

# Does the World still revolve around America?

*By Serge Gruzinski*

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**The United States is no longer modernity's driving force and primary symbol. American cultural imperialism is coming to an end. What better time to recall that American culture, which is as reviled as it is adulated, is itself the result of countless *mestizajes*--as is the rest of the continent.**

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*About: Ludovic Tournès, *Américanisation? Une histoire mondiale (XVIIIe-XXIe siècle)* [Americanization? A Global History (from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-First Century)], Paris, Fayard, 2020. 452 p., 25 €.*

In 2016, when I had been invited to a major Chinese university, I was waiting for an elevator on campus. In the hallway, a television screen was showing, on a loop, the inauguration of Shanghai's Disney Park. Was this the triumph of Americanization over Mao's China, just a few steps from a building devoted to his thought, or did it represent, to use a term coined by the Brazilian writer Mario de Andrade, a Chinese-style "anthropophagy" of the mythical universe of my childhood, as well that of millions of Westerners? This question is important, as it concerns our planet's looming future. It is so important that it cannot be left to think tanks or sociologists of culture, who are generally indifferent to historical perspectives, without which Americanization's rise and evident decline cannot be analyzed.

What is Americanization? In his book, Ludovic Tournès, a professor of international history at the University of Geneva who has written several noted works

on music and the United States, provides a series of clear and precise answers to this question, digging into the meaning of an often hackneyed term while also probing its material foundations, exploring its political, mythical, and artistic expressions, and examining, in turn, painting, music, and film--domains often neglected by generalist historians. This approach informs his questions: what is the relationship between Americanization and globalization? To what extent does democratic messianism embody the American model? How is this model disseminated and what is its cultural striking power? Tournès also offers helpful considerations on mass production, Fordism, and the "American way of life," leading him to ask: "is global culture American?" He concludes: "the twenty-first century will not be American." The United States is no longer modernity's driving force and primary symbol. The explanation lies in the failure of a process of cultural submersion that was widely anticipated; the erosion of American prestige since the 1960s; and the related rise of "structural anti-Americanism" due to the international disengagement initiated by Obama and accelerated by Trump.

## Mestizajes

It is worth recalling the importance of *mestizajes*<sup>1</sup> to the takeoff of the American "cultural dynamic." While the example of jazz is well known, the role of painting in the give-and-take between the Old World and the New is less familiar, though it is equally important. Consider the case of film production and the movie industry as a way of illustrating the accuracy of these analyses. The internationalization of American cinema offers a perfect illustration of a process that went through various stages over the twentieth century, operating in different ways in different continents and countries. At a time when China has raised itself to this industry's forefront, it is worth reconsidering this past, which, because it forged the west's collective imagination over the last century, concerns us all. Still haunted by the Americanization of France (as with Robert Dhéry's 1961 film, *La Belle Américaine*), we tend to forget or overlook the fact that, in other countries, Hollywood's conquest took different paths. Thus "films made in Hollywood-on-the-Tiber, as Cinecittà was then dubbed, contributed significantly to the popularity of Hollywood movies [during the Cold War], as well as to the prosperity of Italian cinema as a whole." With the triumph of

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<sup>1</sup> The author favors the Spanish term *mestizajes* —i.e., *miscegenation*— and the related adjective *mestizo* as the best translations of the French word *métissage*. See Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Routledge, 2002).

epics and the spaghetti western fad, Italian movie production rose to the second place globally.

In other words, there can be no study of Americanization without an analysis of its reception and the strategies of delocalization that it used to bypass the protective measures implemented by various governments – strategies that often depended on the collaboration of colonized countries. Hollywood's offensive could encounter both total closure (as in Mao's China) and, more rarely, a cinematographic response equivalent to the power wielded by the Californian studios themselves, as in India. But it is China's ways of opening itself up and its ability to domesticate the Hollywood monster – to the point that, at present, it appears to have gotten the better of it – that deserve the most attention, as it is the manner in which the Middle Empire neutralizes the most spectacular and compelling expressions of the western imagination that prefigures the actions it may pursue in other, equally crucial domains.

## Europe's contribution

But if the book presents the mechanisms at work in the intercontinental *mestizaje* that blends traditions and creators, it also reminds us of the *mestizo* origins of forms that emerged in the United States itself. Before it exported its products, Hollywood benefited from an influx of European filmmakers. According to Tournès, it is the "hybridity of Hollywood cinema that allowed it to simultaneously create Americanness and globalness". He adds that that the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* is a "perfect illustration of the hybridization carried out by the studios." Beneath words like "patchwork," "*bricolage*," "concatenation," or "composite", the various mechanisms that lie at the origins of American cinema can be reconstituted: the adaption of European genres and graphic styles; the standardization and industrialization of production; vertical concentration; and technical innovation. The complexity of the *mestizajes* that affect most expressions of this nation's existence – yet which is also found in the formation of all Latin American countries – is carefully described through numerous examples, thanks to which one can follow its mechanisms, turning points, and conclusions.

## And the rest of America?

A subject of this kind can't be exhausted in 450 pages. It would be easy to identify oversights in its analysis and narrative. We will confine ourselves to suggesting a few ways of extending its interpretation and further revitalizing our perspective on this topic. First, a few thoughts about the concept of Americanization. It is always considered from the standpoint of the United States, though there exists another Americanization process, which is continental in scope and began centuries before the United States' foundation: we have in mind the way in which, from the Terra del Fuego to California, Spanish and Portuguese colonization ultimately experienced a backlash in the form of repeated waves of *mestizaje* that responded to the many varieties of Iberic expansion. Admittedly, one could skip over this prehistory, though not without recognizing that, from the standpoint of global history, it launched the globalizations that have occurred since the fifteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

But since the book claims to be a "global history", why not extend its scope to a consideration of Americanization's effects outside the United States? While "the hybridity of cultural objects from the United States [may be] an undeniable factor in Americanization" (p. 94), this hybridity can be found in all New World countries. When American jazz is mentioned, how can one not think of Afro-Brazilian music? Is Iberian *mestizaje* so different from American *mestizaje*? At a time when the *Latino* population occupies an ever-greater place in *Gringolandia*, one would like to know the implications of this trend for Americanization's fate. The author rightly devotes much of his analysis to film. In a global history, the trajectory of the Mexican director Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, whom the book mentions only briefly, could have been used to enrich and bring up to date its analysis of the evolution of film production. Including this perspective would also take it beyond well-traveled paths (Kurosawa to Sturges), by considering Mexican directors from the 1930s to the present. Finally, it is possible that by comparing Americanization and Americanization--in other words, phenomena as divergent as the Americanization of Mexico in the 1950s and the Americanization of France and Belgium – one would obtain a more fine-grained picture of the processes implemented by the United States and the various modalities of their local reception. It would also be an opportunity to differentiate the "cultural" dimension of Americanization from the political, economic, and financial stakes commonly associated with American imperialism. In fairness, seriously considering

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<sup>2</sup> Louise Bénat-Tachot, Serge Gruzinski, and Boris Jeanne, *Les processus d'américanisation*, vols. 1 and 2, Paris, Le Manuscrit, 2013.

all these issues and mechanisms would have doubled the book's size. Furthermore, other specializations and a different angle than the one chosen by the author would have been necessary. The globalization of the "American way of life" and its impasses is a complex process that must account for multiple dynamics and temporalities on all five continents. The book has the merit of launching a debate by offering abundant material and insights, while remaining a pleasant read that spares the reader the often lifeless jargon of "Americanized" social science.

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