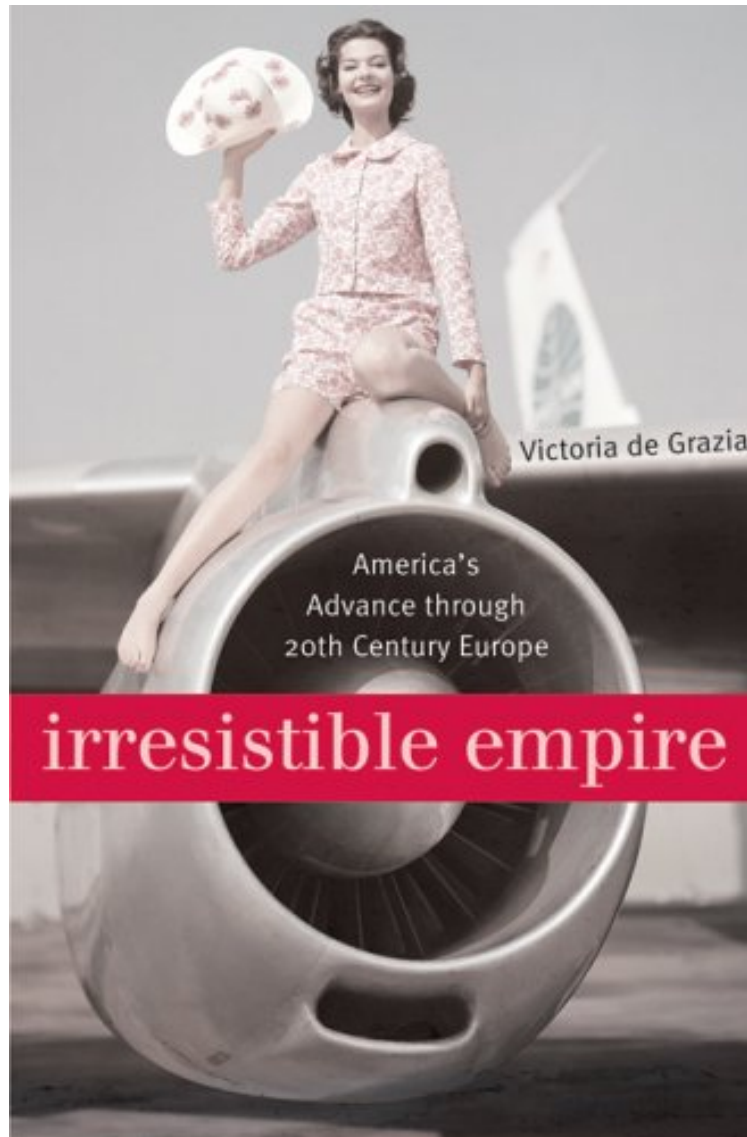


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# Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe

Victoria de Grazia

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**Victoria de Grazia : Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. How the West was Bought By C.P.M. This is a deeply insightful work on how America "conquered" Western Europe with one of the most devastating and total weapons in its arsenal during the twentieth century: economics. De Grazia isolates the nine characteristics of American consumer culture (the

service ethic, branding, corporate advertising, etc.) and how each of these overcame intense cultural opposition in Europe and eventually made the West a true "consumers paradise." Here analysis is very keen on both how America's consumer-culture changed the European world in the interwar period (c. 1919-1939) and how those gains were solidified following World War II's end. However, there is one thing about this work that makes it seem distant both to me and to any possible general readers: de Grazia's prose is too cerebral. This is typified with her overuse of the words "bourgeois" and "bourgeoisie," which I was able to understand having had those words drilled into my head in my high school European history class, but I doubt that the average history reader would get it. In fact, her prose is so erudite that, at times, it hides the main argument in each chapter. While America's cultural dominance of twentieth century Europe should be studied, I would recommend this book only to a true history buff with a high SAT verbal score. 9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. A cleverly constructed book By John Harpur This is a very clever book. The author pinned her explanation of American influence in Europe on canny business practices. The service ethic. Big-branding. Supermarkets. These are some of the themes that are worked over to make the case. The book is delightfully stuffed with anecdotes, vignettes and odd facts and statistics to lend it the feel of visiting a large emporium of ideas. Personally, I liked this 'shelf browsing' feel to the chapters. The book has a few serious downsides which mar its central argument. First and foremost, the author takes little cognisance of the influence of WWII on shaping European attitudes towards American culture. Secondly, in the two generations after WWII more Europeans (percentage) speak English in order to accommodate their ambitions. The author attributes the creeping growth of English pre-WWII to business needs (strange to me that she singles out the Rotarians as particularly influential). However, that does not explain its widespread endorsement by the general citizenry after WWII. This brings me the third issue, the lack of attention paid to the rise of youth culture - largely driven by perceptions of American youth in the fifties. Music, rock'n'roll and the drug culture were directed to a large extent by American tastes. Consumerism is too broad a concept to explain the uptake of American habits. Despite these lacunae, the book is a a thought-provoking exercise and though the prose is bit attenuated at times, it is overall readable and stimulating. 2 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Exquisitely Written By Tracing Error What the other reviews fail to convey about this wonderful book is that the writing is exquisite. Each chapter uses real-life examples, ironies and juxtapositions to vividly evoke contrasts between America and Europe and demonstrate the course of change. When the chapters arc to their conclusion, you feel a real emotional and intellectual punch. History writing just doesn't get any better than this.

