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Peter Baldwin: The Narcissism of Minor Differences. How America and Europe are Alike. An Essay in Numbers

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BOOK REVIEW

Peter Baldwin: *The Narcissism of Minor Differences. How America and Europe are Alike. An Essay in Numbers*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 321 pp., \$24.95

Twenty years ago Peter Baldwin made his mark in the scholarly discussion on the European welfare states with *The Politics of Social Solidarity* (1990), by shifting the conceptual terrain from social classes to the relation between ‘risk groups’ and the state. He has recently published a polemical book on the differences and similarities between the USA and the European countries. The key thesis in *The Narcissism of Minor Differences* is caught in the title. Differences exist but they should be seen in the context of the much more important similarities.

1. Method and message

Baldwin marshals an impressive set of data on the USA and European social, political, moral, ideological and socio-political regimes to prove his point. The book is organized around 212 tables and more figures are mobilized in the running text. His comparisons are constructed as league tables, where countries are ranked along one dimension. The book is written with the lay reader in mind, demanding no statistical knowledge. Baldwin does not seriously discuss the scholarly comparative literature. Instead he dwells on polemic jottings by journalists and the media perceptions of the USA–Europe contrast.

Baldwin’s tables are chosen to emphasize the large similarities and the minor differences between the continents. In many tables the measures are well chosen, in others less so. If you have to compare countries on very different levels of development, it is more relevant to compare proportions, e.g. percentage of GDP, number of X per 100,000 inhabitants, etc., than in absolute costs in (adjusted) dollars. Some tables are funny, e.g. number of perfect wines and Michelin restaurants, how many who have experienced sex with three in the bed.

Baldwin’s key argument is that the differences *within* the USA as well as between the different states in Europe are more important than those between the ‘US’ and ‘Europe’. In his comparisons Baldwin uses

data on the Europeans societies west of Oder-Neisse and north of the Mediterranean. His choice of countries making up 'Europe' mirrors the very different levels of development within and among the different states in the USA. But it is important to differentiate between different regions within a unified polity and economy – such as the states in the USA – and the much larger, and more significant, differences that exist between countries with different economies and state structures. Taking a continental view, 'America' should then include not only Canada but also Central America and the Caribbean. The asymmetry in the comparison is not seriously discussed by Baldwin.

In the scholarly literature, comparisons between the USA and West Europe have usually been built on countries and economies that are comparable in terms of political regime, history and economic development. The focus has been on North-western and Central Europe. Spain, Portugal, and Greece have seldom been included – being too different in terms of economic level as well as having too different kinds of polities.

2. Are some differences more important than others?

Some characteristics of societies are more important than others and some differences are more critical than others. In comparing countries, societies and political regimes there are forms of distinctiveness in terms of institutional setup, forms of power and distribution of resources and rights that can make the claim for saying that one society is distinctive in relation to others, even if 98% of their policies, institutions, resource distribution, and individual rights as well as the content and character of everyday social interaction are quite similar.

If you in 1937 were to judge the similarities and differences of Germany in relation to its neighboring countries in the East and the West you would find a 98% identity with the 'social map' of Europe, from social policy to everyday social life. But with a difference... And even if that difference was of minor quantitative importance, it was in qualitative terms important enough to set Germany in a category of its own.

There is also an important temporal dimension when we discuss similarities and differences between societies. Do we witness a convergence or a divergence in the development trajectories of the different entities? What set Germany apart from its neighbors in 1937 obviously changed over time. Even if we accept Baldwin's presupposition, i.e., that there are only 'minor differences' we could ask if they have become smaller or larger over time. Have the USA and Europe become more similar or developed along different routes after the watershed of the early 1970s, i.e., close to 40 years. In such a perspective we could also

ask in which way the convergence/divergence axis have developed in different fields and arenas.

How can we then interpret differences and similarities, when we compare USA and the European countries? Baldwin uses his ranking tables to emphasize that in almost all cases the data for USA falls well within the span of the European diversity. Quantitatively this conclusion is correct. But by using Baldwin's own data we can also conclude that the USA is in a league of its own with regard to three clusters.

First, on the USA *as an engine of capitalist growth* we find exceptional values of economic freedom for firms and managers, and little state control over firms, a *very low labour regulation*, including highly flexible rules for firing and hiring personnel as well as *very high rate of technological growth*, with the highest value on patents per person, and high investment in clean technology. Here we can add the *very high investment in higher education and on medical research*. The USA is also very high on total university spending and has the highest number of graduates. The other side of USA success as a machine of capitalist growth is its effects on labor. This can be seen in Baldwin's tables on low minimum wages, few vacation days taken, medium high working time, leading to only a medium productivity. The combination of *market efficiency and labour disadvantage* is seen as well in the combination of low unemployment especially long-term unemployment rate with low unemployment compensation. All this is set within a framework of relatively *low total social expenditure* (only higher than in southern Europe).

Second, Baldwin's tables demonstrate the specific character of *the inequality regime* in USA social and economic life, from the very high *infant mortality* rate and a low male life expectancy to the highest value of the *poverty rate* in the population and the income inequality, as measured by the Gini index.

Finally, with regard to *violence, death and repression* the USA is outstanding in the number of murders, as well as being high on robbery. The USA is exceptionally high on the *size of the incarcerated population* and has very long-term prison penalties. The practice of the *death penalty* obviously sets the USA apart from the European norm. Being highest on defense spending is explained by the imperial reach.

These three differences can be summed as the two opposite ends of civilization, where the USA combine both the more primitive and the most advanced aspects of a modern society, where a modern society's regressive and progressive aspects co-exist. The larger role of sectarian religious beliefs, as well as the high level of nationalism, can probably be added to the regressive aspects while the central role of the USA in high culture – far from only the popular! – in music, visual arts, and literature

can be seen as a key counterpart in the other end. This paradoxical combination, its hybrid and mixed character, led the maverick French social theorist Jean Baudrillard to his famous characterization of the USA as the 'primitive society of the future'.

Are these outstanding characteristics – violence, death, and inequality on the one hand, growth technology and educational dynamics on the other – disparate and accidental traits, to be seen as having nothing to do with each other? Or are they interlinked phenomena where the power relations between major social groups and categories could be understood as the forces that shaped this hybridism? To answer that kind of question, we must turn to the rich scholarly literature that seriously discusses the bases for similarities and divergences between the USA and the different European social models.

But the value of Baldwin's book does not end there. On top of all tables he presents some intriguing arguments. Some are peculiar, e.g., the argument that if it were not for the African-American underclass the USA would be quite normal in terms of violence, crime, and prisoners. He argues that the founding ethnic diversity in the USA, creating a much larger difference between 'us' and 'them' than in European countries throughout out the whole social fabric, should be seen as the root of both its underdeveloped social security net, its distrust of public efforts of redistribution as well as its propensity to lay weight on technological fixes rather than policy solutions, illustrated by its success in developing AIDS medicines and its failure in public health efforts.

Compared with European countries the USA presents a specific, hybrid mix of advanced and regressive traits. The role of the death penalty, the key role of war, and violence in its interior and external relations, the key social importance of social and racial inequality for the life – and death – of the population, coexist with its very advanced knowledge and innovation systems – its universities, its medical and computer technology. To explain this intriguing hybridity demands a deeper engagement with the scholarly literature than Baldwin allows himself in this polemic.

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