

# **“Old Europe” versus “New World”:** **A Summary of an Essay from the Interculturist Craig Storti\***

by Patrick Schmidt

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*Europe has what we do not have yet, a sense of the mysterious and unrelenting limits of life....and we Americans have what they sorely need: a sense of life's possibilities.*

James Baldwin  
*Nobody Knows My Name*

“Ah, the Americans have absolutely no culture” sums up well what many Europeans say among themselves when referring to the United States. Americans seem to have no proper manners, don't know how to eat and drink properly, know nothing of European and world history, not to mention foreign languages. To top this, the common man, of all people, sets the standard, which was described as the *tyranny of the majority* by de Tocqueville in 1831. Basically, it comes down to the simple fact that Europeans deep down don't take the Americans seriously.

It is understandable then that any well-educated, self-respecting European would choose not to pay attention the United States, rather ignore it. The trouble is, it can't. The United States is such a geopolitical, economic, military giant, it's impossible to disregard. Thus, an air of despair and resignation plagues the atmosphere whenever a European has to deal with Americans.

However, beneath this façade of resignation lies a deeper conflict. Europeans are torn on one hand between their latent admiration of America's dynamism and can-do attitude and appalled by their offensive lack of depth and manners. All this was written up in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, where European managers, at an executive training seminar in Lausanne, expressed their mixed feelings of wonder and disdain.

Many expressed envy of American technology, entrepreneurial spirit, productivity and everything to do with the Internet revolution; but they also spoke disparagingly of American businessmen. Among their chief putdowns: Americans are provincial, ignorant of world affairs, uncouth, and too materialistic.

“They admire the financial results of many American companies,” [one participant noted] but when they meet managers from the U.S. they see that even the educated, affluent Americans “don't speak any language besides English, don't know how or when to eat and drink properly, and don't know anything about European history, let alone geography. Then they ask themselves ‘How can they be beating us?’” (*Wall Street Journal*, 15 August 2000)

\*) based on the essay ‘Europeans Attitudes toward Americans’ in the book *Old World - New World* by Craig Storti, pg. 257-264

What exasperates European the most, though, is the unrelenting energy and drive that Americans radiate. They want to change and uplift the world with their vision and purpose — the vision to create the perfect Eden. This leaves the European sort of breathless and at the same time somewhat amused. It's not that Europeans don't have such aspirations and idealism. Rather they feel they are more realistic about such goals. In the end, Europeans look upon Americans like parents to their growing, undisciplined teenagers — full of energy, wanting to break the status quo, but at the same time inexperienced and at times dangerously naïve. Their youthful appearance can also make them seductively attractive, always full of new engaging ideas and dreadfully honest.

Americans' attitudes toward the European is one of openness and acceptance. Although they may find the French arrogant or the Germans as too blunt, there is a genuine effort to uncritically accept such behavior. They sincerely believe in being easygoing, one of the core values of U.S. society. However, if there's one thing Americans cannot in fact accept about Europeans, it is their apparent lack of tolerance, i.e. their air of superiority towards the Americans.

All this doesn't mean Americans aren't judgmental. They are, and as it turns out, Americans are as conflicted toward Europeans as Europeans are toward them. On one hand, Americans like to feel they have the better and more just society. America disassociated itself from Europe, the area of bankrupt ideologies and oppressive social structure, the horrors that lead to mass immigration to America.

But while they are putting down all things Europeans, Americans do, deep down, crave after the approval of Europeans. With their 2000-year-old culture, their deeper understanding of human nature and sophistication, Europeans tend to intimidate Americans and cause them to doubt themselves. Whether they do this on purpose or not, Europeans exhibit a degree of self-confidence and "assured maturity" that leave most Americans in awe and admiration. And even when they're wrong about something, it doesn't phase the Europeans too much. Europeans know they're *essentially* right. It's no doubt because they have seen it all before and are not impressed by loud voices and sunny-boy optimism.

This is the key to understanding this subtle and difficult relationship. Americans subconsciously accept (but not willingly) that Europeans will on occasion be patronizing and condescending. They know they're not as sophisticated or refined as Europeans and are forced in the majority of case to acknowledge European opinion or argument because they're simply more informed. After all has been done and said, the 'elderly' Europeans see it as their duty to prescribe proper behavior to the *New World* and the 'youthful' Americans see it as their duty to accept with reticence the behavior of *Old Europe*.