



















## **Introduction**

This two-pronged study consists of complementary yet distinct approaches to one subject, namely, the dominance and decline sustained by the United States of America in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Choosing this topic was not trivial: as discussed in this very dissertation, the United States keeps on being the first power in the world politically and, along with China, economically. People the world over, especially Westerners, from the Second World War onwards have adopted political institutions resembling those of America (liberal democracy), and habits of their mass culture from fast food and blue jeans, to pop music, television sitcoms and Hollywood movies. If the status of the United States as the hegemonic power is receding, even if they are to retain their superpower status in the present, the conditions and factors under which its clout waxed and waned are very important in order to explain our recent past and try to anticipate where we are headed in the future.

The present text will, in the first place, look at mass media, one indispensable element that constitutes the basis for how the United States present themselves to the so-called Western world and to the world at large. This is a topic that will be revisited at the very end of our study. Through mass media, Hollywood movies, television and advertising at first, videocasting websites and social media later, the United States has shown the world how prosperous, mighty and worthy of imitation its material civilization has been, giving away as well a deeply ingrained commercial trend within its own culture. It has shown how rooted in the individual their media proposals are, and, equally, how they can themselves be regarded as commodities or as vehicles for their commodities.

From a different angle, it will then explore what specific causes and historical events led the United States to occupy a position of hegemonic power. It will first trace all the way from the European Early Middle Ages up to almost the present day, so as to explain the innovative strategies by which, first the Republic of Genoa, then the United Provinces of the Netherlands, then the British Empire, and finally the United States, turned into the political hegemon worldwide and gave way in turn to the next power. After that, it will glimpse at the strategies, “free-worldism” in particular, followed by Americans to spread their material civilization in Western Europe and the subsequent effects and

legacy thereof.

The framework used in the process of building up this essay was chiefly historical, sociological and economic, attending to the materials consulted and employed. In order to collect the necessary data, several types of texts—books, essays, articles—on the topics of US media and history were read partially or in full, among the latter the three main sources Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994) and Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire* (2005). Many of the books were read in paperback copy format, though for others, like Postman's or Dawson's, and especially to extract quotes, the website archive.org was useful a resource. The use of books and texts written by academics, especially but not limited to American and English-speaking academics, were preferential in view of the topic and deliberately to present solid and trustworthy references. The chosen writing genre was essayistic, because it allows for a greater freedom in terms of making new input and to navigate through different, even if related, topics.

As for the structure of the text itself, apart from the introduction and conclusions, it is divided into two chapters which are themselves split into subheadings. These chapters address different yet related topics. The first chapter deals with one of the main tools for US hegemony, mass media, its development and how it has affected American culture and their ways of thinking. The second chapter seeks to explain the historical conditions under which the United States climbed to be the world hegemon and how it relates to the development of its business structure, financial growth and expansion through Europe.

In closing, a general assessment on all this content will be provided with the goal of demonstrating that both the rise of the United States and its perceived present decline are intimately tied with one key concept: the self-expansion of the individual.

## 1. A widespread confusion: American mass media and the disappearance of a coherent public discourse

The world of today is a chaos of jostling opinions and aspirations: the so-called “free world” is a fluid chaos; the totalitarian part of the modern world is a rigid chaos.

—Martin Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (1965)

‘Cuz I’m a 21st  
century digital boy  
I don’t know how to  
live but I’ve got a lot  
of toys

—Bad Religion, *21st Century (Digital Boy)* (1990)

In this section of our study, we are going to examine and think thoroughly about a topic that, contrary to general assumption, nowadays is greatly overlooked and taken for granted: how the United States led and spread mass media domestically and abroad, and the consequences thereof. The reason behind this lack of reflection is that, like audiovisual media’s preceding information technologies, writing, print, and radio, audiovisual media have revolutionized the way in which communications are established on a personal and collective level and they have utterly modified the way in which entire parts of our society and economy develop.

### 1.1 Mass culture begets mass media

The type of cultural context television was born in should not be lost track of. By the second third of the twentieth century, both the United States and Europe had lived through arguably the first fully modern and the first mass

armed conflict in history, the First World War. To make a reference to the German author, Ernst Jünger, in *Die totale Mobilmachung* ([Total Mobilization], 1930), the early twentieth century is the era of total mobilization: mass recruitment in national armies, mass politics through universal suffrage, the birth of narrative and commercial cinema, and the age in which Edward Bernays, pioneer of advertisement also tied to psychology, would make propaganda a respectable term renaming it public relations and thereby inventing mass advertisement for public and private purposes. It is out of this cultural humus that television as a medium would grow, redefined in our times by the disruptive arrival of the internet and its news outlets and videocasting websites (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Dailymotion, etc.), which have rendered television a more static and rigid medium, both with its commendable creative capabilities, but also with a huge potential for misinformation and the deliberate spreading of confusion.

The matter does not stop at television, as we say. This technology was the initial thrust of audiovisual media in the home and in the schoolroom, in politics and religious matters, but television's contents were amplified by an exponential degree by the use of computers and derivative electronic devices with an internet connection as a means of audiovisual communications. As Neil Postman proposes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), the contention point of the argument here is that contrary to what was thought of in the past, the computer was and is both irrelevant and much more relevant (28). In the former case, because it cannot get rid of the communicative structures of television and film, and it is in this sense a mere expansion of television, and in the latter, because it took the complaints about television formulated in the 1980s and 1990s to previously unsuspected lengths. These new information technologies, it will be contended, do not only provide users and viewers with countless hours of entertainment of all kinds, going from video blogs to commercials to short

videos of pets or people dancing, but blur the distinction between the public and private spheres of life by giving the user the tools to broadcast his daily life continuously, which has incalculable effects for society and discourse: these contents play an enormous role in the deepening of public confusion by making this type of non-refutable, non-logical narrative structure pervade the mind of viewers and permeate their inner discourse. And while America sets the trend in its national life, then it jumps over to the rest of the world and especially so in the Western area, where American influence is more felt.

