

**THE
NARCISSISM
OF
MINOR
DIFFERENCES**
HOW AMERICA
AND EUROPE
ARE ALIKE

AN ESSAY IN NUMBERS

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INTRODUCTION: EUROPE AND AMERICA, HISSING COUSINS

THE ATLANTIC GETS EVER WIDER. Not just in a physical sense, as oceans rise and coastlines recede, but also in ideological terms. Europe and America appear to be pitted against each other as never before. On one shore, capitalist markets, untempered by proper social policies, allow unbridled competition, poverty, pollution, violence, class divides, and social anomie. On the other side, Europe nurtures a social approach, a regulated labor market, and elaborate welfare networks. Possibly it has a less dynamic economy, but it is a more solidaristic and harmonious society. “Our social model,” as the voice of British left liberalism, the *Guardian*, describes the European way, “feral capitalism,” in the United States.¹ With the collapse of communism, the European approach has been promoted from being the Third Way to the Second Way. The UK floats ambiguously between these two shores: “Janus Britain” in the phrase of the dean of transatlanticist observers, Timothy Garton Ash.² It is part of

Europe, says the British Left; an Anglo-Saxon coconspirator, answer its continental counterparts.

That major differences separate the United States from Europe is scarcely a new idea. But it has become more menacingly Manichaeian over the last decade. Foreign policy disagreements fuel it: Iraq, Iran, Israel, North Korea. So does the more general question of what role the one remaining superpower should play while it still remains unchallenged. Robert Kagan has famously suggested that, when it comes to foreign policy, Americans and Europeans call different planets home.³ Americans wield hard power and face the nasty choices that follow in its wake. Europeans, sheltered from most geopolitical strife, enjoy the luxury of approaching conflict in a more conciliatory way: Martian unilateralism confronts Venusian multilateralism. But the dispute goes beyond diplomatic and military strategy. It touches on the nature of these two societies. Does having the strongest battalions change the country that possesses them? After all, America is not just militarily strong. It is also—compared to Europe—harsh, dominated by the market, crime-ridden, violent, unsolidaristic, and sharp-elbowed. Competition is an official part of the national ideology and violence the way it spills over into everyday life.⁴ Or so goes the argument: a major battle of worldviews and social practices separates America from Europe.

The idea that the North Atlantic is socioculturally parted is elaborated in both Europe and America for reasons that are as connected to domestic political needs and tactics as they are to any actual differences. American criticism of Europe, when it can be heard at all, typically concerns foreign policy or trade issues. American conservatives occasionally make the old continent a symbol for what they see as the excesses of the welfare state and statutory regulation. But the longstanding European criticism of America has become more vehement and widespread and is now shared by right and left alike. Europeans are keen to define an alternative to American hegemony, now that Europe no longer needs the protection of the United States in a post-cold-war world. Beset with internal fractures and disagreements, they have rediscovered the truism that nothing unites like a common enemy.

In other words, this is not a symmetrical dispute. American anti-Europeanism exists, of course, but it pales next to its European counterpart. “There are no anti-European demonstrations,” as Russell Berman writes, “no burning of French or German flags, no angry mobs with pitchforks and tractors in front of Louis Vuitton boutiques or BMW dealerships. American ‘anti-Europeanism’ is not an equal partner but only an anemic afterthought to the

European spectacles.”⁵ The renaming of french fries in the congressional cafeteria in 2003 (rescinded by 2006) is about as far as things have gone. Even the characterization of the French as cheese-eating surrender monkeys was self-caricature, with *The Simpsons* mocking American troglodytes. Occasionally, a Richard Perle, or his equivalent, gives some Europeans a hard time for disagreeing with the U.S. administration on foreign policy. Policy wonks in DC think tanks may argue the fine points of labor deregulation, extolling alleged American flexibility compared to European sclerosis. But they still breakfast on microwaved simulacra of croissants without considering them emblematic of a larger *Kulturkampf*, and they vacation eagerly in Provence. The battle is rarely joined in reverse. When the talk is about possible gulfs across the Atlantic, one almost never hears about differences whose tendency cuts against European *amour propre*. The Europeans concerned with gun control or the death penalty have few counterparts among American observers pointing out the significant transatlantic difference in terms of the presence (strong and increasing) of neofascist parties in Europe, contrasting to their utter absence in America. Or detailing the well-integrated status of Muslims in the United States, their relegation almost wholly to the social margins across the Atlantic (at least outside Britain).

Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and others on the American right attack Europe, just as the European left hangs the United States out to dry. That is no surprise. The contrast comes in the mainstream press. Where *bien pensant* European opinion, as expressed in the *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, or *Der Spiegel*, is heavily colored by certain preconceptions of America, their U.S. counterparts—whether the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Newsweek*—are not analogously inclined. There is no American José Bové, no U.S. equivalent of the European who regards the lowly hamburger as the opening shot of a battle of worldviews that runs the gamut from McDonalds to Monsanto, from globalization to foreign aid, and who can bring the rabble into the street behind him. “The hamburger is a particular source of hatred of America,” readers are assured by Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies. “It is the single most concentrated, or should that be congealed, symbol of the entire complex that is America.”⁶ There is no American version of Harold Pinter or Margaret Drabble, whose anti-Americanism causes her paroxysms of rage and nausea, her prose practically frothing at the mouth.⁷ A vast majority of Americans (91%) desire closer relations with Europe. Only about a third of the French (39%) agree, barely more than half the British (51%), though the Germans (74%) and the Spanish (67%) are more friendly.⁸

Working-class Americans are largely unconcerned with Europe, while working-class Europeans are often quite fond of the United States. They swarm Florida's beaches and enjoy visiting a country that—less strictly governed by the *Bildungsbürgertum*—unashamedly caters to popular taste. The main contrasts come higher up the social scale. University-educated Americans are, on the whole, positively inclined toward Europe. If anything, they are deferential. Think only of the cultural cringe of U.S. academics. Yes, American right-wing intellectuals occasionally attack Europe. Yet they do so not to play to their own foot soldiers, who could not care less, but to goad the American liberal elite. Anti-Europeanism is part of the battle between right and left. In contrast, both the European left and right alike are anti-American. Each has its own reasons, whether it is the vulgarism of cultureless populism for the Right or the exploitativeness of untrammelled markets for the Left. But they are united in their dislike, and thus reassured that they have at least a European identity in common. In America, anti-European sentiments divide; in Europe, anti-American opinions unite.

One of the aspects of European criticism of the United States that puzzles Americans is how selective or even ill-informed it often is. It is a venerable tradition for Europeans to portray America without knowing much about it. Karl May was an overwhelmingly popular German author of cowboy (Old Shatterhand) and Indian (Winnetou) stories, loved by everyone from Einstein to Hitler. Travel was difficult in his day. One can perhaps forgive him for spinning his fantasies of the Wild West before ever setting foot in America in 1908, and even then, never further inland than Buffalo in upstate New York, which—despite its name—was certainly not the West of which he wrote. But when an internationally successful film director, Lars von Trier, makes a series of movies (*Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville*, *Manderlay*) set in and critical of the United States without having ever been there, one begins to suspect something akin to willful ignorance. Not that mere knowledge has ever been a prerequisite for opinions on America. "I did not need to go to the United States to say what I said," Georges Duhamel, a French writer, assured his readers in 1930. "I could have written most of the chapters of my book without leaving Paris."⁹ Reading Europe's popular press pundits, Americans often grope to recognize their country: rapster ghetto chic, laced with urban poverty or trailer park Appalachia, contrasted with gated-community golf links, iced with caloric surfeit and seasoned with prison brutality. The sociological earnestness of it all is interrupted now and then by some head-shaking Vegas weirdness for comic relief.

Equivalent Americans—otherwise well-educated people whose irrepressible desire to pronounce on Europe is matched only by their ignorance of the subject—are simply not to be found. Americans who have made a profession of observing Europe—Jane Kramer, Bill Bryson, and the like—do so affectionately, and from long experience and careful attention. Even Robert Kagan, perhaps America's most trenchant critic of Europe, lives in Brussels and knows whereof he speaks. Occasionally, conservative tub-thumpers in America criticize Europe. Politicians may strive for effect, as when Mitt Romney attacked French health care during his short-lived primary campaign in late 2007. Sometimes, a blogger or op-ed writer uses Europe's failures to make a rhetorical point. But it happens quite rarely.

