

# UNLIKE US: SLOVENE VIEWS ABOUT AMERICA IN THE INTERWAR ERA

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## INTRODUCTION

I was asked to discuss three papers on perceptions of the U.S.A, held by Slovenes between World War I and II. The first paper, "The Slovene Women's Perception of America from Marie Priland to the Present" (Mirjam Milharčič) deals with women emigrants' perception of America, expressed many years after having settled in the USA, while the other two, "America in the Eyes of Božidar Jakac" (Marjan Drnovšek) and Milan Vidmar's "Reflections on Europe and America in 1937" (Peter Vodopivec) discuss perceptions of two Slovene intellectuals, who had visited the U.S. and wrote the books upon their return to Slovenia. There are similarities among the three papers, but there are many more significant differences as the protagonists had different stories to report. People differed not only in their educational and professional background, but they also had different reasons and goals for their sojourn in America. Although all three papers are interesting, my further discussion concerns only perceptions of America, expressed by the two Slovene "visitors" Božidar Jakac and Milan Vidmar.

## DIFFERENT BUT ALIKE ...

The main reason for Božidar Jakac's visit the United States was curiosity, while Vidmar's visits were mostly business. The younger Jakac, visual artist, who had studied in Prague, traveled in Germany and France before his trip to America, was one of many European artists, who went to the United States in the 1920s and early 1930s, to experience the new World for themselves. Traveling from the East to the West coast and back, Jakac who was in part dependent on his fellows Slovene emigrants, mostly supported himself with his art work. His almost two years long stay (1929–1931) in the States gave him an opportunity to acquire a wide range of experiences, which he captured in his art work as well as in his letters. On the other hand, Vidmar's rather two short and purposeful visits: three months and three weeks, were sponsored in

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1927 by the organizers of the world chess championship tournament, where he was a contestant, and in 1936 probably by one of the several American foundations which offered scholarships to numerous European scholars to engage in conversation with their American colleagues. At the time of his American visits, the older Vidmar was an expert on electricity, a professor at the University of Ljubljana, an inventor with entrepreneurial spirit. Vidmar was interested in the economy and social issues in the States, in which Jakac had no interest. He was more of an esthete who marveled, above all, about America's nature and beauties. He enjoyed a long stay in Hollywood where he could be close to his bellowed medium – film – and where he mingled with the important and the knowledgeable: Americans and especially foreigners who were lured from Europe to Hollywood by the superior technology and money in the film industry. The books in which the authors expressed their views and ideas about America are very different. Jakac's travelogue of was based on the letters, personal and reflective, written in America, but adapted in published later in Slovenia. His text is accompanied by numerous revealing drawings and a few beautiful water colors of various places and people he met. On the other hand, Vidmar wrote a book, in which he reflects upon his American experience in Ljubljana as a high ranking university professor in his technical field, trying to analyze complex social issues of an industrialized and modern society and compare it with Europe.

Despite their differences, I was amazed how much underlying similarities there are between their views about America. And these similarities provoked my curiosity and are the focus of my remarks. Vidmar and Jakac were both ambivalent about the States. The energy of the cities and beauty of nature fascinated them, while they disliked excessive mechanization of agriculture (Jakac), mass production, excessive automatization and military-like city planning (Vidmar). They both talked about the enormous size of everything, and about American superficiality: Jakac speaks of polite Americans who lack deep emotions. According to Vidmar, America just didn't have the spirituality that the Europeans needed. He named this missing thing "the soul", which could not be formed in America due to its ethnic heterogeneity and borrowed English language. How is it possible that two such different people express such similar feelings and make similar conclusions about their very different experience in the United States? They were critical about the States and rejected the American way of life, albeit with different words and at a different level. At the end of his travelogue Jakac wrote: "Let the educated people, infected by the breezes of large western cities, drink the poison of all civilization pathologies and intellectual tricks; we do not need Americanism, we do not need the Babel towers of urban civilization, not in life, not in art."<sup>2</sup>, while Vidmar lamented: "There is something in Europe that America lacks. Something that fills your soul upon your return from America. Something you cannot live without, something arising out of European palaces, shop, traffic and something

<sup>2</sup> Božidar Jakac. *Odmevi rdeče zemlje*. Po pismih iz Amerike priredil Miran Jarc, Jugoslovanska knjigarna, Ljubljana, 1932, p. 237.

that is missing in New York, Washington and Chicago.”<sup>3</sup> My impressions from both papers – I might be wrong as both papers are rather short - and from reading Jakac’s *Echoes from the Red Soil* are that both Slovenians (as people in general) had a tendency to generalize their limited experience without much empirical data and understanding of America’s social and political structure and its economy.

