trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



The American Century

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In 1941, the influential publisher Henry Luce declared the century "American." The United States' new role was to redefine the world order, and this mission relied not only upon military power but also upon prestige and culture. To a large extent, this "universal" America was shaped by a historical and geographical construction of the Atlantic.

PUBLISHED	April 15, 2022
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	English
TOPICS	Cultural Diplomacy
SPACES AND PLACES	North America · Caribbean · Europe · North Atlantic · South Atlantic · Africa
PERIODS	The Atlantic Space Within Globalization · The Consolidation of Mass Cultures
KEYWORDS	henry luce, american empire, imperialism, civilizational discourse, hard power, soft power
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/the-american-century/

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The phrase came to history by way of journalism—specifically, from the title of a 1941 article by the owner of the *Time-Life* magazines, Henry Luce. [1] The century he described—the twentieth—was already underway when he named it, yet his article was primarily, but conditionally, predictive: "We are faced with great decisions." The first of these was to declare the century "American."

Journalists like to say that they are in the business of providing the first rough draft of history. Perhaps Luce's chronology was just so: in addition to offering a prediction for the future, it gave a diagnosis of the present and the recent past, a time, as he put it, of "foreboding [when] [t]he future doesn't seem to hold anything for us except conflict, disruption, war." According to today's historical consensus, Luce's diagnosis and his chronology were more or less accurate. The short twentieth century—dated usually from 1914 to 1989—saw the United States become the world's leading power with the world's largest economy. This growth had begun even before the First World War; by the end of the Second, the country had achieved a preponderant share of the world's production and supply. To the extent that American industrial power, investment, finance, and trade eclipsed Europe in dominating so much of the world during this period, it was, perhaps indisputably, an American century.



The *Life Magazine* issue where Henry Luce published his "American Century" editorial (17 February 1941, 61-65)

Source: Archive.org

America's varied missions

A material emphasis, however, does not suffice to justify Luce's definition. What else could the phrase mean? Was the century "American" in that America defined it for the rest of the world, starting with the Atlantic region? Or was it an era for America, according to Americans? Luce's definition suggested both meanings. His century was both an imperial one—featuring a *Pax Americana*—and an apotheosis of American progress, based not only upon the extent of American power but, and arguably more so, upon the achievement and lure of its culture in and beyond the Atlantic, as stated in one of the essay's most quoted passages:

> *"Once we cease to distract ourselves with lifeless arguments about isolationism, we shall be amazed to discover that there is already an immense American internationalism. American jazz, Hollywood movies, American slang, American machines and patented products, are in fact the only things that every community in the world, from Zanzibar to Hamburg, recognizes in common. Blindly, unintentionally, accidentally and really in spite of ourselves, we are already a world power in all the trivial ways—in very human ways."*

It has become fashionable to speak of the latter category of cultural influence as "soft power." This may be a useful definition for demonstrating the limitations of the other sort—"hard," i.e., military power—but it is not enough to understand the import of Luce's idea. Economic power, for example, may fall within both categories. The distinction between hard and soft power is best understood as part of a post-Vietnam War trend in which Americans drew a line between "butter" and "guns." Thus, power and culture in the latter third of the twentieth century came to be viewed as alternative methods or "tools" of foreign policy, whereas during the earlier part of the century (and before), they were understood more synthetically.

The blurring of such distinctions would have been familiar to Luce, a son of missionaries to China. It is not difficult to imagine a relationship between his upbringing and the messianism of his American Century. In fact, American messianism dates to the origins of America in the European consciousness; to the belief in a New World that could redeem the Old; to the transatlantic image of America, and the European colonization of America, as a City Upon a Hill, to quote John Winthrop's sermon as he sailed toward New England in 1630 together with his fellow Puritans.

The messianic and Providential aspects of Americanism became more identifiably political with the American Revolution, and into the nineteenth century as political and cultural movements—each separately called Young America—spread beyond the shores of the Atlantic. These movements coincided with a push of American missionaries overseas, particularly to Asia, or what used to be called the Near and the Far East. There was a flow of Americans to and from various parts of the world—not only missionaries, but also other types of migrants, as well as traders, merchants, investors, expatriates, and just plain voyagers—to such an extent that it is impossible to describe U.S. "isolationism" as having much of an empirical basis.