Rush Limbaugh and his ilk are often thought to poison Americans' minds by contrasting godless, lazy, overregulated Europe to virtuous America. The reality is that Limbaugh and company are too provincial and self-obsessed to look far beyond America's borders—as a quick drill into the data shows. A left-wing European pendant to Rush Limbaugh is the Berlin *Tageszeitung*, the venerable mouthpiece of the aging New Left in Germany, where criticism of America is a staple on the menu. If we search Limbaugh's and the *TAZ*'s sites for the terms America and Europe, and synonyms, we discover that Limbaugh speaks 13 times as often of America as he does about Europe. The *TAZ*, in contrast, speaks of Germany only 1.5 times as often as it does of America. Indeed, it mentions America almost as often as does Limbaugh.¹⁰ In other words, while Europe is a peripheral concern for the American Right, America is an obsession of the European Left. American views of Europe can perhaps best be described as indifference served up with lashings of nostalgia. Europe is the world left behind, sometimes under traumatic circumstances, and one which registers only peripherally on the radar. For Europeans, in contrast, opinions have run hot and contradictory from the moment of first contact: admiration for the possibilities of the new, disgust with how it was actually working out. Perhaps Americans are less interested in Europe than Europeans are in America. But if Americans do not wax eloquent about the old world, at least they do not utter much that is inaccurate or distorted.

The dispute between America and Europe does not pose only the two shores of the North Atlantic against each other. The fight is joined equally within the now expanded Europe. The new nations of the EU have often adopted similar policies and strive for much the same social, economic, and political goals as its old members.¹¹ Yet, reacting to the overweening statism of their own old regimes, they also have favored a more neoliberal economic model. In many

instances they have rejected European models of welfare statism and looked to Anglo-American ideals of a less regulated capitalism.¹² Early in the transition from Communism, Hungarian and Czech reformers were more neoliberal than Reagan and Thatcher.¹³ The Baltic states, though admiring Scandinavia, have been radically free-market reformers.¹⁴ True, the new nations have tempered their neoliberalism in recent years. Yet tax policy in, say, Estonia, with its low flat rates and streamlined system of collection, would be the dream of any American conservative. Debates between Europe and America thus do not pit just the United States against Europe. They also frame a struggle at the heart of the enlarging EU itself.

Although such disputes across the Atlantic have been prompted by disagreements over foreign policy, they touch on something more fundamental and enduring. European criticism of America is, after all, as old as the country itself. Arguably, what we see today is a contemporary incarnation of a long-standing controversy that pits two different models of society against each other as a binary choice. Let me count the ways America and Europe are thought to differ: economic, social, political, cultural, ecological, and religious. America believes in the untrammelled market; Europe accepts capitalism but curbs its excesses. Because the market dominates, the environment is run down in the United States, cared for in Europe. "America has always grown by playing out its soils, wasting its oil, and by looking abroad for the people it needed to do its work," Emmanuel Todd, a French prophet of collapse, assures us, adding that Europeans, as erstwhile peasants, approach nature in a gentle, Gaia-like way.¹⁵

Americans are competitive and anomic; Europeans are solidaristic. Initiative and merit may be better rewarded in the United States, but those who cannot compete on the open market are more likely to fall to the bottom. In Europe, a safety net prevents such misery, even as it may limit the altitude of high fliers. Because social contrasts are greater in America, crime is more of a problem than in Europe. American society is more violent. Social measures either do not exist in America or are more privatized than in Europe. Education, for example, is often described as stratified and largely privatized, while in Europe it is universally accessible and state-financed. The lack of universal health insurance in America means that average life expectancies are low and the uncared for die in misery. Americans toil relentlessly, while Europeans trade income for leisure. As one book on the subject puts it, if Europeans are lazy, Americans are crazy.¹⁶ Europeans are secular; Americans are much more likely to believe in God and accept a role for religion in public life.

On the occasions when the American Right attacks Europe, it, of course, spins a variant on the same dichotomies: Europeans are lazy and defeatist; Americans are entrepreneurial and optimistic. Europeans are corrupt and irreligious; Americans are honest and pious. Europeans are infected with Islamic fundamentalism because they are ineffective against immigration; Americans are building a fence between themselves and Mexico, or are successfully integrating their immigrants—depending on which conservative position on immigration is being espoused.