What determines the sameness of human perceptions? Trying to answer my own question, I was reminded of the complexity of human perception or memory – selecting, organizing and interpreting information or recall, influenced not only by an individual’s personal characteristics and experiences in a new environment, but also by a broader culture, in which an individual is imbedded, most often unconsciously. Each person’s view of another country, therefore, is not only individual, but also a social construct in a particular time. However, social constructs have their historical component, as a culture itself is a historical construct, changing very slowly. Reading the papers I realized how nicely the two papers fit in the above description of perception. What were the social dimensions, conscious and unconscious elements of Vidmar’s and Jakac’s perceptions? Why do these two authors remind me of the works of their European contemporaries that I read, such as *America comes of age* (1927)<sup>4</sup>, by Andre Siegfried and *America the Menace, Scene from the life of the Future* (1931)<sup>5</sup>, by George Duhamel and both published in France. What do these two Frenchmen have in common with Vidmar and Jakac? I agree with Peter Vodopivec that Vidmar’s negative perception were in part due to the Great depression in the States and to influences by his European friends. So also was Jakac as the Wall Street crash surprised him in San Francisco in October of 1929 - and he had traveled in Europe before his journey to America. Barely managing English, he was homesick and wrote in his book that his ideas about America differed from the reality he encountered. Could one assume that their broader European culture influenced their perceptions and conclusions about the States? Perhaps.

## FORMATION OF THE EARLY STEREOTYPES OF AMERICA IN EUROPE

Historians argue that clichés about the United States began to form already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Soon after the revolution, America became a topic of interest to many European intellectuals, who, in the two centuries, produced a great number of works

<sup>3</sup> Vidmar, Milan. *Med Evropo in Ameriko*. Ljubljana: Naša založba, 1937, pp. 32–33.

<sup>4</sup> Siegfried, Andre. *America comes of age*. Translated by H.H. Hemming and Doris Hemming. Dacapo Press, New York, 1974. Reprint of 1927 edition.

<sup>5</sup> Duhamel, George. *America the Menace, Scenes from the life of the Future*. Translated by Charles Miner Thompson. Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931.

<sup>6</sup> Gerbi, Antonello. *The Dispute of the New World. The history of a polemic, 1750-1900*. Revised and enlarged edition, translated by Jeremy Molle. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1973. Originally published in Italy in 1955 as *La storia disputa del Nouvo Mondo: Storia di una polemica*.

Kres, Rob (ed.) *Anti-Americanism in Europe*. Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1986.

about the new World and its social experiment, promising a world of freedom, opportunity and possibility for anyone who settled there. As few people traveled in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Europeans formed their images about the United States on the basis of success stories of the first settlers and early explorers on one hand and, on the other, on information, spread by European nobility and conservative thinkers, which feared social and economic consequences of the American revolution. The first settlers, escaping various constraints (religion, politics, or criminal charges) in their European life, described the United States as a great and promising land with opportunity for success for everyone. Their stories bred hope and sympathy for the United States among the poor who, in large numbers emigrated to the States, seeking a better life.

The European nobility and conservative thinkers showed exasperation, disdain and hate for the new social experiment, based on the enlightenment principles. Negative or positive emotions, the stories about America were repeated and elaborated by people who were never in the States and didn't want to go visit. Thus, in Europe, two different and competing views of the United States were evolving at the same time. In his seminal work *The Dispute of the New World*, Antonello Gerbi described formation and the roots of early European stereotypes about the United States before 1900. Gerbi extensively writes about the 18<sup>th</sup> century French naturalist Buffon and his semi-scientific theories, which maintained that due to natural conditions in America, fauna - animal species, humans included, were inferior to, less developed than the ones in Europe. Although Buffon's theory had been discredited, Gerbi, on the basis of his research, claimed that they constituted the base of early anti-Americanism and influenced European conservative thinkers.<sup>7</sup> Europeans felt uneasy about a new social order, where traditional social classes did not matter, and people's position were based on property and new money. There were also economic reasons to discredit America. Nordholt in his essay<sup>8</sup> pointed out that in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British spread anti-American propaganda among the Netherlands's merchants.<sup>9</sup> Heavily leaning on Gerbi's work, Nordholt discussed several Europeans writers, e.g., German historians A. L. von Schlozer and A. H. D. Bullow and philosopher G. F. Hegel in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, historian J. G. Hulseman in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and their ideas about America as being unnatural, incoherent, cold, crude, and materialistic. Arguing that America was inferior to Europe, Hegel also maintained that a social order, based on the Enlightenment's principles was "a theoretical error". These thinkers were especially critical of the separation of powers. With no history, traditions and culture and interested only in material things, Americans were looked upon as vulgar, greedy, superficial and soulless.

