the highest officers, are freely printed and commented upon in newspapers and magazines—for instance, Khrushchev’s speeches, in their full official text as provided by the Soviet Embassy. The admission of espionage in the U-2 incident and the evident discomfort and uneasiness of Americans because the facts were at first concealed and the admission delayed—this was interpreted in Europe as utter naïveté or even foolishness. In America, to an unequalled degree, mistakes are admitted by political parties, their friends and supporters. When *The New York Times* came out for Mr. Kennedy as its Presidential candidate, the editorial included quite a few criticisms of his program as well as reservations about his candidacy. Everything concerning segregation, violation of civil rights, unfair conditions of labor for Negroes or Mexicans, etc., is openly discussed and sometimes exaggerated.

The United States is the land of statistics. In other countries they are scarce or inaccurate, and where they are reliable they are restricted to people particularly concerned; even if they are available to anybody who takes the trouble to look them up, they tend to circulate only within a small circle of technicians and specialists. In the United States they are common knowledge; all kinds of statistics are published in the press and widely discussed. They are spread around the world by information agencies, and reprinted by foreign publications that seldom publish similar data from their own countries. Everybody knows how many Negroes are deprived of their right to vote, how many embezzlements are committed in the United States, how many drunken drivers are arrested, how many New York high-school girls get pregnant, how many people read pornographic magazines, how many estranged couples exist in the country. All these figures seem impressively high; if the foreign reader compares them with the few cases he personally knows or even with his guess about his own country, he very easily may get the impression that things are pretty bad in the United States. But if only he knew all the relevant facts, he would perhaps reach the opposite conclusion.

All American newspapers print monthly reports about prices and the cost of living. We all know that if in 1947-49 it was 100, it is now 127 and a fraction. In Spain, for instance, we don't know, and our best guess would be that we passed from 100 to 500 or 600 without batting an eyelash. Another much-discussed issue in the United States is unemployment. Figures are frequently given and they are quoted in the foreign press, which seldom reports figures for other countries; moreover, the reader assumes that the words "unemployment" and "unemployed" or "jobless" mean exactly the same thing as the French words *chômage* or *chômeur*, or the Spanish *paro* or *parado*. Not all Americans and few Europeans—if any—are aware that everybody who did not have a job in the last couple of weeks and wants to have one is included in the American statistics as "unemployed," even if he is quite young and never was previously employed, regardless of sex, age, marital status, etc. If a man loses his job, and his wife and a couple of children, wishing to help, look for jobs they did not previously need or want, this makes four "unemployed" in the statistics.

I would say that a climate of veracity pervades the United States. I do not mean that everything said or written is true—

far from this. I simply mean that lies are "exceptional"—even if they may be quite a few—and that it is truth that prevails. In my opinion this is one of the greatest assets of the United States, a wonderful feature of its society. But it is imperative to have this in mind if one wants to interpret correctly a particular state of affairs. Most Europeans fail to realize that the distance between words and facts is surprisingly short in America; they automatically make too heavy a discount, and instead of approaching truth, they widen the gap between their interpretation and the reality. One is reminded of the Spanish peasant who came back to his village after living in Naples: nobody was prepared to believe him when he said that there was a mountain whose summit smoked.

The general disapproval of American diplomacy is mainly, I believe, the consequence of the fact that the United States is bringing, for the first time in history, its domestic ways to the international scene. And, while I believe that this can be a wonderful thing in the future, I am also persuaded that many blunders made by American statesmen and diplomats arise from the fact that they take an understanding of these ways for granted and are not fully aware that to apply them internationally means a major innovation, doubtless risky and far-reaching.

III

Disregarding the true originality of American society, and unaware of the changes which have been taking place, especially in recent decades, many Europeans—and others as well—try to assimilate all information about the United States and fit it to their own assumptions. To the extent that they do recognize some differences, they usually perform two mental operations: (1) they interpret them as basically European characteristics externally changed on American soil either by degeneration or by exaggeration; (2) they take them as inherent and permanent parts of American society, people or government, even if they belong to the past or can clearly be seen to be mutually inconsistent. Let us consider a few illustrations.