The two societies are thus thought to differ radically: competition versus cooperation, individualism versus solidarity, autonomy versus cohesion. As Jeremy Rifkin, an American writer who shares a certain technological pessimism with much European opinion, puts it: “The European Dream emphasizes community relationships over individual autonomy, cultural diversity over assimilation, quality of life over the accumulation of wealth, sustainable development over unlimited material growth, deep play over unrelenting toil, universal human rights and the rights of nature over property rights, and global cooperation over the unilateral exercise of power.”¹⁷

European criticism of America has been voiced for over two centuries now, and the themes of such attacks have been heard before in different guises. A long tradition of cultural conservatism in Europe has lambasted the supposed attributes and effects of the modern world. During the nineteenth century, both the European Left and Right criticized modernity from its own vantage—whether as cosmopolitan, rootless, and anomic seen from the agrarian romanticism of the Right or as ruthless, exploitative, and mercantile in the opinion of the Left.¹⁸ The new world was forced to be modern whether it wanted to or not. But many Europeans thought they had a choice. Modernity, and the ongoing debate over whether and how Europe might participate in it, has long played a role as a Rorschach test in European culture—something onto which Europeans have displaced their fears and misgivings about the change they faced.

Today, America represents the tea leaves in which Europe reads its fearsome future. When, for example, Germans—citizens of the world’s most dynamic export economy—attack globalization (which is to say, their ability to sell their excellent products everywhere) as a form of *Amerikanismus*, then clearly America is not being attacked for what it is (a rather sclerotic and half-hearted player in the global economy, which, by virtue of the size of its internal market alone, will never be as interested in globalization as many European nations), but as a proxy for an otherwise inchoate fear of the world

markets. When Europeans criticize America, it is often a shorthand way of expressing worries about the modern world in general. China, India, Japan, and Korea are often the real objects of suspicion. America is the devil they are familiar with, not one of the unknown unknowns. And, in any case, the dispute is really more about what sort of modernity Europe wants and what its identity in a globalized world is to be. Portraying America as the Other against which Europe defines itself is thus part of an ongoing dispute within the continent over the nature of its own society, its role in the world, and the direction of its future.

It is in this light we best interpret the small library of books published over the past few years, debating whether a sociocultural Rubicon separates (continental) Europe from the (Anglo-) American barbarians.¹⁹ America's unregulated capitalism is a danger to Europe, warns Todd.²⁰ The notion of a unified West has lost whatever meaning it once had, adds Claus Offe, the German sociologist.²¹ A recent letter-writer to the *Financial Times* agrees, although placing the UK on the side of the Continentals. A common language should not, this writer claims, obscure the distance between the UK and the United States: Americans carry guns, execute prisoners, go bankrupt, drive large cars, and live in even larger houses. Their men are circumcised and their working class is poor. The humanist and secular Europeans, by contrast, enjoy socialist hospitals, schools, and welfare systems. They pay high taxes, live longer, and take the train.²² "The proposition that there is something hateful in the very nature of America, that its myths present life-threatening danger to the rest of the world, appears quite natural," Sadar and Davies, our hamburger pundits, conclude.²³ One ponders what unspoken motives inspire such letters, articles, and books. Andrei Markovits, author of one of the most interesting recent books on the subject, suggests that anti-Americanism helps fire the engines of pan-European nationalism. Europeans have less in common than the aspiring empire builders of the EU would like. But at least they can agree on being different from the Americans.²⁴ Or can they?

Much has been made of transatlantic differences in popular books and in the press. But these outpourings, however heartfelt, are troublingly deficient in fact and substance. Polemic and vituperation abound; caricature, rather than portrait, is the dominant genre. It is time to examine more closely what it is we do know. This book is an essay in numbers. In it, I consider if and how Europe differs from the United States. I present a broad palette of comparative and quantifiable data, a kind of statistical Baedeker juxtaposing the two sides of the Atlantic.