Yet, a strange denial of America's proper place in the world persisted. Luce describes isolationism briefly in his essay as akin to a willful failure. "In the field of national policy," he wrote,

> *"the fundamental trouble with America has been, and is, that whereas their nation became in the 20^th century the most powerful and the most vital nation in the world, nevertheless Americans were unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically to that fact. Hence they have failed to play their part as a world power—a failure which has had disastrous consequences for themselves and for all mankind. And the cure is this: to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit."*

Denial came from the realization that, because the United States cannot control everything everywhere to its satisfaction, and because exposure to the world's problems and difficulties imposes costs that many Americans are not willing to incur, the country would be better off apart. That was an illusion: "America cannot be responsible for the good behavior of the entire world," Luce added:

> *"But America is responsible, to herself as well as to history, for the world-environment in which she lives. Nothing can so vitally affect America's environment as America's own influence upon it, and therefore if America's environment is unfavorable to the growth of American life, then America has nobody to blame so deeply as she must blame herself."*

History as geography: an American archipelago

The American diplomat, George Kennan (1904-2005), once noted that the above depiction applied only to one type of American isolationist; the other type, which he said described himself, was someone who believed Americans are likely to do more damage than good whenever they try to intervene overseas, so they ought to keep to themselves. It is impossible to know whether Kennan really meant this, for he liked to promote himself as a "realist" with worldly experience. Internationalism, however, did not mean that the American people find themselves present everywhere, beset with responsibilities, costs, as well as benefits, of global power. "Global" is not synonymous with "universal," as many Americans continue to misbelieve.

Why they came to misbelieve that is an interesting question. It was not because Americans are delusional, or any more provincial than other people. Rather, it related to geography. This belief—or, to be more precise, consciousness—dates back to the moment the New World appeared on a map in contradistinction to the Old, following the so-called doctrine of the two spheres. America appeared there surrounded on two sides by vast oceans. The New World was, at least figuratively, a whole world of its own. Even its North American portion—the great continental empire, as some of its settlers came to call it—was at once a continent and an island, as well as part of a hemisphere, detached from all others.

This cartography suggested not only separation but also superiority. Americans—and this may as well apply not just to those in the United States but to the inhabitants of all the Americas—imagined a capacity to perfect their societies in ways that would outshine Europe, but less as former Europeans, even displaced Europeans, than as a new, multiethnic people. They would inhabit a microcosm of a world that would in turn reflect the macrocosm of a universal America, at once separate and omnipresent. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before a belief in omnipresence translated into one of omnipotence.

The idea of an American Century thus had to do as much with geography as with history, as much with space as with time. It was, strictly speaking, more of a transatlantic, than any other, idea, yet one cannot pinpoint exactly when the American Century began and when it came to an end, unlike, say, the Atlantic Century, which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century with the replacement of the doctrine of the two spheres by the idea of a direct American role as a European power, and ended, arguably, with the end of the Cold War in Europe some eight decades later.

The American Century is tougher to date because the microcosm and the macrocosm defy easy description, especially for Americans. In part that is because of the level of their education. Primary and most secondary schools in the United States are not known for their teaching of geography (or of history,

for that matter). What one learns there lies in a strange metaphysical void, as though all of it were true and important everywhere through the ages. Yet at the time Luce wrote his essay, Americans had opened their minds to theories of relativity. One theory could apply here to the existence of their eponymous century defined by the continuous rise and fall of islands across the world—not as a single island-continent facing the world (subsuming, or sealing itself off from it), but instead a community of islands in motion, that is, an American archipelago.

The archipelago came to include military bases on nearly every continent; expatriate communities; fast-food chains; high and low fashion; chambers of commerce; constitutions, laws, and lawyers; university curricula; software design; accounting standards and practices; boy and girl scouts; architecture and engineering styles; sports teams; Hollywood films—all of which adhered nominally but not always literally to political borders. The presence of baseball or basketball as popular sports or hip hop music as a familiar genre in places physically distant from the United States need not require American players, team names, or song lyrics. They still constitute physical as well as virtual islands in the archipelago, as do "ethnic" restaurants and migrant communities in the American "heartland."

Are the patterns of island growth historically significant? In theory, yes, but in practice they are difficult to trace by category. Is a military base a cultural, economic, or political island? Obviously it is all three to one degree or another. Are there more American islands in some places (say, throughout the Atlantic) than others? Probably, depending on one's particular map; but whether the density and extent of island-making over time may itself be plotted on a map of historical causation is probably too complicated for an easy summary. One reason is that the islands—in Asia, Europe, or anywhere else—are themselves often interrelated.