The most significant conquest of the twentieth century may well have been the triumph of American consumer society over Europe's bourgeois civilization. It is this little-understood but world-shaking campaign that unfolds in *Irresistible Empire*, Victoria de Grazia's brilliant account of how the American standard of living defeated the European way of life and achieved the global cultural hegemony that is both its great strength and its key weakness today. De Grazia describes how, as America's market empire advanced with confidence through Europe, spreading consumer-oriented capitalism, all alternative strategies fell before it--first the bourgeois lifestyle, then the Third Reich's command consumption, and finally the grand experiment of Soviet-style socialist planning. Tracing the peculiar alliance that arrayed New World salesmanship, statecraft, and standardized goods against the Old World's values of status, craft, and good taste, Victoria de Grazia follows the United States' market-driven imperialism through a vivid series of cross-Atlantic incursions by the great inventions of American consumer society. We see Rotarians from Duluth in the company of the high bourgeoisie of Dresden; working-class spectators in ramshackle French theaters conversing with Garbo and Bogart; Stetson-hatted entrepreneurs from Kansas in the midst of fussy Milanese shoppers; and, against the backdrop of Rome's Spanish Steps and Paris's Opera Comique, Fast Food in a showdown with advocates for Slow Food. Demonstrating the intricacies of America's advance, de Grazia offers an intimate and historical dimension to debates over America's exercise of soft power and the process known as Americanization. She raises provocative questions about the quality of the good life, democracy, and peace that issue from the vaunted victory of mass consumer culture.

From Publishers Weekly Although the global reach of McDonald's, Wal-Mart and Starbucks appears to be a recent phenomenon, de Grazia, a Columbia historian, contends that U.S. companies—and consumerism—have been making inroads in Europe for the past hundred years. She argues that an early, and major, U.S. innovation treated foreign territories as extensions of domestic markets. While Old Europe's bourgeois culture emphasized class differences and focused on the luxury of aesthetically pleasing goods, American consumer capitalism concentrated instead on mass-produced items that appealed to the middle-class consumer. By the end of the 20th century, European markets had embraced American consumerism to such an extent that social equality came to mean the ability to participate in mass consumer culture—as it does, she argues, in the U.S. She places the U.S.'s final triumph in 1986, when the first McDonald's in Italy opened next to the mosaics of Rome's Spanish Steps. In a book jam-packed with examples and analysis, de Grazia devotes chapters to the rise of branding and of chain stores, to blanket corporate advertising, to American film as an entertaining introduction to the American lifestyle (and sets of fantasies), to the treatment of European women as a target market and more. While much here has a pedantic quality, de Grazia writes

