Book Reviews

Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America

Jean-Philippe Mathy
University of Chicago Press, 1993. [307 pages]

Students who go abroad learn as much about themselves as about the host country. A perceived tendency to focus on the independent self while ignoring or misunderstanding the host culture was the subject of a recent critique of study abroad (Ben Feinberg, "What Students Don't Learn Abroad" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 3, 2002.) According to Professor Feinberg, the foreign setting is, too often, merely a backdrop for an individualistic, triumphalist, autobiographical episode. One may consider Feinberg's view jaundiced and exaggerated. We hope that each of our students comes to a truer and sharper sense of self while also observing, absorbing and participating in the host culture. Nevertheless, we know that a foreign culture is a mirror in which the self is reflected, and displacement from the home culture can lead to reflection on home, its meaning and its peculiarities, as never before.

What is true of student travelers is true of any sojourner, and of anyone who comes in contact with a foreign culture. Jean-Philippe Mathy's *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* shows how the educated elite of France has used another country as a screen on which to project its ideas and ideals, as well as its phobias and prejudices. Although first published 10 years ago, this study is newly relevant. It is useful to be reminded of the long-standing background against which American actions are viewed by the French. More than an actual nation or national culture, "America" carries the weight of its meaning. America is idealized as an "incarnated idea" of freedom, prosperity, egalitarianism and pleasure, and it is vilified to the extent that it does not fulfill its own ideals or those projected on it.

Among the sojourners whose views are examined in this work in some detail are Alexis de Tocqueville, René de Chateaubriand, Georges

Duhamel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Butor, Saint-John Perse, Paul Claudel, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Alexandre Kojève and (stretching "French" to include "European") Umberto Eco. What aspects of American culture spark the interest of French intellectuals, and what does their interest reveal about France and its educated class?

According to Mathy, America is seen as "an incarnated idea, endowed with mythical status as the repository of the hopes, desires, fantasies and phobias of millions of freedom-loving, money-grubbing or pleasure-seeking individuals around the globe" (p. 47). At the same time, it is condemned as prosaic, pragmatic and boring: "American political principles, frozen as they are in the bourgeois optimism of the late eighteenth century, are totally lacking in the sublime and romantic elements that used to appeal to large parts of the progressive clerisy: the American past is as boring as its technological mass-marketed present" (p. 47).

For a number of thinkers, from the 1920s onward, America represented mechanization, industrialization and consumption, in contrast to a French ideal of individuality, freedom of thought and a sense of the tragic. According to the author "what is peculiar to many French descriptions of American culture is the critical *hauteur* from which they engage their subject matter. From the perspective of an old skeptical wisdom only one diagnosis is possible: Americans are condemned to deal unsatisfactorily with the eternal recurrence of the tragic because they will not conceptualize it" (p. 124). In addition, Mathy identifies in French thinkers a "paradigm of cultural continuity" that would like to maintain American indebtedness to European culture, even after the fact, despite obvious examples to the contrary. As an example of European thinkers recognizing their American sources, Mathy points out, "Poe came before Baudelaire and Emerson before Nietzsche, and both acknowledged their debts to the former" (p. 136).

The Cold War of the 1950s and beyond found "America" to be a convenient political concept for the French Right as well as the Left, the former decrying America's moral decadence and the latter its political hegemony. Another paradox is offered by French views of physical space in America: although its urban industrial landscape is described in dystopian terms, its open spaces (plains, desert, wilderness) have been the subject of eloquent poetic and philosophical celebration.

Finally, America is the subject of a theme popular among French intellectuals of the post-modernist period: the end of history. "The homogenization of thoughts, tastes, and behaviors by mass production and mass consumption leads to a systematic erasure of all differences between individuals and cultures" (p. 219). American economic hegemony is seen as the harbinger of a post-historical universe devoid of cultural distinctions.

This dense and eclectic work draws on philosophy, political theory, poetry, novels, autobiographical writing and literary criticism to shed light on the web of interactions connecting an influential social group in one country to another country that, since it came into existence, has always been a privileged "other." Mathy's book is relevant to study abroad because it reminds us of the complexity of cross-cultural interactions between the perceiver and the perceived. Further, for Americans whose first foreign experience was in France, and whose views of their own country and the world were irrevocably affected by French sources, this work offers a fresh perspective on those influential ideas and their cultural context.

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The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America

Louis Menand
New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 2001. (546 pages)

Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, daunting in its choice of subject matter, closely aligns itself with the ancient sense of the word 'history' as a fluid, almost epic narrative. The Metaphysical Club of the title was a conversation group that met in Cambridge for a few months in 1872. Its membership roster listed some of the greatest intellectuals of the day: Charles Peirce, William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Chauncey Wright, amongst others. There is no record of the Club's discussions or debates—in fact, the only direct reference to the Club is made by Peirce in a letter written thirty-five years later. Menand utilizes the Club as a jumping-off point for a sweeping analysis of the beliefs of the day. The subtitle

of the book belies its true mission: 'a story of ideas in America.' Menand discusses the intellectual and social conditions that helped shape these men by the time they were members of the Club. He then shows the philosophical, political, and cultural impact that these men went on to have. In doing so, Menand traces a history of ideas in the United States from immediately prior to the Civil War to the beginning of the Cold War.