Everybody takes for granted that the United States is a "wealthy" country, but most people assume that this is a "gift," that the United States is naturally wealthy, implying that it always was and probably will be, without any particular condition or activity. This viewpoint colors foreign attitudes toward every-

thing related to American wealth and its function. It takes a little effort to demonstrate that American wealth did not exist from the beginning, that it had to be "worked out" by tremendous and well-directed exertion through centuries of hard work; that life in the United States was and still is hard; that other countries having ample natural resources nevertheless remain poor. In other words, American riches have been earned and do not come by inheritance or automatism.

At the same time, the prevailing opinion is that Americans are greedy and money-loving people, eager to earn more and more, "materialistic" to the point of referring to a man as "worth" so-and-so much money (an expression which the Spanish writer Moratín, in a text of 1793, traces back to England). Few people know—or care—about the extent of American willingness to give and their ability to find reasons and even pretexts for giving, to the astonishing amount of \$8 billion in 1960. How many foreigners would guess anything approaching this figure?

In the same context, it is widely assumed that the United States is a "capitalist" country. The label is what counts; it is generally understood in terms of other countries (European or South American), or of other times, say, the late nineteenth century. The image of the "robber barons" is more likely to come to the foreigner's mind than that of the man who pays an income tax of 91 percent. I would like to know how many educated people abroad have a fairly adequate idea of such subjects as the number and status of stockholders of American companies, workers' wages and rights, the minimum and the average standard of living. (I read some time ago in a French review: "Many workers in the United States have a car indeed, but they are mostly second-hand cars.") The true image of American economic and social organization is rarely seen abroad. Its most attentive observers usually rely on critical books by American sociologists, who, on the one hand, take for granted that their readers know the general background and, on the other hand, write with a sense of humor that the foreign reader often fails to perceive. Most American books on social problems are written in a tone not too distant from that of *The New Yorker*, despite their scholarly character, and they ought to be read accordingly.

The worker's social status is also misplaced. Most people think of him as a "proletarian" and do not realize that the American "proletariat," such as it was, has almost vanished. But when the

facts show them that American workers are no longer proletarians, Europeans stop thinking of them as workers. It is almost unbelievable how many Europeans who profess to be deeply concerned about workers' problems simply ignore the American solution. The same thing can be said of the social aspects of the evolution of American capitalism. Foreigners have no clear idea of social classes in the United States, since to identify them with "economic classes" does not work. Hence many people jump to the wrong conclusion that the United States is a "classless society." And when they realize that after all classes do "still" exist, they return to their old conception, paying little attention to the extraordinary opportunities of Americans in terms of job, education, marriage, way of life—regardless of their class.

The Negro problem is perhaps the main source of misconceptions abroad. Few Europeans know the basic facts about it: (1) that it is a real problem; (2) that therefore something has to be done; (3) that there is not such a thing as an "American solution," because there are several; (4) that the so-called "Southern attitude" is: sharply criticized within the country; not shared by a large number of Southerners; rapidly changing; and partly justified, *i.e.* supported by some reasons, even if they conflict with some better ones; (5) that the improvement in the general situation is tremendous and faster than could reasonably be expected; (6) that the vast majority of Americans—South as well as North—is persuaded that integration is the unavoidable solution of the problem, but most Americans know—or at least feel—what critics easily overlook: that integration has to be *made*, not simply ordered or spoken of, and it takes time, like growing a tree or educating a child. This brings us to a related and most serious cause of misunderstanding of the United States.

IV

The relations between state and society may differ among European or Latin American countries, but the contrast with the United States is one of kind as well as degree. On the whole, the function of the central government is far more restricted in the United States and, more important, American society is entrusted with multiple and highly complicated tasks. I underline this last point because the tremendous and perhaps too fast growth of the Federal Government in the last 20 years may lead one to believe that the traditional situation is being reversed and that American

society is being increasingly subordinated to and controlled by the Federal Government. I hope this won't happen and am persuaded that it is not yet the case. The state, as represented by the Federal Government, now has many more functions than before World War II, and accordingly much more power and resources, but it is undeniable that American society has been growing in a parallel way, and the balance has not been lost. The role of society, its possibilities and means, the variety of its capacities, its demands on its rulers, are now more important than ever.