clearly, giving an uncommon perspective on the ways and means by which the U.S. and Europe drew close after WWII. (Apr.) Copyright copy; Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. A smart and engaging look at how U.S. consumerism swept aside European cultural conservatism to create a transatlantic, transnational market. (Kirkus s 2005-01-15)If Charlemagne or Napoleon could see their continent today, they would be with de Grazia. One glance at Europe's great capitals, and they would assume Europe had been conquered, occupied and settled by Americans. The men who dreamed of l'Europe profonde would curse the ubiquity of Eminem as they sat in the greasy KFC on the Falls Road in Belfast munching their Chicken Popcorn. They would stagger their way around Italy's most beautiful city, guided by a McDonald's map of McVenice. Irresistible Empire is the story of how this happened, of how an imperium came to Europe in the form of an emporium. Unlike the Middle East and Latin America, Europe has seen only the peaceful face of America's empire. De Grazia...shows how--in just one century--the Old Continent was subject to slow conquest by a million consumer goods. (Johann Hari New York Times Book 2005-05-08)[An] important, richly detailed, sometimes eccentric book...[De Grazia's] subject is 'the rise of a great imperium with the outlook of a great emporium': how America's products, producers and salesmen, with the full cognizance and backing of its politicians, came after 1900 to transform not just the purchasing habits and desires of Europeans but also their ideas about society and themselves...Much has been published on American empire and on the transatlantic divide in recent years. The great virtue of this work is that it takes a provocative and unusual line. De Grazia illustrates how empires can seduce and not simply coerce. (Linda Colley The Nation 2005-06-13)A major work of scholarship, 20 years in the making, that uses the tools of economics, history, and cultural studies to lay bare the mechanisms that created the American Century. (Adam Kirsch New York Sun 2005-05-25)This book gives a doorstopping gloss on Churchill's remark that Americans always do the right thing...but only after exhausting all the other possibilities. [Europe's] capitulation to their capitalism is the subject of this elegant work. It is an eloquent book too, written with measure and cadences and care which have their roots in Old World learning rather than New World Write-Lite and its flashy neologisms...This is an impressively learned and intelligent book. (Stephen Bayly The Independent 2005-05-27)Irresistible Empire describes how 'cleverly marketed and advertised brand-goods' from across the Atlantic knocked down the fortresses of a more hierarchical and craft-based 20th-century European culture. The book is full of elegant case studies and erudite anecdotes. (Cormac Oacute; Graacute;da Irish Times 2005-05-14)Victoria de Grazia's Irresistible Empire, a 480-page juggernaut in a mini-flotilla of recent books about 'soft power,' represents a remarkable, big-think undertaking two decades in the making...Today, as Europe endures turbulence over the state of its own union, de Grazia's book could not be more timely...That de Grazia limits herself to the roots of American influence in Europe is a testament to her depth. But it is her robust writing, mastery of scene-setting, and deft deconstruction of illustrative events that move it from academic to accessible. (Clayton Collins Christian Science Monitor 2005-06-28)This wonderful book, written with extraordinary erudition and verve by a social historian, is a study of the way in which the American ethos of mass consumption has 'conquered' Europe since the interwar period. (Stanley Hoffman Foreign Affairs 2005-05-01)The triumph of American commercial values over old Europe's overtly intellectual culture in the 20th century is the theme of Victoria de Grazia's compelling, thorough and sparkingly written study...The author is right to contend that mass consumer culture is such an ephemeral form of material life that the great trends that formed it are 'easily lost to sight.' But this masterful book brings them right back into our field of vision. (Peter Aspden Financial Times 2005-07-15)De Grazia writes clearly, giving an uncommon perspective on the ways and means by which the U.S. and Europe drew close after WWII. (Publishers Weekly 2005-02-14)[R]eaders will be intrigued by de Grazia's magisterial account of economic and cultural change. (Carl L. Bankston III SalemPressOnline)This is an extraordinary book, and de Grazia displays impressive range and erudition in taking the reader from Dresden to Duluth, Minnesota, from Belgian entrepreneurs to Italian supermarket concerns, to the boardrooms of the advertising giant J. Walter Thompson on New York's Madison Avenue. She attends both to material, economic changes and to the social (and gender-historical) consequences and cultural meanings of those changes, a divide that few historians are able to span. Consequently, hers is a richly textured and multilayered account, highly accessible for its absorbing anecdotes and engaging style and yet deeply grounded in archival research and current historiographic insight. Above all, de Grazia has done a tremendous service by theorizing and historicizing this contentious topic and by giving it the transnational treatment that it demands. This ambitious book will remain a reference point for years to come. (Paul Lerner Times Literary Supplement 2006-05-05)In this stimulating book, Victoria de Grazia explains how an American "market empire" displaced an Old World consumer regime built around community, solidarity, and class hierarchy...De Grazia develops her argument through case studies, each one masterfully written and impressively documented...Her multilingual research, attention to the power of norms in everyday life, and ability to synthesize business, politics, and culture make this one of the most important books written about consumerism in international history. (Christopher Endy Journal of American History)Victoria de Grazia's book makes a significant contribution to the current academic discourse on imperialism by focusing not on its political and military dimensions, but on its cultural manifestations...This is a scholarly and provocative book which makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the contemporary role of culture and its diffusion...In addition to its scholarly contributions, this is a readable and enjoyable book, which contains a wealth of interesting information