There is an old joke about a man looking for his lost car keys at night under a street lamp. A passing pedestrian helps him search for a while, and then asks whether he is sure that this is where the keys were lost. “Oh, no,” replies the would-be driver, “I lost them over there.” “Then why are we looking here?” asks the pedestrian. “Because this is where the light is.” So, too, the statistical evidence available for both sides of the Atlantic severely restricts where we can probe. Subjects that could be illuminated by quantifiable evidence are often badly served by the data we have. And in any case, quantification only takes us so far. Not all differences can be identified by numbers. But at least statistics allow us a first pass over the terrain and give us the opportunity to compare reliably. Blinkered but demonstrable, quantification releases us from the clutches of anecdote and impression into the realm of fact and verifiability. The point of this book is not to engage in subjective evaluations of qualitative differences or similarities. The world’s bookshelves already groan under the weight of such attempts. It is instead to look dispassionately at the quantitative evidence, such as it is. My ambition is not to settle the debate over transatlantic differences once and for all (as if that could ever be achieved). Instead, I hope to apply a swift and well-aimed karate chop of fact and figure to unsettle the prejudices and dislodge the mistaken assumptions that have become common currency in periodicals, popular books, talk shows, and conversations on both sides of the Atlantic.

Beyond those popular debates, each facet of the alleged contrasts between Europe and America can marshal an army of scholars well-versed in the details: whether social policy experts, criminologists, educational researchers, students of health care, environmentalists, or those who study religion. I cannot possibly hope to do each of these fields justice, nor to keep their practitioners from thinking that their specialty has been mauled. I can only beg their indulgence and plead the difficulty of presenting so broad and synoptic an account of so large a part of the world. My concern is not with the finer details of these specialized fields, but with the popular perceptions of difference across the Atlantic and the way that these perceptions inform the middlebrow press, TV reportage, the blogosphere, and the attitudes of those Americans and Europeans who know enough about each other to form an opinion. It is not just one aspect of the transatlantic relationship or another that I want to examine, but its entire gestalt. There is—if I can put it this way—an ideological totality to the major fault line that has been identified as running down the North Atlantic. Each aspect is seen as reinforcing and affirming the others. To tackle just one or two of these in detail would get us nowhere. A statistical bird’s-eye view may.

To foreshadow my conclusion, the evidence in this book shows two things. First, Europe is not a coherent or unified continent. The spectrum of difference within even Western Europe is much broader than normally appreciated. Second, with a few exceptions, the United States fits into the span of most quantifiable measures that I have been able to find. We may therefore conclude either that there is no coherent European identity, or—if there is one—that the United States is as much a European country as the usual candidates. We might rephrase this by saying that both Europe and the United States are, in fact, parts of a common, big-tent grouping—call it the West, the Atlantic community, the developed world, or what you will. America is not Sweden, for sure. But nor is Italy Sweden, nor France, nor even Germany. And who says that Sweden is Europe, any more than Vermont is America?

Sigmund Freud coined the phrase “the narcissism of minor differences” to account for the intense energy invested in parsing divergences that, to an impartial observer, might seem trivial and inconsequential. The psychological wellspring of such behavior, Freud reasoned, was the hope of affirming internal group solidarities against an outsider who was perhaps not as “other” as his would-be enemies would have liked. His foreignness therefore had to be narcissistically elaborated in lavish detail. Among Freud’s examples of such supposedly minor differences were those between Spaniards and Portuguese, North and South Germans, the English and the Scots. If he had left it at that, we might be able to agree with him that this was but “a convenient and relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression.” We could, that is, if we were willing to let, say, the Highland clearances in Scotland and Bismarck’s wars of unification between Prussians and, among others, Bavarians slip into that twilight world where past bloody strife between fierce enemies has faded in memory to become but historical allusion among current allies. But Freud’s other examples of what he considered minor differences are less trivial. They demonstrate the gravity of the issues actually at stake: Communists and their bourgeois opponents in Soviet Russia, and (in a book published in 1930) Christians and Jews. Freud was not a political philosopher, nor did he elaborate this theme at any length. We need not, I think, accept his examples of minor differences as very telling. And yet we stand to benefit from his insight into differences whose objective divergence is so slight that it does not actually justify the ferocious devotion put into elaborating them.²⁵

Not everyone will welcome this book’s conclusion, that unrecognized affinities span the Atlantic. In Europe, it may be read as a neocon apologia for America, one that does not even have the courage of its own convictions,

namely that the United States is, and wants to be, different. It may be seen as arguing that things are not so bad in America, and therefore as a book that cuts corners on the truth. American conservatives may find it unsettling that less separates Europe and America than they think—or want. However, it is above all, I suspect, American liberals who will be troubled by this book. They may be annoyed by what they interpret as support of the status quo. American liberals appreciate having an idealized image of Europe at hand to criticize domestic American policy. If Europeans enjoy having an ugly America to buff the sheen of their own continent's qualities, liberals in the United States like to have a virtuous Europe—and above all, a Europe that is different from America—as the target to aim for when calculating their own policy ambitions and trajectories.

