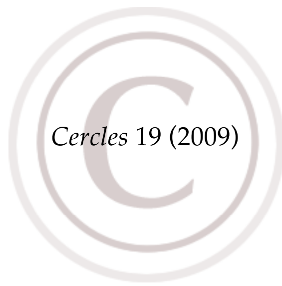

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INTRODUCTION

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Publishing projects work in mysterious ways. What prompted this issue of *Cercles* on Americanization was, believe it or not, Walt Disney.

Is there anything more typically American than Disney for a European? For some a symbol of the success of the mythical melting pot[1] or of the American dream, for others the stigmata of a despicable American cultural imperialism, Disney, in his life and work, has taken part not so much in the definition of what an American is but rather in the translation and expansion of values that appear to have been identified as American from the start.

A case in point was his project, later taken on by the Walt Disney Company, of building a town from scratch [Schiesel]. A few months ago, while I was working on landscape in eighteenth-century Puritan colonies and speculating on what made the New England village truly American [Meinig], it became obvious to me that the similarities with medieval European towns could not be ignored. What seemed to make the whole difference, then, was the necessity for newcomers to adjust to the American local specificities (topography and native population), in an environment deprived of all European tradition or influence.

The way Puritans adapted to what they called the wilderness, however, was not that estranged from European urban and rural traditions and definitely not out of place in a Christian world which had its own demons—lurking about in dark forests as they ought to—and which feared the potential contamination from the outside world as much as the Puritans did. If the New England village resembled the English or French village, what, then, has been and can still be considered today as the typical American town? That was precisely when I thought of Disney.

Celebration, Florida,[2] was said to be "Disney's dream come true" [Frantz & Collins: 47]. It may seem like an idiosyncratic project, but it may also reflect the whole of American values and spirit. Douglas Frantz, a former journalist for the *New York Times* and former managing editor of the *Los Angeles Times* has lived in Celebration and reflected on this unique experience:

> This search for a new and better life, the desire to start fresh is as old as America itself. Right from the start, American way of life fulfilled the demands of generations for freedom and expansion, the longing of

[1] Walt Disney was of Irish, Canadian and German descent and therefore maybe from France and even, like Crevecoeur, from Normandy (near Bayeux more precisely) where one finds a village named "D'Isigny," where the name is said to come from.

[2] Celebration's web site, <http://www.celebrationtowncenter.com/ee/> December 4, 2007.

> men and women whose ancestors had lived constrained by strict social and religious codes. Through two centuries, the country has remained at heart a frontier society, though the geography of its frontiers has changed dramatically. In a sense, the people who moved to Celebration had much in common with the immigrants who came to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They had pooled their resources, pulled up stakes, and moved to a new place, and this place was about as different for some of them as America had been for the European immigrants [109].

Much earlier, when Crèvecoeur asked in the eighteenth century "What then is the American, this new man?" he had a ready answer: Americans, he claimed, "[i]n this great American asylum," are "individuals of all nations […] melted into a new race of men, […] the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle."

> Every thing has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants, wanting vegitative mould, and refreshing showers; […] but now by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root and flourished!

Were Walt Disney and J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, a French surveyor from Caen, Normandy, united in the same euphoric vision of their own *Magic Kingdom*? Far-fetched as it may seem, Crevecoeur, as the initiator of a definition of "the American, this new man" [Crèvecoeur: 52-5] detailed in his *Letters* what were, according to him and thanks to his own experience on the New York Frontier, the unique qualities and values shared by the transplanted colonists. Those still resound in American cultural history and have actively contributed to the collective construction of the American identity as several of the papers in this issue explain: betterment and renaissance, freedom, rejection of an omnipotent and stifling religious or hierarchical authority, hard work, community and frontier spirit are some of the values extolled by the American tradition.[3]

Though some, like John Schwetman[4], may argue that these qualities are not unique to the Americans, when you are European, there always comes a point, while 'experiencing' American life or teaching about American history, literature, art, cinema or music, when things strike you as

[3] See, in particular, Jennifer Schell, "'The most virtuous and independent citizens': Farmers, Whalemen, and Factory Workers and the Americanization of Manly Physical Laborers": 82-94; Bruce I. Weiner, "The Democratic Exchange of Reading and Writing: Americanization and Periodical Publication, 1750-1810": 126-141; Bruce Plourde, "Frontier as Symptom: Captain Kirk, Ahab, and the American Condition": 142-154; and Jammie Rommie, "The Green River Pageant and The Americanizing Of The American Frontier": 218-231.