## **1.2 Visual media change the rational structure of discourse**

We may start by asking ourselves, what discourse is exactly and how it has been and is still affected by the arrival of television as a device that informs daily and at every moment the way in which millions of people see life. Neil Postman offers a plausible argument for discourse being under siege. In the first place, as per Postman's own definition, public discourse is in its most basic sense "our political, religious, informational and commercial forms of conversation" (28). In his view, television, and quite specifically television advertisements, pose a more serious threat to capitalism as traditionally understood than Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. The reason is that, historically up to that point, claims to sell commodities had rested alone upon rational arguments, like their affordable price or excellent properties. This is explained in relation to television advertisements' audiovisual nature:

By substituting images for claims, the pictorial commercial made emotional appeal, not tests of truth, the basis of consumer decisions. The distance between rationality and advertising is now so wide that it is difficult to remember that there once existed a connection between them. (128)

The case in point is best illustrated by the author through a very familiar example.

A McDonald's commercial, for example, is not a series of testable, logically ordered assertions. It is a drama—a mythology, if you will—of handsome people selling, buying and eating hamburgers, and being driven to near ecstasy by their good fortune. (128)

In other words, when a given person turns on their television set, they will spend an inordinate amount of time looking at narrative structures that radically deviate from traditional written language. In it, arguments of a rational nature were always paramount, if anything because written language could not be supported by visual or auditive stimuli.

It is Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori, in his work *Homo Videns* (1997), who best explains how television has modified the structure of public discourse in America and the Western world at large. He contends that

when public opinion was conveyed mostly through newspapers, the balance between autonomous opinion and heteronomous (hetero-directed) opinion was guaranteed by a free and varied press, which was the representation of many different voices. The arrival of the radio did not alter this balance substantially. The issue arose when television appeared, to the extent that the act of seeing replaced the act of thinking. (75; my translation)

Once again, the point raised here is about the non-discursive nature of television and how it has stifled the ability of viewers, users, readers to assess the contents that they consume logically and critically. It may be argued that this is partially untrue of information technologies based on the

internet, as they allow for, for example, comment sections on audiovisual publications. It seems, nonetheless, clear that these interactive elements are only relevant insofar as they are subservient to audiovisual contents, which, because they are premised on entertaining the viewer, appeal to their emotions.

### **1.3 Anglophone media dominate the evolution of culture**

We should not lose sight, however, of the fact that television, social media, and video uploading websites do not happen in a vacuum. The headstart of Great Britain and the United States in the media is not at all coincidental, as the Industrial Revolution was first ignited in the British Empire and achieved its acme in the United States. From the use of the telegraph or Hollywood, from the BBC or the CBS, the English-speaking world has assumed a leading role in terms of mass media. Suffice it to say that in other early industrialized nations, for instance, public French or German television trace their origins to the 1930s and 1950s respectively, while British and American television were kickstarted in the late 1920s. The United States rose to be a hegemonic power in the 1900s and immediately before that, the British Empire had been the dominating power. This preponderance of the English-speaking sphere over the rest of the world meant that the rest of nations did not only copy some of their business mores and political institutions, but also the ways in which their new information technologies developed.

Emmanuel Martínez details the salience of English-speaking mass media perfectly in our own days:

The big six media groups, based in the United States, are TimeWarner, Walt Disney Co., NewsCorp (having merged with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox not long ago), NBC Universal, Viacom and CBS. These six gigantic

groups—the next three are Vivendi Universal and Bertelsmann, based in the United Kingdom, and Sony, based in Japan—may be controlling around 70% of the media business worldwide, which gives a hint about how powerful they are. [...] In this Anglophone environment, and above all American, we must as well highlight the irruption in the media field of the big technological and internet businesses, specifically the group known as GAFA: Google, Amazon, Facebook—or Meta—and Apple. (Posmodernia.com; my translation)

What these staggering numbers and data teach us is a twofold lesson. On the one side, not only are social media and the world of television, advertisement not disassociated, but it is these new technological businesses that are now producing television and promoting broadcasting sites and rose in part through ads. Still more, far from being a completely outdated medium, it is social media starlets and celebrities who tend to imitate television—and even are featured on it!—and not the other way around: they do interviews, stage dramas, or put on discussions much like conventional television talk shows. On the other side, we may note that one difference is that the costs of production are lower because all the means of input fall on the user rather than on the company.

There has been a double movement, both from the top down and from the bottom up. New technological companies give a platform to video uploaders, who mimic television formats, while catering to increasingly more specific, niche tastes. At the same time, they rid themselves of the investment that conventional television would entail by treating them, the “content creators,” as their partners, who take care of the production values and attract the viewers. Then, just like the *Brady Bunch* (1969-1973) was a television show about family values, made by television producers who would typically work within a company and have a family of their own, current “influencers” and “YouTubers” make videos about themselves and



their individual views and consumer choices supported by a technological company with whom they have a “one-on-one” relationship and directed at their individual-account subscribers or followers. Besides, because social media celebrities and video uploaders are not subjected to the same formal constraints as television hosts, they are free to do and talk about a wider selection of topics, provided their viewers are willing to watch, which also helps in producing audiovisual contents that are more minutely tailored for their viewership.