The ideas that Menand highlights are legion: Ralph Waldo Emerson's views of morality, Louis Agassiz's biological theories of race, Charles Darwin's materialism and the metaphysical musings of the Club itself. Menand makes multiple readings of the United States in the late 19th century, and it is through these that he can speak with authority on the ideas that emerged from the Metaphysical Club.

In addition to Emerson, Agassiz, and Darwin, Menand incorporates discussions of John Brown, *Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward*, W.E.B. DuBois, the Transcendentalists, Eugene Debs, pacifism, George Pullman, to name only a few. Many of the vignettes may seem unnecessary, serving solely as devices for narrative discourse. However, through these snippets a thorough overview of Antebellum and Postbellum United States society emerges, particularly in regard to those issues of continued relevance (such as States' rights, questions of race, the nature of being 'American'). Further, by avoiding a linear narrative, Menand rounds out the philosophy of the enigmatic Club, a 'before and after' effect that gives the Club its identity.

If Menand opens *The Metaphysical Club* with discussions of Emerson and his 'American Scholar' lecture in a way that presages the Club, then the description of the Club in the middle of the book serves to introduce John Dewey, the intellectual inheritor of the group's philosophy and the focus of most of the remainder of the book. Though it was Peirce who named the philosophy 'pragmatism,' it was Dewey who carried that philosophy onward, both in his writings and through his long academic career.

Menand closes his book by drawing broad comparisons between the intellectual environs of the United States in the post-Civil War and post-Cold War eras. In both 'worlds,' there are 'many competing belief systems, not just two,' with skepticism about 'the finality of any particular set of beliefs {becoming}...to some people an important value again' (441). Given the monumental events that have occurred internationally since the

publication of *The Metaphysical Club* in early 2001, perhaps Menand's Epilogue is especially important: '[D]emocracy is the value that validates all other values. Democratic participation isn't the means to an end, in this way of thinking: it is the end. The purpose of the experiment is to keep it going.'

What, then, is the importance of this book to the field of international education? In short, it would appear to draw attention to three deficiencies in the field:

The need for pedagogy. As demonstrated by the last issue of *Frontiers*, the influence of the pragmatists on pedagogy is monumental, not only in terms of experiential education, but also (and by extension) for education abroad. However, whereas the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) has set 'Principles of Good Practice' based on learning theory (See Lynn Montrose's article ""International Study and Experiential Learning: The Academic Context," in *Frontiers,* 8(Winter 2002), no equivalent emphasis on student learning appears in 'NAFSA: Association of International Educators' resources or workshops.

The need for history. Menand never fails to situate his subjects historically, incorporating elements of politics, cultural studies, socio-economics. Though chronologies of 'study abroad' have been compiled, the field might benefit from a Menand-esque historical analysis, not a list of dates important to NAFSA's Section on U.S. Students Abroad, nor a roll call of those government policies that have facilitated SECUSSA activities. Instead, we stand to gain from an integrative history of the field.

The need for discourse. The discourse facilitated by the pragmatists was done without an appeal to higher absolutes. As mentioned above, such discussions (taking place socially) lead to 'better' ideas, allowing a trajectory that benefits society or a subgroup. Can such a discourse take place within the field of education abroad? In discussions, can we identify programs that are better educational opportunities for students than others? Can we agree to criteria and standards for the field that go beyond the current 'Statement of Professional Competencies?' whose focus is student learning, both personal and academic? Most importantly, can we have such a discussion (say, through the SECUSSA listserv) in a professional manner with the strongest influence on such a discussion being the promotion of education and not fear of liability?

Menand demonstrates that despite pragmatism's dormancy for the

last fifty years, as a school of philosophy it stands to make a real impact in the contemporary 'story of ideas.' Those same historical factors that permitted pragmatism's reemergence (according to Menand, the end of the Cold War, democratization, and globalization) have given a new impetus to the field of international education. Let us hope that in true pragmatic fashion we have the ability to both 'think' and 'do.'

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First Great Triumph: How Five Americans Made Their Country a World Power

Warren Zimmermann
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. (576 pages)

A century ago, Americans across the country—rich and poor, black and white, urban and rural—engaged in a grassroots debate over whether their country should acquire colonies and become a global power on the European model. Warren Zimmermann's book examines American imperialism in this age, weighs its positives and negatives, and suggests that this history has relevance for our own age in which "American empire" is again controversial.