[4] "There is […] an important potential fallacy in any argument about Americanization, especially one emerging from an American perspective […] and that is the fallacy of American exceptionalism. We Americans learn from an early age that we are unique among nationalities." John Schwetman, "The American Cosmopolitan: Deracination in the Works of Jack Kerouac and Toni Morrison": 176. It is striking that Schwetman should insist on the one-sided vision that Americans may have of themselves and their country since for this issue on Americanization, all contributions but one have been made by American or British scholars. It is therefore interesting and pleasurable to witness, from a European and even French standpoint, the questions raised by the authors about their own culture and identity from different perspectives.

being typically American—as was the case for me with Celebration. Why this is so and what exactly is typical is not always easily explained; somehow it just seems to belong to the values, the ways or traditions of the country—or at least the representation we have of it. Hence the various attempts in this issue to define what "American" has meant and the evolution of the term, if what is said to be American is truly American, the process through which immigrants, architecture, art, literature and even Natives have come to be considered as Americans, or have come to consider themselves American[5], or even have created, transmitted or transformed what were and are still considered as typically American values.

The process by which Americanization is supposed to have happened has never been clearly identified. For some, it seems that the mere *going* to America and then *going* West have been the impetus and means of transformation of immigrants who, before 1776, were English colonists living on the eastern foothills of the Appalachians; whereas, after 1776, living in the Alleghenies, the western foothills of the mountain range, they had become American citizens. In his famous but debated Frontier hypothesis, Frederick Jackson Turner described this process of Americanization, though it remained quite mysterious, calling on mythology and lyricism rather than reality and reason. In any case Turner's interest was mainly in the consequences of western migration and in defining what the new nation was destined to become rather than in the process itself.

The call for papers for this issue of *Cercles* on Americanization was therefore born out of the lack of clear and definite answers to questions that touched on different fields: history, religion, art, etc. If we, Europeans, could point to what we found typically American—at least that is what we thought—no one seemed to be able to narrow the answers down to the American "big bang", the moment when or the place where "things" started to become truly American.

Was Americanization the adaptation of the people to specific local cultures and values? What were those values and, as Celebration suggested, had they remained the same throughout American history or had they developed and evolved? Did Americanization happen through the appropriation of one's own plot of land with the consequent dreams of conquest and empires? It seems that these questions might best be answered by attention to the colonial and early national periods; however, only one paper, "Anglican or American: Re-examining the Impact of the Frontier on Legal Development in Seventeenth-Century Pennsylvania", written by Christopher Fritsch, traces Americanization back to the early colonial era. Most of the papers focus on the 19th century, showing how notions of American-ness are linked to historical changes and upheavals.

Finally, from my European perch, I imagined that the question of a Turnerian rejection of European roots and values would also be raised. But, even if Turner's thesis repudiated Herbert Baxter Adams's germ theory,[6] yet

[5] See Melissane Parm Schrems, "'We…will rule ourselves': The Mashpee-Wampanoag Indians Claim Independence, 1776-1834": 44-65.

[6] The theory drew links between American institutions and early Germanic tribal practices.

it allowed Europe to be part of the American construction—if only as the model not to follow. The papers show us that today, apparently, Turner is nothing but a ghost hovering over a global history in which American scholars no longer feel the weight of European influence. The tables have been turned in fact, and it may well be now the Europeans who are compelled to define themselves to a degree against American values.

At all events I had not expected most of the papers—each in their own way—to point to the same conclusion. Americanization, it seems, is not so much a "fallacy", as John Schwetman put it, as a question of representation. The papers actually concentrate on the issue of identity and answer Creveceour's question; they try, through attention to different fields—poetry, art, theatre, politics, the law—to show how representations of shifting American identities were very much linked to historical and societal contexts and how the notion of American-ness is a notion relative to the standpoint of the observer, in the same way that the West and the frontier were relative to the geographical position of the pioneer. Many papers eventually agree on the fact that it is not so much the subject that is American as the way a whole country wanted and still wants to show it: the distinction indeed is between 'Americanization' understood as factual historical event or process and 'Americanization' understood as perception of self, an idea or ideal, or of a state of mind. The romanticizing of an experience, historical episodes, or people, tells us much—if not more—about what America is as the experience itself.

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