that will appeal to both academic and popular audiences. (Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare)Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* is both a study of the forces working to 'Americanize' Europe and a contribution to the debate about their value...The strength of her account lies in its long-term perspective...De Grazia approaches the issue of Americanization through a series of finely drawn case studies which examine not merely the obvious examples of American commercial practice--the chain store, big-brand goods, Hollywood movies, and the supermarket--but also the mechanisms by which she believes American capitalist values were spread through Europe. Many of these individual chapters read like stand-alone essays--nuanced, witty, and carefully polished accounts, for instance, of the Rotary International or the European poster industry...As *Irresistible Empire* amply demonstrates, shrewd American entrepreneurs and patriotic zealots (often one and the same person) have tried hard and often successfully to inculcate 'American' business practices in Europe. Europe would be a different place without them. (John Brewer New York of Books 2006-11-30)Given the proliferation of studies of consumption, a comparative and integrative study in this area is to be warmly welcomed. Victoria de Grazia makes a notable contribution with a study that offers a good deal of interest to business historians...Both the range and the close argument encourage frequent dips into the extensive notes and bibliography to identify particular sources and connections. (Michael French Business History 2006-12-01)Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire* is a dazzling work that aims to reassess the American impact on Europe in the twentieth century...No historian has yet attempted what de Grazia does here: a sweeping synthesis that provides very detailed and thick descriptions of just how private and state projects have operated to carry American methods and products to Europe, changing the nature of business and consumer culture. (Max Paul Friedman H-German 2006-06-01)[Victoria de Grazia's] insightful, thoroughly researched, and beautifully written book treats an important and pivotal moment in Europe's encounter with the emerging hyper-puissance, the United States...On the whole, Victoria de Grazia's recent work will be valuable to intellectual, cultural, and business historians, as well as anyone who enjoys ruminating on the divisions that continue to bedevil the transatlantic alliance, especially in regard to how Europeans and Americans conduct their business and, indeed, their lives. (Richard Kim Theor Soc 2006-01-01)This richly rewarding and smoothly synthetic work traces the influence of American business practices and models in Europe through the crisis-wracked course of the twentieth century. Its palpable merits lie in the close coordination of archival research and transversal analysis across different regional locales, business sectors, nation-states, and periods--all accomplished with brisk synoptic sweep...This important, well-crafted, and stimulating work has very convenient aids in its illustrations, endnotes, and critical bibliographical essays. It will be an excellent classroom resource across undergraduate and graduate courses. The argument is bolstered by clear, pertinent statistical information and "hard" data to support the author's case for sinewy "soft-power" hegemony. (Michael Ermarth Journal of Modern History 2007-06-01)Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire* is a bravura performance. Based on prodigious research in archival and published sources on both sides of the Atlantic, the book is beautifully written, with epic sweep and the eye of a novelist--or perhaps better a filmmaker--for the significant detail that simultaneously limns a character and advances the story line. Fascinating empirical discoveries await the reader in every chapter, from Thomas Mann as a Rotarian at the beginning to the Eurocommunist origins of the Slow Food movement at the end. But *Irresistible Empire* is no mere cabinet of archival curiosities or album of microhistorical vignettes. Animated by a bold thesis about the triumph of American mass consumer culture, with its stratiordf;ed, status-conscious worlds of goods, over European bourgeois civilization, this book offers nothing less than a grand macro-synthesis of twentieth-century Western history, integrating cultural, economic, and diplomatic themes on a transatlantic scale. (Jonathan Zeitlin Journal of Cold War Studies 2008-07-01) Quite possibly the most ambitious, original, and comprehensive study of the complex two-sided interactions between American popular culture and Europe to date. Both fair-minded and lively, de Grazia develops a bold overview of her subject right up to the present, without ever losing sight of the national and individual variations in the larger patterns of production, marketing, and reception. A dazzling and eloquent book. (Ann Douglas, author of *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*)