The study centers on the "fathers of modern American imperialism" (p. 8): John Hay, Captain Alfred T. Mahan, Elihu Root, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Theodore Roosevelt. Together, these men theorized and executed a strategy of naval building and territorial acquisition that thrust American power southward into Latin America and westward into Asia. Between 1898 and 1903 the United States acquired a formal empire consisting of Guam, Hawaii, Midway, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Samoa, and signed protectorate treaties with Cuba and Panama. It established coaling ports for naval and merchant vessels across the Pacific and in the Caribbean Sea. The Panama Canal, Roosevelt's proudest accomplishment, would link both halves of the country's new transoceanic sphere of influence.

Zimmermann's book begins with a description of the careers and "elements of character" (p. 14) of its five central protagonists. They are all

presented as men of their time. The author casts them as neither particularly heroic nor demonic in their use of power. They brought energy and vision to their desire to project American influence abroad, but they also displayed beliefs in racial inequality, shared by most whites of their day, and seemed deaf to those who opposed American hegemony. The chapters on each of these men are filled with colorful details: John Hay's poetry-writing, his depression, and his affair with the wife of Henry Cabot Lodge; Mahan's arrogance and single-minded devotion to a global vision for an American Navy and naval strategy; Root's valedictory address concluding that "educated men were only conservative when educated incompletely and narrowly"; Lodge's passion for American history, manifested in his 26 books, although his history classes at Harvard shrunk to an enrollment of three; Roosevelt's asthma, obsessive self-improvement, and mythologizing of the West. Zimmermann has a flare for keeping a reader's attention.

The book then traces the birth of and subsequent controversy over American imperialism. This section provides a well-written synthesis of the push to war against Spain, followed by America's rapid military successes and acquisition of new territories. Overjoyed at the presumed benefits of war, Roosevelt said "we have scored the first great triumph in what will be a world movement" (p. 275). Anti-imperialists, however, rallied in opposition to a "great triumph" that would cost so much in blood and treasure. Zimmermann's chapter on the imperial debate that crystallized around America's brutal occupation of the Philippines provides a lucid summary of positions on both sides. In the end, the expansionists prevailed, building a sphere of influence in the Caribbean and across the Pacific. They set a course for an "American Century."

The final, and in some ways most interesting, chapter of the book discusses this "American Century." Noting that we still live in the shadow of empire, Zimmermann seeks to evaluate the complex legacy of these years of empire-building. The five who helped build American power saw themselves as the principle advocates of a globally-minded policy, champions of an expansive and large-minded vision that benefited the nation and uplifted the world. The fact that many people at home and abroad came to disparage their international vision as "imperialism" may challenge readers to reflect on these two words—internationalism and imperialism—and on their historical contexts and meanings.

Research scholars who specialize in this era will find little that is

unfamiliar in this broad history, crafted for a popular audience. It is researched in printed sources, and much of the narrative synthesizes the standard historical accounts of the past two generations. It is neither triumphal nor particularly critical in overall tone. Written by a veteran diplomat, its interpretation is middle-of-the-road (one might say, diplomatic). As is the pattern in popular histories, it emphasizes the role of individuals rather than of broader forces. To be sure, Zimmermann acknowledges the empire-building roles played by large business interests, by sensationalizing media, by new technologies, by elites eager to take their place on a global stage. Still, the subtitle, "how five Americans made their country a world power," suggests a great-man interpretation of history that has gone out of fashion in the academy, even as it has been embraced by trade publishers.

All in all, however, the lively style and thoughtful discussion of the ambiguous roots of America's global preeminence make this book a worthwhile read for anyone with an interest in international affairs. A kind of imperial chic has come into America's political mood just now. Well-publicized books by Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace,* and Niall Ferguson, *Empire,* suggest that American empire in the twenty-first century might be necessary, possible, and beneficial; both see empire as an essentially benign, modernizing project. The title of Zimmermann's book seems also to endorse such a pro-imperial view, but the narrative itself offers a more nuanced message. Although Zimmermann argues that a small group of turn-of-the-century Americans had the confidence to assert their country's power to rule others, by force if necessary, he also explores why the business of direct rule provoked such opposition. Lofty ideals may have helped promote American imperialism, but they also threw it into question.

Zimmermann endorses William James's view of the War of 1898: "We gave the fighting instinct and the passion of mastery their outing" assuming that "we could resume our permanent ideals and character when the fighting fit was done." Instead, the fighting fit of imperialism, he (with James) believes, changed America and left a mixed legacy. In Zimmermann's view, it called forth greater national confidence and solidified a claim of high purpose; it also exaggerated the value of war, gave a disproportionate power to the executive branch of government, and purveyed assumptions that America was both omniscient and superior to other nations. Imperialism was grounded in claims of advancing both

human rights and stability, but human rights often lost out when these two goals turned out to be mutually conflicting.

Zimmermann ends his book by noting what he thinks is a recent erosion of American power and a declining political will to sustain the American Century. Doubtless, he might now re-write his last section. In any case, readers engaged in the new twenty-first-century discussions of American power and empire may find useful historical background in his interpretation of the so-called "first great triumph," one century ago.

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