I would urge my audience to contemplate the possibility that the potential reactions I have sketched out here to this book say more about the reader than the read. I wrote the book in the belief that recent U.S. foreign policy has so poisoned relations between Europe and America that it has affected more general perceptions of what differences actually divide the North Atlantic. The debate has degenerated into ideological posturing, motivated by local politics and tactics. Vast cauldrons of rhetorical soup have been boiled from meager scraps of evidence. It is time to bring some empirical meat to the table. To argue, as this book does, that the differences across the Atlantic are not as great as commonly thought is not to discount European achievements, nor gloss over American shortcomings. It is to aim for an accurate portrayal of the two sides of the Atlantic. And it is to suggest that a clear-eyed view reveals that the commonalities across this divide are greater than the differences. Indeed, it may well be that the cultivation of whatever divergences remain is, as Freud warned us, narcissistic. In any case, it is highly likely that the election of Obama and his new administration in Washington, ameliorating eight years of transatlantic antagonism, will lend plausibility to the arguments put forth here.

Readers may argue that different figures could be found for some of the data presented here, or that the picture I sketch is unbalanced. That the United States profoundly differs from Europe is a “fact” so often stated that it has become just that: part of what we intuitively think we already know. The story of radical difference is too often the conceptual prism through which we view both Europe and America: a philosophical starting point rather than a question to be examined. This book thus aims to start a debate that has not yet taken place, or rather, one that has been held in an atmosphere of too little data.

To the best of my ability, I have collected and examined the available evidence. But my ambition—to write a brief, evidence-based account comparing

the United States and Europe—has proven unexpectedly difficult. Few comparable statistics exist. All too often, the numbers deal with only a small assortment of nations, and rarely do they span the Atlantic. The ones I present here are those that I have found. I am not a statistician. Few of those who engage at a popular level in this debate are. I have therefore not sought to go beyond amassing and presenting the standard available data gathered by reputable organizations. Occasionally, I have created my own comparisons, but only where the data seemed to be robust and comparable. Most of the time, I have ventured only where the statistical light shines, which is far from everywhere.

The book's data come mostly from a handful of organizations that devote significant effort to presenting internationally comparable figures: the World Health Organization, the United Nations, UNESCO, UNICEF, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, Eurostat, the Sutton Trust, the World Values Survey, the International Labour Organization, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the International Association for the Study of Obesity, the World Resources Institute, the International Energy Agency, the International Social Survey Program, and, above all, that astounding emporium of facts and figures, the OECD. To their efforts, I owe whatever rigor the following may possess. But unlike the scholars whose acknowledgments are rife with the usual pieties, I'm not going to absolve them of the weaknesses. The flaws, shortcomings, and inadequacies of the data are also theirs. At least, they have taken a significant first step in gathering evidence. But in this ever-globalizing world, we need far better and more comprehensive data to understand differences and similarities across national boundaries.

No doubt, objections can be raised to many of the statistics presented here. But these objections go both ways. For example, American unemployment figures do not include the many young men in prison and are thus understated. In a similar way, Swedish unemployment figures would be higher (and more truthful) if they included many of those who are counted as disabled. (If you believe the raw figures, Swedes are the most disabled people in the industrialized world, with over a fifth of all adults incapable of work.) In America, 0.7% of the population is incarcerated, in Sweden a mere 0.08% (figures from 2005–06). In America, 10.7% of the adult population is disabled (figures from the late 1990s); in Sweden, the figure is twice as high (20.6%). If the United States had Swedish incarceration rates and counted the surplus prisoners as unemployed, the American unemployment rate for 2005 would rise from 5.1% to 5.8%. Alternatively, if we were to assume that Sweden had American levels of disability and counted the other Swedes on disability benefits as unemployed,

the Swedish unemployment rate would rise from 7.4% to 17.3%.²⁶ In point of fact, McKinsey calculates the actual unemployment rate in Sweden to be around 17%.²⁷ Different nations cook the books in different ways.