In this sense, these new information technologies—and we can add podcasts here—are a more perfected television, because they are not dragged down by an illusory duty to be rigorous and professional in the task of informing the audience; instead, they can fully concentrate on the aspects that will be the most entertaining and hence, will attract more people and more revenue for both user and company.

Following Spanish philosopher Gustavo Bueno here, who could well be paraphrasing political thinker Joseph de Maistre: “every people have the television they deserve” (225). What we shall add is that every generation has the means of information they choose and, at risk of sounding gloomy, we may be ditching conventional television only to adopt a kind of television that revolves around petty private matters and colorful visual stimuli.

#### **1.4 American media shape and are shaped by American culture**

We must bear in mind, though, that these two arms of the media (big media conglomerates and big technological companies) do not only coexist and are interpenetrated, but both also partake of the US business environment. This must be stressed here, for two reasons: first, the big media and technological companies shape and are shaped by American culture and, in turn, affect the

rest of the world and, second, if the United States is in decline, we can expect this situation to give way to a new and unexpected one.

We cannot overestimate sufficiently the role as an arbiter of culture of the media in the United States. Regarding the two points of media and culture, we will say with scholar Paul Gottfried—himself quoting Thomas Molnar in *After Liberalism* (1999)—that the nature of the United States is Protestant and, especially, commercial from the start, with its tobacco and cotton plantations in Virginia and with its banks in New York (20). As such, information technologies were destined to serve a purpose to this commercial strain of the United States, as it could be observed about its Protestant origin with the advent of televangelism. Spanish philosopher Alfonso López Quintás makes this observation by reflecting on the work of Marshall McLuhan:

The great theoretician of communications M. McLuhan coined the expression ‘the medium is the message’: you do not say something because it is true; you take it as true because it is said. Television, radio, printed word, and diverse types of spectacles possess an enormous clout to those who see them as a reality that is imposed on them from a place inaccessible to them. The one who knows what happens behind the scenes has some power of discernment. But the big audience is kept out of the centers that broadcast these messages and is seduced by the power that implies the possibility to reach the furthest places and gain entry to the homes of people and whisper into the ears of a crowd, without raising the tone, suggestively. (21; my translation)

What this statement lacks is the turn of the screw that social media and video uploading websites have meant—e.g. Pew Research Center registers a dramatic surge in the number of internet users worldwide (Greenwood). In

our recent past, the big audience alluded to by our author was merely passive, consuming the commercial and television programs presented to them by the television screen. While this passive role has not completely disappeared, the motto of one of the pioneering and most popular videocasting websites, YouTube's "Broadcast Yourself," has become a reality not only for pure entertainment, but for every aspect of life imaginable, amongst which the commercial is of course included. With the abilities afforded by cheap cellphone cameras and an internet connection, anyone and everyone who is ingenuous and enterprising enough to attract a large following can promote the qualities of a given product both at a fraction of the cost that a company would have spent on a conventional ad, and in an informal enough setting that will appear less invasive and tedious than it would have on television or radio.

This is truly revolutionary from the standpoint that it breaks the traditional business hierarchy that had been customary up until the late twentieth century. As will be seen in the following chapter, family-based, decentralized, flexible businesses had been the norm from the fifteenth century up to the 1850s, at which point the introduction of corporate capitalism in the United States and Germany gradually replaced the family business as a dominant economic structure, with its top-down big business and state hierarchies.

Back to our main point, what we argue is that, in the same way that the Hays Code of the mid-twentieth century (1934 to 1968) was both reflective of and enforcing a morality of that era—which may seem stringent or naive to contemporary viewers—today's audiovisual contents in social media and video uploading websites are not only an expression of the current state of society but invent, or at the very least, reinforce a new social disposition. In the very same way that the New Deal and the Cold War (of which the Hays Code was a manifestation) were times of economic regulation and strong

presence of the State (in this case, the Federal Government in the United States) in public matters, in our times, where the State has not disappeared, but shares a space with these big businesses and technological companies, we are witness to an advancement, or a “deregulation,” if you will, of social customs in favor of these enterprises. To put it in perspective, we shall only add that recent economic news about the area of Silicon Valley, the leading technological complex worldwide, register that it is worth around 840 billion dollars as of 2017 (Pulkkinen), which is more than the total gross domestic product of several national economies, such as that of Switzerland or Saudi Arabia.

In relation to how media affect and reflect the state of society, McLuhan uses the dichotomy of “hot and cold media” insightfully. Proposing this classification, he shows the ways in which media have impacted the reception of public discourse:

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in “high definition.” High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, “high definition.” A cartoon is “low definition,” simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone. (24)

What is yet more interesting, he continues by providing us with examples of cultural items and their communicational attachments that help us anticipate the cultural forms that lie ahead of us:

In terms of the theme of media hot and cold, backward countries are cool, and we are hot. The “city slicker” is hot, and the rustic is cool. But in terms of the reversal of procedures and values in the electric age, the past mechanical time was hot, and we of the TV age are cool. The waltz was a hot, fast mechanical dance suited to the industrial time in its moods of pomp and circumstance. In contrast, the Twist is a cool, involved and chatty form of improvised gesture. The jazz of the period of the hot new media of movie and radio was hot jazz. Yet jazz of itself tends to be a casual dialogue form of dance quite lacking in the repetitive and mechanical forms of the waltz. Cool jazz came in quite naturally after the first impact of radio and movie had been absorbed. (29)

How then shall we assess vlogs, YouTube interviews, amateur documentaries, walking videos, podcasts, and other such new forms of media? Certainly, they are, by this description, “cooler” in terms of interactivity, at least superficially, but also tend to be “cooler” in definition, in the sense that is given here, because more often than not they do not offer much in the way of information and when they do, it is not infrequent that they do not go into a lot of detail or make an effort to give a coherent whole, because the medium does not lend itself to great displays of discursive and logical argument. On the contrary, they are “hotter” in that they are more dynamic and less constrained by time and subject than television was. Yet again, “the medium is the message,” and what these new media say is that the individual, a one-person user account on these platforms, generally, can earn units of social validation (likes, reposts, what have you) and be

rewarded economically, if a sufficient number of users visit or interact with their publications.