At the start of the twentieth century, a young essayist, Randolph Bourne (1886-1918), described such a "trans-national America" in what became one of the more famous American essays on the subject. This was not the ideal of the melting pot but almost the opposite: a multicultural and multinational kaleidoscope, primarily pan-European in practice but, in theory, global, with each island, however big or small, deep or shallow, being "American" in some fashion. A mid-twentieth century mayor of Boston, James Michael Curley, used to say what made him an American was that he was a Boston Irishman; the same thing may be said for any other American. Self-reinvention is both the essence and the exercise of transnationalism, which is not an exclusively American invention but is probably the one aspect of American culture, politics, and society that best defines the country's allure and success relative to others.

Hence the salience of the "American Century." Salience refers to physical or material power as well as to intellectual and cultural authority, otherwise understood as prestige. For Luce, "that indefinable, unmistakable sign of leadership" was also moral: "faith in the good intentions as well as in the ultimate intelligence and ultimate strength of the whole American people." Prestige grew as much from an appeal "at home" as from allure abroad—from the image and authority of the United States relative to the perceived status of other nations. Prestige is also an island that rises and falls alongside others as it interpenetrates and incorporates them.

Empire and civilization

There is a familiar adjective that equates power with prestige: imperial. Americans were no strangers to empire. Their nation-state originated in revolt against one, and they had proclaimed their own—an "empire for liberty"—since that time. The imperial definition was, like many definitions of empire,

normative. The American "empire" was salutary; the British (and most other European empires) were not. With some empires the sea determined this characterization. It was a good thing—indeed, the fulfillment of a destiny, according to some people—that some powers occupy and populate a continent, and perhaps a hemisphere, in the name of empire; but whenever destiny meant crossing an ocean and enslaving other people—entire cultures, in some cases—it had to be rejected.

The distinction between continental and overseas empires is oversimplified, but in the United States' case, it is necessary for an understanding of the American Century as coexisting with an archipelagic imperialism that abjured the pursuit of empire for its own sake. In Luce's lifetime a quasi-colonial empire—in the Philippines, Cuba, and other places—was proposed and even championed by a vocal minority, yet criticized simultaneously as un-American. One way to elide the dispute was to assert that American imperialism was meant less to impose a civilizing, or any other, mission from one end of the world to the other than to *advertise*—to use a more preferred American term—the appeal of the American way of life and to attract adherents, even allies, by way of its replication or adaptation, for the benefit of all humankind. "America," Luce concluded,

> *"as the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprise, America as the training center of the skillful servants of mankind, America as the Good Samaritan, really believing again that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and America as the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice—out of these elements surely can be fashioned a vision of the 20^th century to which we can and will devote ourselves in joy and gladness and vigor and enthusiasm."*

For many Europeans the terms culture and civilization are distinct, even different; for Americans, less so. It should have surprised few people that an American political scientist, Samuel Huntington (1927-2008), writing some twenty-five years ago—that is, well after the early-to-mid-twentieth century vogue of theorists of civilizational growth and decline, Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) and Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975)—could announce to much popular acclaim an imminent "clash of civilizations." What he mainly described were cultural and ideological conflicts having geopolitical effects within and beyond existing nation-states. Whether Huntington and his adherents sought to erase, or to supersede, important distinctions between *civilisation*, *Kultur*, etc. is less interesting than the fact that those distinctions do not exist to the same degree in American discourse, with Luce's essay being a good example.

This is not to say that Americans do not set and follow cultural standards. This was as true among the nineteenth-century Young Americans as it was among 20^th century thinkers: "civilization" according to Charles and Mary Beard, or to the various authors in Harold Stearns' *Civilization in the United States* (1922), meant, for the most part, high- or middle-brow culture. When the first generation of American nationalists—the writers, composers, painters, etc. during the first third of the nineteenth century—promoted a special American culture and even a national language, they did so with what we would now describe as a civilizational discourse. Nationalism also appeared in genres of popular culture, especially music and, later, film, and sport. It is impossible to imagine American civilization without them.



Henry Luce (left) with his wife, American playwright, legislator and diplomat Clare Boothe Luce (1903-1987), at the time she became United States Ambassador to Italy, America's first woman ambassador to a major country (1953). She had been a successful playwright ('The Women' 1936) before turning to politics in the 1940s

Source: Popperfoto/Getty Images

American nationalism in the form of "exceptionalism" need not rely upon rigid distinctions in the production of culture. Even its "lower" elements—fast food, reality television, rock music, social media, among others—are considered assets to what is, on balance to its promoters, a positive—in the forward or constructive sense of the word—interaction with the world. They are assets because so many people want them, or something like them. They are islands in the archipelago because, after a time, they become so familiar to other cultures that they cease to be nominally American at all.