Foreign observers are often puzzled at the "apathy" of the United States toward some social evils. How is it that they seem to be more or less tolerated for long periods of time, despite the open disapproval of the best part of the country and sometimes of the highest authorities, perhaps the Supreme Court? If integration of schools has been decided upon, how can it be that it proceeds so slowly and with so much reluctance? Is it not imperative that it be immediately and absolutely enforced? Many Europeans fail to understand why the United States cannot get rid of the teamsters' problem, or of some harmful organizations of dubious legality, or of certain forms of juvenile delinquency. Foreigners are likely to diagnose the cause as weakness or complacency or complicity; in other words, a serious illness of America.

I believe exactly the contrary. For me, this is proof of the wonderful health and vitality of the United States. It would certainly be easy for the state to apply its power and perform surgery on the social body, thereby getting immediate results. But this would be to prevent society from reacting creatively by itself to develop new organs or functions which do not confine themselves to the suppression of the disease, but act positively to cure it. One of the most deep-rooted beliefs which shapes the American conscience is that evils are to some extent justified, that there is not on earth an absolute evil. The state can suppress—surgically—juvenile delinquency. But a strong and healthy society suspects that suppressing it is not enough, that something has to be invented and positively worked out instead of juvenile delinquency. It is often better to have a little patience in order to overcome not only the present evil, but the condition that created it.

We should not under-rate the power of society. In my opinion, the greatest threat to the United States in its whole history—including the Civil War a century ago—was the attitude labelled,

for simplicity's sake, McCarthyism. No official power destroyed this menace; on the contrary, the instruments of the state were widely used in its behalf, and to some extent still are. It was American society, public opinion, that healed its own disease, by using its moral sense, its taste for fair play, its sense of humor, its confidence in man, its love of freedom. The state could have thwarted McCarthyism, but only American society could overcome it.

v

The weakest element in the whole complex of the United States is its foreign policy. Of course, America's role is exceedingly difficult, and mistakes—even serious mistakes—are unavoidable. It is easy to point to them with an accusatory finger, but I do not believe that most Europeans and Latin Americans would sleep as peacefully as they do—even allowing for some nightmares from time to time—if some other country had the position of responsibility now held by the United States. Nevertheless, American foreign policy over the last 15 years has recorded some unmistakable failures which could have been prevented and which badly hurt the American image abroad. Without trying to analyze these mistakes, I would like to hazard an explanation of their cause, for it is relevant to my central thesis about the nature of American society.

Every Administration is acutely conscious of the difficulties and risks involved in foreign policy. Concerned to avoid mistakes, and conscious of America's lack of experience in a field of rapidly increasing importance, the responsible officials rely more and more on the advice of experts. Apparently nothing could be more reasonable and safe, especially as Americans have a deep-seated tendency to rely on experts. But I see two dangers in its application to the field of foreign policy.

The first is that not too many experts on foreign affairs are available—I mean fully competent and really qualified, able to cope with the very thorny and unusual problems they have to deal with. The result is likely to be that one accepts restricted qualifications as if they were general, assuming, for example, that knowledge of Latin America qualifies one to deal with Spain. A worse danger is that expertness in one field will be considered transferable to all fields. Ortega y Gasset spoke in "The Revolt of the Masses" of "the barbarism of specialization": this describes

the attitude of men who are competent and qualified in some particular field and behave as if they were equally competent and had authority in other fields where they should be prepared to learn. Businessmen and military men rank among the best experts in the United States; but their competence is restricted to highly specialized questions. Now, I have the impression that they have played a very important role in determining American foreign policy, even in spheres where they were not properly qualified, and have often had the last word about complex and delicate matters remote from their training and experience. As a Spaniard, I am perhaps in a position to realize how often this has been the case and how many dangers are involved. Oversimplification and a tendency to overlook everything that fails to fit into a scheme designed for a particular purpose may cause far-reaching mistakes with serious and unforeseen consequences.

The second danger in unrestricted reliance on experts or self-appointed experts is of a subtler and deeper nature. It consists of depriving society of any important function in the making of foreign policy. Whereas in other aspects of American life the role of society is essential, and the state has mainly supplementary, coördinating or exceptional activities, with the result that the balance between both is preserved, American society as such plays only a minor role in the relations of the United States with other countries; public opinion is powerful in America, but it has little to say in the field of foreign policy. It is often disregarded, sometimes disdainfully, by those who "know better." If they did know better, this attitude would perhaps be acceptable, although I feel that they would benefit by paying greater attention to public or individual opinions; but it often happens that their proud assumption proves to be wrong. The reader will have no difficulty in thinking of illustrations.