Consequently, the act of channel surfing on television has been replaced by tapping and sliding on smartphones and tablets or clicking on PC mice. These are arguably, much smoother and “cooler.” And of course, there is the outcome that because the monopoly of television and radio in broadcasting has been broken, now non-professionals, or at least people using non-professionalized channels, have entered the competition for viewers. In other words, the realm of economic competition for audiovisual entertainment and programming has been displaced from the company to the individual level. Yes, the social media user is dependent, in a way vassalized, on the big technological company that hosts their account and takes a share of their revenue, but other than that he is an entrepreneur working for himself and broadcasting the contents he wants or deems will render him the most views.

### **1.5 The turn towards individualism prompted by mass media**

The heart of the argument here, and what ties in with United States culture and its status as a hegemonic power in the world, is that there has been a double movement. On the one hand, the United States set the basis for big business, a brand of company, the multinational enterprise, that distanced itself both from the family business donned by the British Empire at its peak and from the Imperial German big company with ties to the German State. On the other hand, by associating themselves with these multinational enterprises, and especially new technological companies like GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon), the individual person has gained the possibility to disentangle himself from the constraints of time and space, community, and roots of sorts, placed on him by the traditional business.

Because the United States is founded, as, once again, Paul Gottfried informs us (141), on individual liberties, this type of American business has no precedent, in that it takes the individual worker and abstracts him from community and organic ties, which are adversarial to his self-expansion. This is especially true of big technological companies and social media that both complement and succeed television. Whereas television programs could, and often were enjoyed by the family or a group of people, the audiovisual programs on social media and video uploading websites are often viewed in isolation and cater to the individual and are indeed recorded on behalf of an individual person or a small group of them.

But we are compelled to come to Neil Postman again and ask about these new media:

What is information? Or more precisely, what are information? What are its various forms? What conceptions of intelligence, wisdom and learning does each form insist upon? What conceptions does each form neglect or mock? What are the main psychic effects of each form? What is the relation between information and reason? What is the kind of information that best facilitates thinking? Is there a moral bias to each information form? What does it mean to say that there is too much information? How would one know? What redefinitions of important cultural meanings do new sources, speeds, contexts and forms of information require? Does television, for example, give a new meaning to “piety,” to “patriotism,” to “privacy”? Does television give a new meaning to “judgment” or to “understanding”? How do different forms of information persuade? Is a newspaper’s “public” different from television’s “public”? How do different information forms dictate the type of content that is expressed? (118)

What do these new media indeed mean for “information,” for “wisdom,” for

“patriotism,” for “privacy”? Because they are equally consumed on the street (even at risk of personal safety, looking at your smartphone screen while on the crosswalk) and under the homestead’s roof, these barriers, at least as mental spheres, have been undermined. Since there is, much more now than when *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was written, an instant access to any kind of piece of information, one is under the impression that one is informed and, paying attention to Gillo Dorfles in *Fatti e fattoidi* (2009), that there is a growing difficulty to tell facts from “factoids” – or, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, invented facts believed to be true because they appear in print – (15-18). As for patriotism, because people are constantly exposed to flows of information from any point of the globe, disjointed pieces of information at that, it has become harder to have a meaningful conversation, even with your neighbor or people nearby; everyone minds their own parcels of knowledge and their taste niches.

All this confusion has a demoralizing aspect as well. When people are constantly submitted to the exposure of these audiovisual stimuli, bright colors on screens and strident rhythms from loudspeakers, constant urgings and psychological conditioning to acquire new products, their world becomes more incongruent, agitated and unintelligible, which can be a factor behind anomie and depression.

The tendency is to think, then, this self-expansion of the individual was prompted by the US business and by the foundational precepts of the United States as a nation. These were brought to their zenith when the United States became the sole hegemonic power at the end of the Cold War and are at the root of the confusion amongst which we live being at least partly guilty, paradoxically, for its decline.



## **2. The ascendancy and decadence of the United States of America as a hegemonic power: Europe, finances, and big business**

The political philosopher Leo Strauss and his numerous epigones insist that America was founded as a Lockean nation; thereafter it has stood unchangingly for individual rights to life and property. Strauss's student Thomas Pangle further maintains that the American character was permanently shaped by the country's founding ideas, which were materialistic, utilitarian, and individualistic. The European Catholic traditionalist and exuberant critic of American life Thomas Molnar also speaks of an immutable American character. Molnar argues that the United States was founded as a Protestant commercial republic, and all of its subsequent political and moral problems are traceable to that circumstance.

—Paul Gottfried, *After Liberalism* (1999)

Faith in machinery is, I said, our besetting danger; often in machinery most absurdly disproportioned to the end which this machinery, if it is to do any good at all, is to serve; but always in machinery, as if it had a value in and for itself. What is freedom but machinery? what is population but machinery? what is coal but machinery? what are railroads but machinery? what is wealth but machinery? what are, even, religious organisations but machinery? Now almost every voice in England is accustomed to speak of these things as if they were precious ends in themselves, and therefore had some of the characters of perfection indisputably joined to them.

—Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)

A great number of first-rate thinkers and analysts have reflected deeply on the relationship sustained between Europe and the Americas and what has made it particular, especially since the end of the First World War, when the United States of America was already establishing itself as a great superpower in its own right. In his work *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715* ([*The Crisis of the European Mind, 1680-1715*], 1935), French historian of ideas Paul Hazard advanced the argument that when Europeans discovered a new mankind in their travels westwards, they were affected in their understanding of humanity so profoundly that the medieval tradition of political theory gave way to those of social contract present in Rousseau and Locke. Others, such as Sinologist Amaury de Riencourt in *The Coming Caesars* (1957), who famously drew a historical comparison going back to Classical Antiquity, contended that the United States had a relationship with Europe resembling that of the Roman Empire to Ancient Greece, where the former took cultural and historical cues and lessons from the latter, but followed its own, separate way. Yet for others, like English historian Christopher Dawson, in his work *Understanding Europe* (1952), the relationship between Europe and the Americas is one where North American power and prestige grew at the expense of Europe:

Of all the achievements of the European expansion overseas, the creation of the United States is undoubtedly the greatest. The more the importance of Europe as the centre of world power and economic organization has declined, the more that of the United States has increased, until to-day the existence of Western Europe is becoming increasingly dependent on the economic and military power of the United States. (128)

Reviewing all this, we are compelled to observe the United States in two

lights. On the one hand, as an imperial endeavor, and on the other, as an outgrowth of European civilization. It is true that the United States became distinct from Europe and confronted it to some degree, to the point of even revealing its own internal tensions. As Christopher Dawson has pointed out (128-135), the Puritan New Englanders, as inheritors of Dutch Calvinists and the Cromwellian spirit, were more opposed to consorting with European politics and the landed aristocracy, while the generally agriculture-based population of the South, like, for instance, Presidents Washington and Jefferson, were more closely bound to Europeans through religion and social mores.

The imperial vocation of the United States is very apparent. We could bring to the fore several examples proving so. Some are as conspicuous as the adoption of the bald eagle as the national symbol, which perhaps echoes the eagle carried by the Roman legions, or the assertion by President James Monroe that the United States must be the dominating power in the Western hemisphere. On the contrary, for the case of politics revolving exclusively around domestic affairs, we can also find abundant evidence of a centripetal, deeply national-centered tendency in American politics throughout US history: going all the way back to Thomas Jefferson, who wanted to turn Hengist and Horsa, the legendary Saxon chieftains who first settled Britain, into the seal of the United States, and reaching as far as to the 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, which heavily punished commercial imports priming American products in its stead.

The point we want to raise is that the United States has developed in contradistinction to other empires, if we can call America an empire. As a country birthed by European, in particular, British culture, as well as Scottish and French Enlightenment political propositions—being geographically exoteric from the continent—the United States of America is quite distinct in its way of expanding itself from classical European powers.

## 2.1 The European roots of American economic power

We follow here Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire* (2005) and Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994), who cleverly point to the different ways in which Western Europe was of paramount importance in the ascendancy of the United States to leading world power. For the former author, this is because US business could make use of Western European economies as a catalyst for its enterprises worldwide and for the latter, it is because it took a lesson from preceding capitalist superpowers, namely, the Dutch United Provinces and the British Empire, in devising its world strategy.

To understand the economic roots of US imperialism, let us explain this second argumentation in some detail. Giovanni Arrighi uses an extremely wide variety of sources, ranging from historians Garrett Mattingly or Frederic Lane, sociologists such as Max Weber or renowned economists like Karl Polanyi or Joseph Schumpeter. His vision of the course of historical events is based on the systemic cycles of capital accumulation theory from historian Fernand Braudel, which add a twist to the alternating phases of material and financial expansion formulated by Karl Marx. Even the title of his work is taken ultimately from Braudel's concept of the "long sixteenth century" of Spanish dominion.

The basic outline of the succession of empires described by Arrighi takes us to the Italian Peninsula in the first place. Out of the conflagration and decay of the Late Roman Empire first, and the "barbarian" Germanic kingdoms which followed it, later, several split political entities came into being in the north of Italy. In their bid for control over one another and political clout and influence in Europe, the oligarchic elites of these polities, constituted as

republics, developed different strategies to dominate trade, involving sophisticated specializations both at odds and complementary. The most relevant and potent of these republics in terms of trade, Genoa and Venice, struggled in several ways for the control of the Eastern Mediterranean and the lucrative commerce from the Silk Road. This conflict was caused by the Genoese being driven out of North Africa and their usual commerce routes and by internal dissensions between their urban trading elite and their rural aristocratic-minded landowners: they crippled their military power and expelled them from being a significant player in the European trading scene with the War of Chioggia, which ended in the Peace of Turin of 1381 with the Republic of Venice as the presumed victor.

This is the real starting point of his elaboration. The Republic of Venice and the Republic of Genoa are, for Arrighi, a sort of antitypes (the likes of Athens and Sparta in Classical Antiquity) in his conception of the evolution of capitalism and how it was used as a strategy by states for political power (92, 110-115). Whereas Genoa had to resort to a cosmopolitan kind of commercial and financial activity for its urban elite to stay afloat, due to its military inferiority, Venice's commercial and military enterprises were so interconnected that it developed as a sort of monopolistic emporium. The Republic of Venice was devoted to, in Arrighi's terms, "state-making," in an initial phase of material expansion, over "economy-making" in a later phase of material contraction and financial development. This is what made it lag behind Genoa as an economic power. When at the end of the fourteenth century it was displaced from Mediterranean trade, the Republic of Genoa sought fortune setting up shop and dominating the so-called "Bisenzone" trade fairs in Europe, in the first place, and later, being the financiers of Imperial Spain. In short, Genoa internalized useful strategies from previous ones and discarded others that hindered their objective.