"A truly American internationalism"

Prestige therefore has a fluid quality. It exists at practically all levels of culture, and extends to politics. Diplomatic culture, for example, saw European powers and European diplomacy reach a peak of prestige in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Americans long had mixed feelings about that. Luce and his fellow proponents of the American Century insisted that Europe's time had passed; Americans must come to recognize the important role they had come to play in the world, starting with, as some would have it, their nation's supplantation of European power.

The end of European empires bore an American fingerprint. American opinion leaders—from the demise of the Spanish Empire after 1898 to the dissolution of the Soviet Empire after 1989—insisted that these polities lay on the "wrong side of history." This verdict included, by Luce's time, the overseas empires of allied nations as well.

It is not ironic that one of the twentieth century's most progressive achievements on the right side of history—European integration—has appeared to some people as little more than a vehicle of American empire or conquest of Europe. The intellectual origins of European integration of course predate and extend beyond any exclusively American contribution, for its best-known founders—Jean Monnet (1888-1979), Robert Schuman (1886-1963), Altiero Spinelli (1907-1986), *et al.*—were European; yet, it cannot be denied that the United States and many Americans, including those at the highest levels of the US government, played important roles in its success. And that such success, insofar as it derived from a transatlantic commitment to remaking and reinforcing a regional security community, cannot be understood in isolation. The American Century was not about Americanizing the world or even Europe so much as it was about recognizing that there was more to American prestige than wealth or culture. There was also, perhaps most of all, the assertion and assumption by Americans like Luce of a special vocation in shaping the world beyond their nation's borders in a novel way.

"The American Century" is not, therefore, an imperial term, at least in the negative or territorial sense. It does not, in other words, translate to a proprietary fact. It is, instead, at least according to its boosters, a more adjustable form of internationalism—as Luce put it, "a truly *American* internationalism" and "something as natural to us in our time as the airplane or the radio"—which favors mutuality, or what Woodrow Wilson called a community, in which altruism and its benefits are presumed, shared, or even taken for granted.

Call this hegemony, an informal empire, an empire by invitation or integration, or something else, such labels underscore the not entirely original conviction of Americans that their power, influence, and "Century" were voluntaristic, different ("exceptional"), and, at least initially, Eurocentric. This does not mean Asia was absent from their mental maps; for many boosters, from William Seward in the middle of the nineteenth century to Douglas MacArthur in the middle of the twentieth, Asia lay at the center of it, as a number of publicists proclaimed (as some still do) that their country's destiny was to be found across the Pacific. Nevertheless, the world that Luce's generation inherited was ruled by European nations and empires. Therefore, the visionaries of an American era or century had issued a declaration to and against the ruling powers of Europe. The contribution of Woodrow Wilson and his contemporaries to this declaration came with their realization that the United States' admission to the European club of great powers could take place by way of a rewriting of the club rules. Wilson called this the "New Diplomacy" and it was not exactly new, but did aim to replace particular "secret" methods with a more legalistic and moralistic approach to international relations, already familiar in the inter-American system and to liberal opinion elsewhere. With its norms, institutions, laws, and language of collective security, interdependence, and self-determination, it caused an important shift in diplomatic culture, and became the dominant approach of the new era.



The Peace conference in pictures. Published by the *Continental Daily Mail* (Paris). Photographs by Victor Console, 1919

Source: Archive.org

Wilson's own attempt at doctrinal substitution at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 proved premature but it brought about the recognition—and the gradual acceptance—that this system, sometimes termed American but more accurately called transatlantic, was the preferred prescription for a civilized future. It reached its apex just after the Second World War. It featured not so much a clear transfer of European to American hegemony as a transatlantic merger following another great European civil war. Most mergers, it is said, are really acquisitions, and there are probably a good many Americans and Europeans, as already noted, who would describe the US role in and toward Europe during the second half of the twentieth century as resembling the latter more than the former. Yet, one also recalls that this process of merger, acquisition, or, again, as most contemporaries preferred to call it, integration, took place during the Cold War when "the West" meant a geopolitical, socioeconomic, ideological, and, plausibly, "civilizational" polity centered on the North Atlantic, and extending, depending on circumstances, as far south as the Horn of Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, as far east as the Zagros mountains, as far north as the North Pole, and as far west as the sea of Japan.

