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Does Europe know better?

The Clash of Political Cultures between the US & Europe

(1500 words)

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With the Ukrainian crisis Europe has suddenly reemerged in the media headlines. Transatlantic policy differences have resurfaced as well, in view of the **return of the continent as a potential battleground and as an increasingly independent actor**. Clearly, the Biden administration does not want war, yet Washington seeks to meet the Russian buildup with an increase of NATO force as well as the threat of massive economic sanctions.

Except for the UK, European governments **prefer a negotiated solution** short of war in the hope of protecting their gas supplies and Eastern trade. This difference of opinion reveals a fundamental cleavage in NATO, stemming from a divergence of political cultures that is often misunderstood. **How can this be explained?**

The new European model

During recent decades the Europeans have developed a model of their own that provides a **progressive alternative to the American way of life**. This is a form of democratic modernity, resulting from painful learning from the catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century.

In the bitter contest between the ideological blueprints of Communism and Fascism, liberal democracy emerged victorious in 1918, 1945 and 1989. It was the United States, which had thrice rescued the continent from itself. But during the last generation, the **Europeans have begun to emancipate themselves from American tutelage**. They are developing their own version of international cooperation, democratic self-government, and social solidarity out of the shared Western values that can serve as an example even for the United States. Further details on this can be found in my latest book *Embattled Europe (2021)*.

One positive trait of the European model is the **generally peaceful behavior of a Europe** that has learned the lessons of two incredibly bloody world wars. While individual countries still cling to national sovereignty, their cooperation within the European Union (EU) is an attempt to avoid the repetition of earlier bloodshed by pooling efforts in economics and other areas.

While often disagreeing on foreign policy and security issues, Brussels speaks with a **much more united voice in matters of global trade**, favoring a balance between free exchanges and protection of its own market.

In contrast, since the end of the Cold War the US government has engaged in a **great deal of unilateralism and the use of force**, which has led to much criticism in Europe. As a result, the EU member states are heavily involved in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), supporting the US inspired liberal world order that emerged after World War II.

While participating in some military interventions sponsored by the UN or NATO, the EU members prefer to resolve problems by negotiation whenever possible. With the exception of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, this **multilateral and civilian approach** has pacified Europe. It has also helped reduce tensions in other crisis regions in the European neighborhood, even if it had occasionally to be supplemented by force.

Europe has a more democratic election system

Another exemplary aspect is the existence of a truly democratic election

system in Europe that seeks to encourage more citizen involvement. In contrast to the voter suppression, rural overrepresentation, and flagrant gerrymandering of the American and also British “winner takes all” process, the Europeans have opted for a **proportional representation system**. Such a system more accurately reflects the wishes of the electorate by counting all ballots equally, even those of the smaller parties.

Europeans have difficulty understanding why the American election system does not follow the “one person, one vote” principle. After all, as the proportional representation system is more modern than the 18th century constitution of the US, it **more accurately reflects minority views**, which in turn leads to higher participation during elections.

The resulting **broader range of voices** in the various parliaments in Europe favors the establishment of coalition governments, which tend toward compromise, resulting in **centrist policies**. Weighing each vote more fairly than is the case in the Electoral College in the US, this system makes for more representative government in the long run.

Differing welfare systems

Yet another worthwhile characteristic of the European model is a

reformed welfare state, which creates a sense of security and solidarity. Since neoliberals in the UK succeeded in preventing the Europeanization of social policy during the almost 50 years when the UK was an EU member, responsibility for social policy issues has largely remained a preserve of the respective EU member states.

Still, the rapid expansion of social benefits during the postwar boom ceased during the stagflation and deindustrialization in the aftermath of the oil shocks of the 1970s. Instead, following the American example of a return to an ideology with emphasized the beneficial power of the free market, this has also led in Europe **to a noticeable retrenchment in government services**.

Nevertheless, far from disappearing, the **welfare state in most European countries has been reformed**, moving from subsidizing wage replacements for client groups to enabling people to reenter the job market through additional training and childcare. Though strained by immigration pressures, aging populations and demands for gender equality, the **widespread support for government social policy** has continued.

In fact **half of the budget of most European states is absorbed by social policy measures**. But this has had very positive results. In

international comparisons of social inequality, the EU members therefore perform **considerably better** than the more polarized US.