## 2.2 The rise and fall of the American informal empire

What Arrighi proposes is that this series of dichotomies (territorial and financial power; space-of-flows and space-of-places; capitalistic-industrial and capitalistic-financial power; state-making and war-making versus economy-making; States and quasi-States; etc.) applies to every new economic, or capitalist, hegemonic power following. When Genoan elites, who had made their fortune in the shadow of the Spanish Empire, withdrew from financial activities, their Dutch successors promoted the Westphalian nation-state and nationalism as a tool to harness power (130, 135-142). In turn, having learned from the Dutch to assume protection costs of trade routes through chartered companies, like the Dutch East India Company, the British took an imperial form of state, this seemingly inspired by Spanish imperial institutions, to maximize benefit by controlling production costs of commodities directly in their colonies and domestically (163-179). In this way, the United States, having learned to internalize protection and production costs, retrieved the nationalistic strategy of the Dutch United Provinces to excite nationalism in European colonial territories and make new inroads for the use of their currency, the American dollar, in international trade, hence achieving the innovation of internalizing transaction costs as well, but needs be disregarding a formal empire political structure which would not be congruent with American history (277-308).

While this line of argument is perfectly consistent and plausible, Arrighi's conception is not without some fault lines and issues. He anticipates a decadence of American economic hegemony, in his view having already peaked and started to decline in the 1980s and 1990s, the same way that British hegemony peaked and started to decline in the so-called Belle Époque (1871-1914). This decadence would cause in turn the "East Asian archipelago" (South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong) to gain more economic relevance progressively and render world economy more

anarchic. The main motive would be that these tiny states—or quasi-states, in Robert Jackson's definition (79)—both would lack the means to protect their economies wholly by themselves and lie outside the western world, which makes matters more unpredictable in cultural terms. Still, Arrighi provided three different outcomes for the future among which number a scenario where the United States establishes a global economic empire and stops decay, perhaps an echo of Francis Fukuyama's famous thesis in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) that we had had arrived at the end of history. However, he failed to foresee an ascent of the so-called BRICS countries' economies, and especially, China.

### **2.3 US strategies: Big business and the figure of the manager**

Notwithstanding this, Arrighi provides us, in few lines, with a very descriptive account of how in particular the United States had become the leading power in the world at the outset of the twentieth century's interwar period, to the detriment of the British Empire:

What the First World War demonstrated was above all that British capital needed a territorial empire more than ever, and yet it could no longer afford it. US capital, in contrast, did not need such an empire to emerge victorious from the escalating competitive struggle. Between 1803 and 1853, purchases and conquests had more than doubled the territory of the United States, which became continental in scope. Shortly afterward, the civil war (1860-1865) settled the dispute between the Southern states—which favored the continuation of territorial expansion in the Caribbean and a closer integration of the United States within Britain's world market system—and the Northern states—which favored a reorientation of US strategic concerns from outward territorial expansion to the integration of the acquired territories into a cohesive national economy. (300)

Moreover, after deciding their internal disputes and taking course toward domestic economic development, the United States did not keep idle during the Roaring Twenties, and came to achieve financial preponderance:

Throughout the 1920s productivity continued to grow faster in the United States than in any of the debtor countries, further increasing the competitive edge of US business and the difficulties of debtor countries to service, let alone repay, their debts. And as the dependence of the world's payment system on the US dollar increased, the United States acquired foreign assets "with a rapidity ... which ... is unparalleled in the experience of any major creditor nation in modern times" (Dobb 1963: 332). (282)

How did Americans take advantage of this newfound financial strength, though? For one, realizing that the vast expanses of territory which they had only recently acquired to the west correspondingly needed an all the same vast economic development. This may be the underlying cause for the invention of a new, revolutionary economic enterprise: the multinational company. Business historian Alfred D. Chandler's elaboration of 1977 is a poignant telling of its origins, as Arrighi is careful to remind us:

In Chandler's view, the development of managerial hierarchies marked the culmination of an "organizational revolution" that had begun in the 1850s, with the railroads, and, by the 1910s, had transformed out of all recognition the methods by which capitalist enterprises were managed and administered and the ways in which economic activities were structured. As a consequence of this organizational revolution, "[a] businessman of today would find himself at home in the world of 1910, but the business world of 1840 would be a strange, archaic and arcane place. So, too, the American



businessman of 1840 would find the environment of fifteenth-century Italy more familiar than that of his own country seventy years later.”  
(250)

When reading Chandler remark on this “development of managerial hierarchies” we cannot help but recall an earlier work, James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), where the scholar expounds on this subject. Some of his predictions in the book, as in the case of Arrighi, never came to fruition. Nevertheless, his account on the new type of man called to lead this new type of enterprise, whether big multinational companies or big government organizations ruled through bureaucracy, continues to give us cues toward the understanding of what management is. At first, the author tells us, the ideal Smithian (as in, Adam Smith) manager was the owner of a factory, mine or any other type of company. However, he continues, when technological advances and the growth of corporations made small, family-based businesses more irrelevant, due to them not being competitive enough, the figure of managerial staff as mediators between the owners and employees appeared on the scene. An illustrative, if restricted, example, involving the particular organizational structure of a car factory is offered:

I. Certain individuals—the operating executives, production managers, plant superintendents, and their associates—have charge of the actual technical process of producing. It is their job to organize the materials, tools, machines, plant facilities, equipment, and labour in such a way as to turn out the automobiles. These are the individuals whom I call the managers. (Burnham 78)

Burnham, then, goes on to classify the various types of people who have a stake in companies, breaking them into “managers,” “finance-executives,” “finance-capitalists,” and “stockholders.” For our purpose, nonetheless, let us say that this human type of “managers,” both at the administrative

forefront of big companies, but at the same time preoccupied with their individual professional careers is the one that has prevailed culturally.