Europe and many other parts of the world, therefore, grew more Westernized, and probably Americanized, as the American people came to accept their nation's status as a world power, then superpower. The West became synonymous with the "Free World" and came to include a number of other countries that lay physically distant from European shores. Yet the intellectual, ideological unity of the West coexisted with the abovementioned archipelago. The prestige of the West was presumably universal and, in principle, timeless; the influence of the archipelago, as we have seen, remained local and temporary.

Conclusion

"Thus in the beginning all the World was *America*," John Locke wrote, referring to the state of nature. That state was imaginary, just as an American world and, therefore, an American century were also modern inventions. The founders of the United States understood something of that idea in stipulating in their Constitution that their new nation was a permanent work in progress: "a more perfect union," never a perfect one, as well as a "promise," according to Luce, "of adequate production for all mankind, the 'more abundant life'—be it noted that this is characteristically an American promise."

That mantra has been repeated often over the course of American history—from Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" (1776) to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address (1863) to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech (1963), among countless lesser-known declarations. It holds the American creed to be, as Luce put it so well, not merely promissory but aspirational. Americanism aspires to universality but America never quite gets there; it aims for an ideal formula of freedom, prosperity, and security, but never really enacts one; it rests upon a perfect standard of justice but continually confronts its own hypocrisy and, occasionally, malice; yet it perseveres and, in principle, improves. It is, in other words, a sociopolitical experiment and, truth be told, a rather successful one, on balance, having so far outlived one or two other such experiments elsewhere in the world. It has been deeply, perennially, self-confident but also, just as perennially, self-critical.

Whether one dates the beginning of the American Century to 1898, 1919, or 1945, it falls short of the epochal. Did the American people squander their century? The easy answer is, yes, in part. Too many Americans confused the means and ends of world power and influence; too often they directed the wrong actions at the wrong audiences for the wrong reasons, the most egregious and infamous example being the armed intervention in Indochina, which remains, with the partial exception of the post-9/11 expeditions that continue today, America's longest war. It is difficult to rate the benefits of this and most other such interventions elsewhere in Asia, Africa, and especially closer to home in Latin America over their cost in lives, treasure, and reputation—like, perhaps, the extent of American, American-backed, or American-influenced destruction of "traditional" societies and natural environments, coupled as they have been with the imperative of progress. Were the gains of so many repeated interventions in countries as varied as Haiti, Iraq, Nicaragua, and Libya worth the price in lost prestige, not least in Europe, where many people had once welcomed not one but two major American military incursions?

VIDEO

View online: https://archive.org/embed/openmind_ep612

> Austrian-born US ambassador to Vienna Henry Grunwald (1922-2005) followed Henry Luce as managing editor of *Time* magazine in 1968. In this 1990 interview, he discusses the conditions of a "second American Century." Richard Heffner. "The Open Mind," 27 October 1990. *Thirteen.*
>
> **Source:** Archive.org

The historian will say it is too soon to reach a full and fair verdict on the American Century. The larger point is that, for all its wealth, power, and influence, the United States has failed to lay the cooperative foundation of the more progressive, free, democratic, prosperous, secure, and generous world that Wilson and Luce had decreed. Or that, having made a good effort at laying it, then quickly lost interest at the precise moment when the foundation began to prove its worth. There have been times, such as recently during the very short "post-Cold War" era from 1990 to about 1998 when such a foundation seemed strong

enough; other times when it certainly looked more delusional; and still others when this negative verdict would pale against the extraordinary contributions of the American people and their collaborators in science, technology, art, music, industry, and nearly every other aspect of contemporary life. Even now, more than two decades into a detectable retreat from hegemony, would-be immigrants continue to dream of a life in the United States. The allure persists, as well as calls for a "New American Century."

Can allure coexist in perpetuity with so much doubt? This is the paradox of an aspirational culture. It is always too soon to tell. Perhaps a better question to ask now is whether the American experiment itself can survive in another, and perhaps someone else's, century. Or whether, so long as Luce's America still lives in the hearts and minds of people around the world, it may be worth imagining a time and a place when it no longer matters that a country or a people attaches its name to a century at all.

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NOTES

1 Henry Luce, "The American Century," *Life*, 17 February 1941, 61-65.