

Rudolf Kayser, “Americanism” (1925)

Abstract

The catchwords “Americanism” and “Americanization” gave rise to a host of stereotypes, notions, and projections (e.g., the clichéd view of America as a country without “culture” or as a mass society) that found expression in certain images and metaphors and prompted diverse associations and reactions. For the most part, these ideas and notions were based on selective – and sometimes false – perceptions and generalizations, as opposed to first-hand knowledge of the United States. On an abstract level, the terms “Americanism” and “Americanization” functioned in German discourse as code words for industrial-technical, economic, and/or cultural-societal modernity. The phenomenon was discussed in this 1925 article by literary historian Rudolf Kayser, who, at the time, was editor of the *Neue Rundschau*; Kayser eventually immigrated to the United States in 1935.

Source

Americanism

Americanism is the new European catchword. It suffers the usual fate of catchwords: the more it is used, the less one knows what it means. It is certain that in this case the range of meanings is enormously broad, far exceeding particular minor phenomena, and that it applies to the fundamental character of our time. So the remarkable situation has arisen in which, for the designation of a truly radical change in the inner and outer forms of our life over the last few decades, we have no expression other than the name of a foreign continent that previously appeared to us infinitely far away, and not only in the geographical sense.

What is it then with Americanism?

Certainly it has nothing or only little to do with the American, whom we, after all, know less than any other national type. As a literary type, the American is also much less familiar to us than that of the European or the Oriental. The French citizen, the English lord, the Russian peasant, the Eastern sage—they have become palpable realities to us through their literatures, offering perspectives on the spiritual and social structures of their nations. There are those who say we do possess the figure of the American in literature. But what do we know of their writings? Who in Germany reads [Joseph] Hergesheimer, [Theodore] Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, [H. L.] Mencken ...? In Eugene O’Neill we became acquainted with our first American dramatist, and—let us be honest—he left us cold.

But we have other things: trusts, highrises, traffic officers, film, technical wonders, jazz bands, boxing, magazines, and management. Is that America? Perhaps. Since I have never been there, I can make no judgment. But I do know that the images of these things come to us from America. But does all this then amount to Americanism? Are these phenomena not much more than the external and revealed symptoms of a more secret, spiritual, soulful essence? Is Americanism not a new orientation to being, grown out of and formed in our European destiny? This is a question that the Viennese writer (who died a year ago) Robert Müller first raised and answered: “Americanism is therefore either a method or a fanaticism.” And with this we come much closer to its character and its Europeanness.

In fact, Americanism is a new European method. The extent to which this method was itself influenced by America seems to me quite unimportant. It is a method of the concrete and of energy, and is completely attuned to spiritual and material reality. The European’s new (Americanized) appearance corresponds to

it too: beardless with a sharp profile, a resolute look in the eyes, and a steely, thin body; and the new female type (explained only minimally by sexology alone): boyish, linear, and ruled by lively movement, by her step, and by her leg. It is altogether fitting to the method of Americanism that it expresses itself very strongly in the corporal, that it possesses body-soul. This in no way implies superficiality, only a clear turn away from abstraction and sentimentality and a transformation of even our noblest capacities into the concreteness and wakeful liveliness best revealed by the body. (Sport is therefore but one symptom of this new inner split.) Concrete and unsentimental, thus in a positive sense naïve—such is the method of Americanism, in the life of the soul and the spirit as in practical affairs. No burden of culture weighs this method down. It is young, barbaric, uncultivated, willful. It has that free and strong breath we sense in the poems of Walt Whitman and which already enchanted Baudelaire. It follows no abstract or historical ideal, but instead follows life. Americanism is fanaticism for life, for its worldliness and its present-day forms.

Americanism thus appears as the strongest opponent of romanticism, which sought to flee worldliness. It is the natural enemy of all distraction from the present, whether through a backward-looking conception of history, through the mystical, or through intellectualism. Americanism is very northern, clear, and secure; it billows with a seawind. It has a strong and exact relation not only to the exactness of a machine, organization, economy but also to nature. It does not experience nature as a symbol of subjective feelings or as a Rousseauian idyll but as the mightiest and most extravagant reality, which people do not face, but in which and with which they live. This new experience of nature reverberates most strongly in the books by Knut Hamsun, as in the Scandinavian character in general—one thinks too of Johannes V. Jensen—he is very close to Americanism (which Robert Müller likewise emphasized). But it is Prussian in its sober technical methods and reaches down into the Latin countries insofar as clarity of form and rationalism are at issue. Nothing, however, is more foreign and bygone to Americanism than the old Russian East, its fatigue and passivity. Americanism hates unfruitful passions, the unplumbable depths of the soul, and a stifling, deadening religiosity. Only in the world of reality does it find a worthy test for humanity.

Marcel Proust's declaration, "Toute action de l'esprit est aisée, s'il n'est pas soumise au réel,"^[1] is easily understood by Americanism (and, incidentally, understood in the sense of the American philosophy of pragmatism). But Paul Valéry's elevation of architecture to an ideal—not in the sense of classical laws of form but by virtue of the experience of building and statics—also contains a recognition, despite the writer's formal strictness and musicality, of reality. Perhaps, though, the proximity of these two Frenchmen to Americanism is controversial. Its literary inroads become clearer in cases of writers who consciously turn away from tradition in their desire to create a new world in a new form out of the radical experience of the immediate present, for example, the epic writers Alfred Döblin and Ilya Ehrenburg. Their novels are carried by the experience of collectivism; they are visions bursting with vitality and monumental legends of the present. Electrical centers explode into action and send their energy waves through the mechanized world. In the most recent Parisian literary fashion, Surrealism, the attempt is made to reduce this new experience of reality—a near total opposite of the old biological-romantic naturalism—to a theoretical formula.

But literature follows Americanism only minimally at first. Its vitality is still too overpowering and uncultivated, so that it is still sensed as nearly antiliterary. Its intellectual potential is still problematic. Perhaps it marks an end or an intermission in the cultural history of Europe; but perhaps as early as tomorrow we will find ourselves confronting a surprisingly new flowering. It would be fruitless to pose and solve puzzles here. On the other hand, it would be wrong to want to recognize the epoch only in the external phenomena of economy and exchange, thereby passing over the new orientations of the spirit. The present clings to reality as the most powerful creative substance, as energy, as mastery of the world.

Now should we complain or rejoice over Americanism? Neither. We sense its vitality and should not measure its manifestations against false standards.

The jazz band, too, is force and sound, magical in the wild brilliance of its rhythm. But why, as we listen to the pounding of its instruments, speak of classical music?

NOTES

[1]¹ “All action of the spirit is easy, if it is not subordinated to the real.”

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