#### **2.4 The impact of the manager: Corporate capitalism outside America**

As we were pointing out in the preceding chapter, the very founding of the United States is predicated on the notion of individual self-expansion, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” and this kind of professional, the “manager,” best embodies the qualities and ideals encapsulated in that dictum. Whether in Coca-Cola or Ford Motor Company, the US Postal Service or the IRS, the manager is not tied to a particular place, perhaps even a country, and is only loyal to their employer insofar as it is beneficial for their professional career. This situation is certainly contrasted by what would have been the most advanced European alternatives, the “British” and “German” versions of big business, where in the “nation of shopkeepers” the business was tightly bound with the family unit, and in the Central European powerhouse emblematic big companies such as Thyssen, Krupp worked closely with the State. In present times, the figure of the manager has only grown more detached and, in Zygmunt Bauman’s terms, more “liquid,” evolving into the freelance worker or more recently, with the advent of the technological age, into the “digital nomad,” in a sense regressing to pre-industrial times, when certain artisans and liberal professionals sought work where it was found, though mostly unbound from any meaningful means of collective identification, whether community, nationality, language, economic class or profession, etc.

One transitional figure, exemplary of this position of the “manager,” which we can conjure up to illustrate the point, is that of Samuel Insull. This English businessman naturalized American was fascinating in several ways. He was personal assistant to Thomas Alva Edison, but more importantly, he went on to devise the holding company on the basis of what he had learned from Edison about mass production of electric power, but also of what he

had seen on a trip back to England, that to make electricity profitable, he had to charge by use, rather than by lightbulb, as had been customary in the United States until he made this realization. As Daniel Yergin observes in *The Quest*,

[w]hen Insull took over Chicago Edison in 1882, there were just 5000 customers in the entire city, and they paid by the number of electric bulbs. The optimistic view at that time was “as many as 25000 Chicagoans might ultimately use electricity.” But by the 1920s, 95 percent of the homes in Chicago were wired for electricity. And they paid by usage. This was the prototype of Insull's vision for the world: “Every home, every factory and every transportation line will obtain its energy from one common source, for the simple reason that that will be the cheapest way to produce and distribute it.” By the boom years of the 1920s, Insull himself had become not only one of the most famous businessmen in the world but also an icon of capitalism. [...] At the peak, in 1929, Insull's empire of holding and operating companies, valued in the billions, controlled power companies in 32 states; and he held 65 chairmanships, 85 directorships, and 11 presidencies. (357)

This is why Insull could arguably be regarded as a pioneering figure in what was to come in economic terms for the rest of the twentieth century. Not only was he European-born; he took what he had learned about the application of technology in his home country of Britain, in conjunction with the savviness he had acquired with Edison – and his competitor in the “War of the currents,” Westinghouse –, to propel the nascent, intricate and enormous corporate structure of American companies.

However, because the United States had emerged as the true victor of the Second World War and established its own international institutions (the

United Nations) and its own economic order (the Bretton Woods system), the American-style multinational company, and this figure of the “manager” would not be confined to the United States. Even though post-war Europe had been devastated and split up in two halves with the US wartime ally, the USSR, Western European countries this side of the so-called Iron Curtain still were the most culturally compatible and economically developed for American business to extend their operations.

## **2.5 The US market empire and the replacement of European social and consumption models**

Much like Arrighi, Victoria de Grazia’s *Irresistible Empire* offers us a picture rife with oppositions that pit the material culture of the United States against that of Europe across the twentieth century. Characterizing the United States as the “Market Empire,” she starts by showcasing the example of Rotary International. Like with Samuel Insull’s empire, we can trace its origins to early 1900s Chicago, but more importantly this service club would begin its global expansion by jumping over the ocean to Western Europe. A small anecdote of physical proximity is possibly in order and that is that when one visits the historical center of Palencia, right at the entrance of the prominent Hotel Castilla Vieja, one can see a plaque informing the visitor that this is the place of meeting for the local chapter of Rotary International. In similar fashion, de Grazia tells us of the enthusiasm the Western European bourgeoisie, in particular she explores that of Dresden, felt for this new type of gentlemen’s club which, although exogenous, they interpreted as a vehicle for sharing their bourgeois values across the continent (41-42). As a side note, it is interesting to point out that the author

tells us that, in spite of the Chicagoan headquarters opposing this trend, Rotarians in Europe reflected the characteristics of each country.

What is most important to take into account here, nonetheless, is that Rotary International was a milestone in the loss of initiative of “European commercial civilization,” as De Grazia contends (49-56). While Europe was being ravaged by two great European wars, Americans were undergoing a great economic development and they translated the Fordist and Taylorist mode of production into the social realm with Rotarian clubs, hence, propagating their model of “mass sociability” first to the old metropolis, then to the rest of the world where they could.

This was only a first step of in the revolution that the United States brought on Western Europe. The chain store, most prominently, Woolworth’s, and five-and-dime stores were a first contender to traditional inner-city shops. Then, after the Second World War, the revolution of the refrigerator and the automobile (Frigidaire and General Motors) meant that commodities could be kept for longer and people and commodities could travel longer distances in bigger quantities, which saw the rise of the supermarket, the hypermarket, and so on, and the ultimate transition of Western Europe from European “commerce” to American (mass) “distribution.” In this matter, American corporations like the International Basic Economy Corporation or the National Cash Register were involved in setting up some the first experiences of European self-service establishments or supermarkets, like Supermarkets Italiani (today’s Esselunga), which, in de Grazia’s view, helped erode European class-based stratification and expand American “populist capitalism,” by making, for instance, fur-coated upper-class women shop beside more modest middle-class customers.

