

Negative Dialectic

Sergio Fabbrini's take on the twists and turns of transatlantic camaraderie

John Feffer | The election of Barack Obama seems to have healed transatlantic relations. Even the disagreements—for instance, on the war in Afghanistan—now seem manageable. Was it really so easy to get Europe and the United States back on the same map?

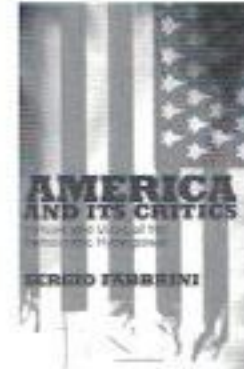
After all, during the first years of the 21st century, Europe and the United States experienced what seemed to be a momentous clash of civilizations. The rise of neoconservative power in Washington and the resistance launched by both European governments and the European public culminated in one of the most serious breaches in transatlantic relations since the Suez crisis of 1956.

Transatlantic relations did not come to an end during the Bush administration. Indeed, even during this civilizational discord the United States and Europe cooperated militarily in Afghanistan. NATO continued to function and even marked in 2004 its largest expansion. Economic investment, despite threatened boycotts on both sides, continued to flow.

In books and articles over the last decade, Italian political scientist Ser-

gio Fabbrini has been scrambling to understand this recent ebb and flow in transatlantic relations. Anti-Americanism in Europe and anti-European-ism in the United States, Fabbrini argues in *America and Its Critics*, have challenged the viability of NATO and, prior to Obama's election, called into question the ability to cooperate on global concerns from terrorism to global warming. At the same time, however, Fabbrini has devoted several articles and an entire book, *Compound Democracies*, to the thesis that the United States and Europe are converging at an institutional level as examples of what he calls "compound democracies." Over the long term, in other words, the two political systems are becoming more alike even as the politicians themselves, in the short term, articulate a different set of political values.

Fabbrini rightly attributes the reason for the most recent rift to the rise of conservative nationalism in the United States. The neoconservatives who engineered this revolution overcame not only the traditional liberal nationalists, who generally emphasize the unique genius of the American



Sergio Fabbrini:
America and Its Critics: Virtues and Vices of the Democratic Hyperpower (Polity Press, 2008)

constitution, but also the liberal internationalists who had helped build the post-World War II global order of the United Nations and the World Bank. These new conservatives had a horror of the American state, which they viewed as intrusive and redistributive, and yet perversely they supported enlarging the same state's capacity to project power overseas. When they came to power with the election of George W. Bush, they launched a new foreign policy of "democracy promotion" that translated into two wars (Afghanistan and Iraq), several less overt attempts at regime change (Iran and North Korea), and a great deal of rhetorical posturing (at the United Nations and elsewhere).

Quite a few Europeans recoiled at this activist foreign policy. Even most European conservatives had made peace, more or less, with the vigorous role of the state in their own economies and the restrictions placed on post-colonial armies. And Europeans in general did not warm to the idea of America resuscitating the old World War I bromide of "making the world safe for democracy." Fabbri astutely views the European distaste for the neocon project against the backdrop of long-standing anti-Americanism that has united the anti-imperialism of the left, the anti-populism of the right, and the anti-market-fundamentalism of the Catholic parties: "In some sense, anti-Americanism is one of the founding discourses of European modernity in so far as the latter has tried to define its modernity as distinct from (if not opposed to) American modernity."

Anti-Europeanism in the United States, meanwhile, remained a dis-

tinctly minority opinion during the era of the Marshall Plan and NATO. With the end of the Cold War, however, two kinds of neoconservatives gradually acquired political power. Conservative populists in the Reagan mold, like Newt Gingrich, used social and cultural issues to foment a backlash against Bill Clinton and his putative European-style preference for universal health care and other "socialist" boondoggles. But it took the more momentous events of September 11 before the much narrower version of neoconservatism of hawks like Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz could transform U.S. foreign policy in the direction of a unilateral exercise of military power.

While Fabbri shares some of the astonishment of his European colleagues at the excesses of American power, he is careful to challenge their more extreme characterizations of the United States. He devotes large sections of *America and Its Critics* to debunking the notions that America is a democracy without people, a democracy only for the rich, and an imperial democracy. Americans might not vote in the same numbers as Europeans, he argues, but Americans are engaged in a much broader participatory democracy of ballot issues, plebiscites, and civil society organizations. The United States is a nation of economic extremes, and this is reflected in who goes to the polls and who wields the most lobbying power, but the country also boasts a vibrant constellation of interest groups representing the disenfranchised.

Finally, Bush certainly made a play for greater executive power, particularly over foreign policy and particu-



Sergio Fabbrini:
Compound Democracies: Why the United States and Europe Are Becoming Similar (Oxford, 2007)

larly in order to project U.S. power abroad. But, Fabbrini argues, the separation of powers largely held during his term even if Congress surrendered its war powers. "America does not have the necessary decision-making structures for supporting imperial ambitions," he argues, even if certain policy outcomes tend in the imperial direction. "As long as there is an open decision-making process in foreign policy, the imperial outcome of some decisions does not call into question the democratic nature of the country," he concludes.

Here, Fabbrini falls back on his arguments concerning "compound democracies," which have both a horizontal and a vertical separation of powers. The United States has checks and balances among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches at the federal level. And it also has a division of authority between the federal government and the state governments. These competitions for power, he argues, ensures that American democracy can withstand any number of challenges: a power-hungry executive, an apathetic electorate, or a widening gap between rich and poor.

While European countries generally prefer different political structures, the European Union as a whole is drifting in the American direction. Through the establishment of a dual executive (the Council of Ministers and the European Commission), a stronger European Parliament, and a European Court of Justice, the European Union is gradually developing the horizontal checks and balances alongside its already-existing vertical division of power between the federal bodies and the individual member states.

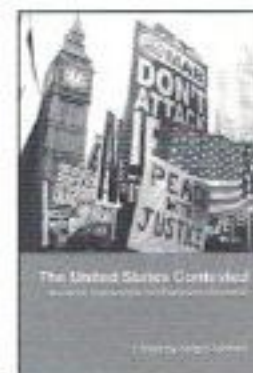
Fabbrini would no doubt be reassured by Obama's election for it would bear out his arguments about the self-correcting capacity of America's political institutions and interest-group politics. Indeed, European countries have certainly welcomed Obama, and polls indicate a marked decrease in anti-Americanism.

But the new administration has also continued several key aspects of the Bush administration's foreign policy. Washington is still pressuring Europeans to contribute to the NATO force in Afghanistan. The United States continues to add to its already gargantuan military budget. The administration has banned torture but maintains the policy of rendition.

America's imperial addiction, in other words, is a deep one indeed. Bush's unilateralist impulses did not come merely from the program of a narrow band of neoconservatives. The care and feeding of the American hyperpower has been a two-party project. The United States and European Union might find considerable common ground as two compound democracies. But the transatlantic clash of civilizations—over the appropriate mix of state and market, over the supremacist leanings of the United States—will be with us for many years to come regardless of who occupies the White House.



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Sergio Fabbrini, ed.:
*The United States
Contested: American
Unilateralism
and European Dis-
content* (Routledge,
2006).