Another example: a substantial fraction (ca. 13% in 2005) of American foreign aid goes to two countries in the Middle East: Egypt and Israel. Though it easily disappears in quantitative comparisons, this observation should be part of any accounting of American foreign aid: it is prompted by geopolitical as well as humanitarian motives. Equally, so should the fact that for historical, strategic, and geopolitical reasons, almost two-thirds of British and French foreign aid goes to their former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. In comparison, 40% of German aid and 25% of American goes to sub-Saharan Africa.²⁸ A quarter of French aid returns to its source as funds intended to allow recipient nations to pay back loans extended by France in the first place, and the statistically single best predictor of French aid is whether the recipient country is francophone.²⁹ One could go on picking holes in the available statistics until no trustworthy figures remained. For better or worse, I have accepted the numbers presented by the international organizations as the best we have and worked with them accordingly. At the end of the day, as many mistakes will have been made in one direction as in the other. The overall trend is what will carry conviction. As is so often the case in scholarship, one can have precision or breadth, but not both at the same time.

The comparisons that follow assume that each country is equally interesting and pertinent, whether a large one, like the United States or Germany, or a small one—Denmark, say, or the Netherlands. The comparisons are not, as a statistician would put it, weighted according to the demographic importance of the country. Norway, with fewer than five million inhabitants, does not vanish against the massive bulk of the United States. Of course, when we look for lessons that can be learned from other nations, size is not always irrelevant. What works in tiny, homogeneous Iceland may not be suitable for more fragmented America—or Switzerland, for that matter. But nor is size everything. Just because one country is smaller, or larger, than another does not automatically eliminate the value of drawing comparisons between them. When economists debate the virtues of deregulation, for example, the sizes of the respective economies do not figure prominently in their considerations. Certainly, the intellectual and social policy importance of the Scandinavian nations can best be understood in this way. Were it not for the implicit assumption that these small countries have something to teach the rest of the world, it would be hard to explain their grip on the imaginations of sociologists, political scientists, and public policy

makers. Small, distant, and obscure, they nonetheless punch above their weight in social policy discussions. They are taken seriously in their own right and not judged just by their geopolitical clout. I make a similar assumption here. When we seek to identify commonalities and weigh differences, we talk about ways of organizing societies, types of nations, or styles of citizenship, not just about the sheer brawn of demography, GDP, and firepower. Small nations may, in this respect, have as much to contribute as their larger peers.

Before plunging into this book, a final methodological caveat is required: the data assembled here are the latest figures I have been able to find that include both Western Europe and the United States. In most cases, I have examined the immediately preceding annual numbers to ensure that the latest year is not just a statistical blip, but represents a stable value of some duration. The vast majority of numbers presented come from the last decade. Occasionally, I have been forced to rely on slightly older ones. This means that the picture sketched here, though as up-to-date as possible, is nonetheless a snapshot of relations between the score of countries under consideration. It is a picture frozen in time, not an account of an ongoing relationship. However much the two shores of the North Atlantic approximate or are distanced from each other right now, the longer story may be one of moving closer together—or farther apart. I argue that Europe and America are closer now than is commonly thought. But it may be that, nonetheless, they are moving away from each other. While others claim that they are far apart, it may be that they are actually coming closer. I will come back to this question later, rather than getting further involved in matters of method before presenting my findings, but the issue should be kept in mind during what follows.

As I now turn to compare Europe and America, I will speak only of Western Europe as it largely overlaps with the 15 states that made up the EU before its recent expansion. When it is available, I include data from a few nonmembers (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland) since my subject is Western Europe, not the EU as such. Limiting the focus to Western Europe is the fairest approach. Were I to include the new members of the EU as well, Europe and the United States would be even less distinguishable and my argument would be won almost by default. The recently arrived EU nations are not only more likely to agree with the United States on foreign policy than is old Europe. The new Europeans also act more like Americans. They are more religious, more skeptical of an interventionist state, and more *laissez-faire* in their economic practices. As it expands, the new EU is also becoming more heterogeneous, and in that sense, too, more like America.