The mentioning of women is not trivial, either, because, as noted by de Grazia, this American liberalism-come to Europe has a female countenance:

By the 1920s it was a cliché that women were the “purchasing agents” for their families, and that 85 percent of all consumer spending was done by women. Accordingly, the stretch to reach women and formalize the language by which they might be engaged revolutionized the medium and vocabulary of commodity exchange. “The proper study of mankind is Man,” according to Printer's Ink, “but the proper study of markets is Woman.” (267)

This new “Mrs. Consumer,” as addressed by the author, could have not at all been possible, to tie in with the beginning of this study, without mass media and advertising. To allocate resources massively, the spreading of the automobile and new attitudes of buyers were necessary, but to persuade these buyers to turn into “consumers,” word apparently largely absent from use in most European languages until the late twentieth century, Hollywood stars and the material world surrounding them had to become household names in Europe, and pioneering advertising agencies like J. Walter Thompson had to dispel the artistic pretensions of European adverts (posters, like those designed, for instance, by Alphonse Mucha or Toulouse-Lautrec) and convince the European masses of the benefits of mass produced commodities through concise, scientific-sounding, messages in print, radio, and later, television.

When the author arrives at a more current date, she notes how this mass consumer culture has been so successful outside America, that no longer are American supermarket chains those taking the initiative, the French Carrefour being the one expanding worldwide and overshadowing the biggest American counterpart, Walmart, not to say anything about Chinese equivalents catching up. Hence, we have come to a point where this mass consumer culture prompted by the “Market Empire” has been internalized by other powers who no longer regard it as exogenous and have

substantially displaced the United States.

## **2.6 The outcome of mass consumption: The self-expansion of the individual**

All this taken into account, we have to ask the question. How can we gauge the legacy of this hegemony and decline of the United States? The “manager,” “Mrs. Consumer” (or the consumer-citizen), the “digital nomad,” but also the “YouTuber,” or the viewer of YouTube videos, all have one thing in common: the notion that the individual is entitled to an (at least theoretically and so long as it is economically viable) unlimited self-expansion, defined by tastes and consumer choices, lifestyles aided by the marketplace and electronic appliances. Surely, material progress has had doubtless positive side effects, like the decrease in risk and load at the workplace, but other, no less worrying problems haunt us like anomie and disarray, loss of the sense of belonging, depression and loss of a sense of objective in life, especially when people have been and are overcome by the vertiginous technological advances experienced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

## **Conclusions**

Find a job, find a  
friend  
Find a home, find a  
dog  
Settle down, out of  
town  
Find a dream, shut it  
down.

—The Strokes, *One Way  
Trigger* (2013)

In the course of writing this study, so as to abide by the set word-limit more or less, several interesting topics were unavoidably left out. We could cite some present in the various works which were consulted: the Ciompi Revolt (1378-1382) led by Michele di Lando in Florence, which could find an analogy in American history in the Haymarket affair (1886); the setting up of the institution of Casa di San Giorgio (1407) in Genoa, which, by its structure and objective, can be considered an ancestor to the Federal Reserve (1913) of the United States; the Ford-ILO Inquiry (1929-1931) which sought rudimentarily to discover the standard of living of workers in various countries, followed some twenty years later by a more detailed and adjusted inquiry by the American Bureau of Labor Statistics; Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "one-worldism" as opposed to Harry S. Truman's "free-worldism;" Roosevelt's "New Deal" as opposed to Truman's "Fair Deal;" Charles Gide's European cooperativism as an alternative to American big business and others.

Nevertheless, the chief aim of this writing was narrowed down to cover two pressing issues: in reverse order, one was to make a coherent and, at the same time, concise narrative of how the United States became the hegemonic power in our preceding century and why it seems to be relinquishing that position presently; the other was to explain how and why the mass media played and still play a fundamental part in the ascent and, paradoxically, the decline of the North American behemoth. What we found during the task of drafting and structuring of this text was that the main contribution and discovery of the United States was the application of mass production to most other aspects in life. While this redounded in a plentiful society where a wide majority of people have access to affordable commodities in terms of the economy, it also resulted in a human type that is sociable rather than solidaristic, self-involved rather than community-centered, and more inclined to relate to others through the means of mass



communications, namely, the internet. This ultimately, may be a very important factor among others for the demise of the United States as first world power, but since this mass consumer culture has spilled over the world, and especially Europe for cultural compatibility and provenance of Americans, we have seen this pattern replicated in other countries.

In the end, as well, if we are to assume that, the United States of America having risen to power through mass production and the economy, other countries are projected to become economically stronger in the following decades (e.g. China), what can we expect from the use of mass production disassociated from the cultural milieu—in Joseph Henrich’s terms “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic)—that gave it birth? And if mass production, consumption and, above all, mass media grew so intimately linked to so-called Western culture parameters, how will possible non-Westerners wield this tremendous asset? Will they, in the long run, encourage or undermine the use of internet and social media among their own citizens? Or, if they consider it harmful, will they encourage them abroad but not within their own borders?

In the hands of polities which (and that is possible of near-future United States and Western European countries as well) are not scrupulous to coerce citizens for not kowtowing to political power, mass production, mass communications, and the internet are formidable punitive tools that can frame dissenting individuals as outlaws and even meddle with their access to their own resources. In consequence, if they cannot be restrained, alleging an impediment to individual liberties, they should at least be regarded with the utmost seriousness, in order to minimize its potential harmful effects (e.g. atomization) and amplify its positive effects (e.g. make information readily available to users).

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