Liberal thinkers and writers, e.g., poet Goethe and scientist Humboldt and many

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Pells. Richard. *Not like us. How Europeans Have Loved, Hated and Transformed American Culture Since World War II*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Gerbi, *Dispute of the new World*, p. 3-34.

<sup>8</sup> W. Schulte Nordholt. Anti-Americanism in European Culture: The early anifestation. In; *Anti-Americanism in Europe*. Rob Kres (ed.) Free University Press, Amsterdam 1986, p.7-19.

<sup>9</sup> W. S. Nordholt. 9.

others, especially after 1830, rejected the conservative view of America and saw in the new country a vibrant antipode to the rigid and tyrannical old Europe, a political entity without "useless tradition" and claimed that conservative views were only half true and unbalanced, based on ignorance, emotions and prejudices against America. Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville with his work *Democracy in America*, which received a lot of attention when published in France, helped to dispel the conservative view of America. Aristocrat by birth, Tocqueville wrote two comprehensive volumes, published in 1835 and 1840.<sup>10</sup> Wanting to see the American republic and the functioning of its democratic system for themselves, Alexis de Tocqueville and his friend Gustave Beaumont traveled to the United States where they spent nine months (April 1831-February 1832), systematically observing and recording what they saw and heard in their journey. De Tocqueville did his work meticulously and with enthusiasm for learning and truth. Although de Tocqueville's work was well received initially, it was soon forgotten. Perhaps the work was too evenhanded, and the already polarized public did not find his reporting and analysis appealing. Although the de Tocqueville America has vanished, *Democracy in America* remains an important historical source for studying the American history as de Tocqueville "was a genius of perception on whom nothing was lost."<sup>11</sup>

Romantic writers and explorers, who had been in the States, expressed this admiration for the natural beauty of America and glorified it, but hated the society. Novels, e.g., written by Karl May (who never was in America) and others, created a fictional image of America's West and had little in common with the reality, but they were very popular throughout Europe, also in Slovenia. According to Nordholt, most of the typical stereotypes of the American society had been formed before 1860.<sup>12</sup> Stereotypical views -- positive and negative -- contradictory, yet fictional images of America were changing with the time and with people who expressed them, but there is plenty of evidence that the same stereotypical negative and positive clichés persisted through 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY STEREOTYPES ABOUT AMERICAN PERSIST IN EUROPE IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The European image of America over time has been the topic of many studies, written by European as well as American scholars after the World War II, mostly in the context of so called anti-Americanism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> The United States became a strong industrial force at the turn of the century, when it absorbed mil-

<sup>10</sup> Tocqueville Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Alexis De Torqueville. With an introduction by Joseph Epstein. The complete and unabridged Volume I and II, A Bantam Classic Book, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, Joseph Epstein. Introduction to *Democracy in America*, p. XIV.

<sup>12</sup> Nordholt, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> See Pells, *Not like us*. Preface and Chapter 1.

lions of jobless Europeans and gave them bread and home, very modest for most, but nevertheless more than their native countries could do for them. The Germans were the first ones to pay attention to the American way of doing business, and praised American efficiency. After World War I, Americans invested in the weakened European economy and expanded their influence mainly through the film industry and tourism. The United States became aggressive in the European economy and culture: Europe, exhausted by war, was fearful of being colonized and wanted to fight Americanization.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, anything that came from the States and the States itself had to be repudiated. In the early 1920s, mass emigration to the U.S. was stopped, but the U.S. doors were opened to tourists, journalists, professionals and businessmen for travel, study and do business. After returning to Europe, European visitors wrote books about America. In Britain, the journalist William Stead published *The Americanization of the World*; in France appeared *America the Menace, Scene from the life of the Future* by George Duhamel, and *America comes of age* by Andre Siegfried, and the Dutch writer Meno ter Braak published *Why I reject America*. The common characteristic of these books, although written by different people, was a harsh criticism of the United States and their way of life. The Slovenian writers were more ambivalent than the writers just mentioned, but nevertheless critical, rejecting the New World.