The final consequence of this state of affairs is that, since the foreign image of a country is largely founded upon its foreign policy, most people in Europe and elsewhere think of the United States as represented by its Administration and, even more, by some groups of "experts" influential in policy making, rather than by the American people. One could object that this is the rule and that some allowance has to be made for the unavoidable distortion of reality in seeing any country through its representatives. But in the case of the United States this deformation is greater, because the role of society is more important than in

most countries, and therefore the image that reaches foreign eyes is unusually distant from the true outlook of the United States as a whole. And this is a major factor in explaining why there is an astonishingly wide gap between the views of foreigners who see the United States from abroad and of those who know it from living there.

VI

What can be done in order to give a more truthful and accurate image of the United States abroad, and especially in Europe? I was going to write "a better image" and I stopped, because it would be a big mistake to look for a better image. Propaganda is one of the great evils of our time, perhaps the greatest, which is spoiling a large part of the wonderful things created by the twentieth century. Besides, unlike some countries, the United States can afford the truth.

It is unnecessary and perhaps harmful to attempt to "sell" the United States. Boasting, exaggeration, omission of negative aspects and oversimplification should be carefully avoided by Americans who seek to reveal the face and soul of their country. The main trouble is that most Europeans know little of the United States, and this little in a fragmentary way, lacking background and perspective. When Americans try to "explain" America, they generally emphasize institutions, as if they were not a simple consequence of the social reality that lies underneath. It is imperative to bring to the foreigner's mind the true, deep originality of the United States—the roots of these doubtless valuable institutions which cannot be transplanted without them.

On the other hand, ideas about the United States should be up-to-date. Americans are usually very careful about this, but in a rather elementary form: they will give the last-minute developments in politics, the last week's economic data, the monthly progress in integration; but the image of the United States as an intellectual wasteland and of American writers, artists and thinkers as exiles in their own country, which may have been to some extent true 30 years ago, is prevailing and almost uncontested in European intellectual circles today. The conflicting views of the United States as both a colonialist and an anti-colonialist power peacefully coexist in many minds; foreigners jump easily and in half-good faith from one view to the other, according to the subject of discussion or simply to their momentary temper. And,

finally, Americans (and others) seldom take the trouble to understand and explain what is, after all, a little more complicated than can be encompassed by a label.

This question of labels is a very delicate one. Especially negative labels. They usually lead to confusion, weakness and defeat. Everybody remembers that in the thirties there was much talk of "anti-fascism" throughout the world; everyone who was not a fascist was an anti-fascist, which amounts to very little. It is difficult to get enthusiastic about an "anti-thing." The result was, as we sadly know, a tremendous flourishing of fascism and related ideologies in most countries, which led the world to disaster, blood, sorrow and stupidity in the forties. But the lesson was not properly learned: the fifties was the decade of "anti-Communism." A new negative label was substituted for a positive, fruitful and original reality—the United States on the one hand, Europe on the other, as the two brotherly, different, irreducible lobes of the West.

Negative labels often conceal attitudes and principles which have little in common, and some of which may be surprisingly close to what is so staunchly opposed. If it would, the United States could rally many important forces and resources around the true, living principles that positively shape it—freedom, truthfulness, self-respect, toleration, friendliness, individual opportunity, fair play, criticism, confidence—instead of collecting reluctant followers, dismayed allies, skeptical onlookers and, even worse, would-be friends who, under the same flabby negative flag, stand for opposite principles.

The most difficult task is for Americans to realize what they are like, so they can explain it to others. It is always hard to understand one's own reality, even harder if contrast with other ways of life is lacking or insufficient. Americans have been living inside the United States for nearly two centuries. They now are fatefully living also in the world. This will deeply affect their social and historical reality. The huge body of the United States will be animated by a different soul, a little older, with more experience, labored by history—that is, by illusions, successes, failures, hopes and above all the disappointment of realization. This "character," the United States, is growing more complex, and it will have to rely on its own creative and original possibilities. It is in my opinion imperative that the United States remain faithful to its authentic personality and behave accordingly.