Europe – a progressive alternative

Taken together, all these traits of the European model constitute a **progressive alternative because they provide a better quality of life** for most citizens than the vaunted “American dream.” In truth, the latter may offer a higher income, bigger houses, grander SUVs—but these are purchased by much job insecurity, social inequality and racist violence.

People who have lived in Europe prize its **social safety net**, such as “access for all to childcare, medical and parental leave from work, tuition free college, a living stipend, universal health care and generous pensions.”

Other attractive features are longer vacations, greater public support for cultural programs, gun control, and more secure employment, just to cite a few examples. **Such benefits unquestionably do require paying higher taxes.** But they also provide greater services that make life more agreeable for the average citizen.

Many populists seem not to understand that they get what they pay for in public goods when they complain about bad roads but refuse to be taxed for repairing them. In fact, many **Americans might be ready to pay slightly higher taxes in return for the public benefits** they would obtain, if they only knew about them.

While the American way of life has many positive features that have attracted generations of immigrants, the **European model has developed into a serious alternative for progressive politics**. No doubt, the material rewards for individual initiative are greater in the US, reinforcing the rags-to-riches myth. And the great efforts within the US to live with ethnic diversity are laudable.

The use of military force in the post-Cold War world, however, has failed to win the peace and has **deeply divided** much of the world into being for or against the US. American politics have also become **highly polarized at home**, and **social inequality has steadily grown**.

In contrast, Europeans have developed more peaceful international relations, a more democratic self-government, and greater social solidarity with those less fortunate. No doubt, the **EU countries also have many problems of their own**, such as the functioning of the common currency, dealing with mass immigration and coping with Brexit and the rise of populism to name just a few issues.

But in some essential aspects of life such as public transit, health insurance, childcare and environmental protection **most Europeans are better off** than their Anglo-American relatives.

If Washington and Brussels are to cooperate successfully in transatlantic and global affairs, they **need to understand these cultural differences** and perhaps try to narrow the gap.

The US's and Europe's approaches to Russia

In addressing the Ukrainian crisis, the American and European approaches are in the final analysis **complementary**. If Vladimir Putin is bent on using military means, imitating Hitler's rhetoric of ethnic self-determination, he can only be stopped by **the threat of encountering force against his aggression**. But preemptive military action by NATO may also result in an unnecessary regional war.

To resolve this deadlock, **negotiations are needed** that guarantee Kiev's independence and integrity while meeting Russia's justified security concern of avoiding a fallback into Cold War confrontation. Moscow would be more likely to cooperate if it felt internationally respected as a world power.

The choice is therefore not simply between military or civilian options. Instead, **dialogue is the way forward**. Both sides should keep talking

with each other in a variety of forums so as to avoid force while being prepared to use it.

Both the Americans and the Europeans need to understand that their divergent approaches to the Ukrainian confrontation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they complement each other. It is obvious, **only if the West maintains a united front is there any chance to stop Russia's expansionism.**

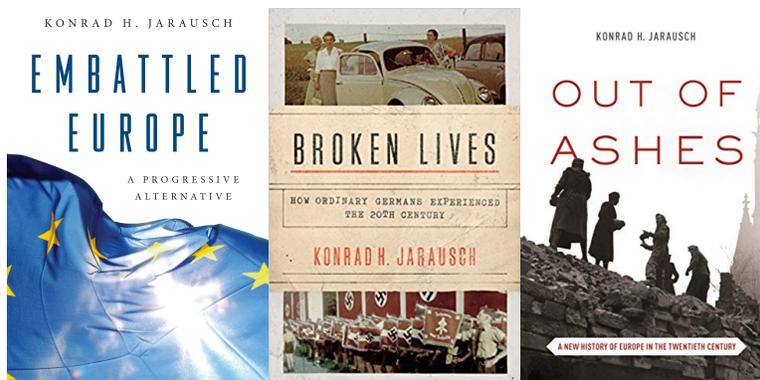
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Books recently published by Konrad Jarausch:

Embattled Europe: A Progressive Alternative (Princeton UP, 2021);

Broken Lives: How Ordinary Germans Experienced the Twentieth Century (Princeton UP, 2018);

Out of Ashes: A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century (Princeton UP, 2015).





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