Clichés that America is without soul and identity, that its culture is shallow and naïve, that American people are polite but superficial and obsessed with material goods and money have been present in Europe since the inception of the States, but were reinforced by American writers, who described life in America. In the 1920s and 1930s, European conservative anti-culture attitudes toward America were supported by the left-leaning American intellectuals and their work, critical of American, less than perfect reality, to reinforce their 19<sup>th</sup> century image of America. One of the examples is Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt* (1922), in which he described an empty and alienated life of George Babbitt, the real estate agent, and his family, who mainly cared for material things and money. The book was very popular in Europe and for this novel Lewis was the first American who received the Nobel Prize for literature (1931).

The American culture in the interwar era was egalitarian and appealing to the masses (film) and followed the American economic expansion, rather than being imposed by political force. It made converts on its own strength and, therefore, perhaps was more threatening. George Duhamel constructed his book as a series of 15 conversations, in which he discussed the American life (movies, cars, liberty and commerce etc.) with his American host and friend Parker P. Pitkin, whom he liked and described as "not of one Americans who take Constantinople for one of more curios cities of France, ... well read, ... intelligent, ... thinks for himself... visited Europe."<sup>15</sup> Expressing his views on the emerging industrial and mass society, the paternalistic Duhamel

<sup>14</sup> Americanization is a term invented by the British in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it referred to technical inventions, coming from the U.S. Its use spread across Europe by the end of the century and its meaning widened. It also included the way of life.

<sup>15</sup> Duhamel, p. 43.

ridiculed Pitkin, who could not understand why Duhamel did not like, e.g., American democracy or movie theaters. While Duhamel touched on several America's social problems, emerging as a consequence of developing industrial and consumer society, his fears for American liberty and its future seemed to be irrational. Six years later than Duhamel and only two years before World War II, in 1937 Vidmar was worried about America as "it sinned a lot", longing for the European "soul". In their fears for the United States, they didn't notice that the "idealized Old Europe" with its troubled economy and fractured social structures, was producing three totalitarian systems (Fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism), which sent in exile millions and also killed millions of their own. Apparently, they were wrong about the gentle and spiritual Europe. They were looking for an "outside" enemy, and did not notice their own.

### SLOVENE ANTI-AMERICANISM?

It seems that Jakac and Vidmar were very much part of the European landscape in the 1920s and 1930s, and that their views about America were similar to those of other writers. Although ambivalent toward the New World, Jakac and Vidmar were also critical of the American way of life. Their conclusions about American culture reflected the views of cultural conservatives. Louis Adamič, an American-Slovene writer in his book review of Jakac's book, commented that the book was in many respects satisfying, but he inferred that Jakac was not only conservative but also parochial, who "would like to fence Slovenia" against all Western influences and progress.<sup>16</sup> Adamič's label of Jakac seems right, although I would replace "parochial" with European. The U.S. were unknown territory for Jakac, and his barely managing the language certainly contributed to his insecurity in the States. Being homesick and longing for "safety", he idealized his homeland. Jakac's reactions at the end of the book was emotional, unreflected, and in this sense, yes, he was guilty of being anti-American. From Vodopivec's paper, one could say that Vidmar also had an emotional response – looking for a soul, which in his view did not exist in the States: if he had spent more time in the U.S, he might have found it. Vidmar's social analysis was more of left-leaning criticism of capitalism, which, in my opinion, was justified. I would, however, make a very strong distinction between relevant criticism of American society and unreflected, emotional, generalizing statements about the U.S. which should be labeled as anti-Americanism. I have read about quite a few such statements, reading about American education.

It seems that the love-hate relationship between Europe and the U.S. continues to exist, and in the last decades, there have been plenty of books, critical of the United States, written by Europeans and Americans alike.<sup>17</sup> Much attention in the media has been paid these days to anti-Americanism and hating America, but after reading Gerbi,

<sup>16</sup> Lous Adamič. *Kritika*. *Sodobnost* I/1933, str. 32–34.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Bawer. *Hating America*. Hudson Review.com. <http://husonreview/BawerSpO4.html>, Retrieved December 1, 2004.

Duhamel and Pells, I wonder if today's anti-Americanism is any different in its function than it was a hundred years ago. Anti-Americanism is most often a perfectly normal manifestation of dislike for otherness, whatever that might be. All human groups tend to be suspicious of all other human groups, especially when they feel vulnerable. However, I am more certain that the clichés of America—positive or negative— are deeply imbedded in the European culture and are perpetuated, often at an unconscious level, by human tendency to generalize individual experience. Do the clichés of America exist in today's Slovenia? Deductive reasoning enables me to conclude that they do exist; the question is when they appear, why, and to what degree, but Peter Vodopivec is absolutely right that anti-Americanism is not the sole legacy of the Slovenian immediate past - Communism.