

Blower, Brooke Lindy: *Becoming Americans in Paris. Transatlantic Politics and Culture between the World Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press 2011. ISBN: 9780199737819.

**Rezensioniert von:** Michael Goebel, Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut, Arbeitsbereich Globalgeschichte, Freie Universität Berlin

Interwar Paris has long captured the imagination of anyone interested in twentieth-century literature and art, not least in the United States. Colorful stories of bohemians' uninhibited exploits, recently memorialized in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*, have created a myth of „Gay Paree“ as a place of youthful freedom, innocence, and unbridled creativeness. In her elegantly written book Brooke Blower sets this overly rosy record straight. „More than the site of café terraces and haute couture, Paris served as a junction for international exchanges, a stage for capricious street politics and bitter disputes of all kinds“ (p. 264). She argues that Paris' nature as a global hub of world politics and migratory networks turned it into a particularly privileged theater for negotiating the United States' national identity and political role in the world. It was in Paris, she maintains, where scores of temporary residents, students, writers, war veterans or tourists from the U.S. gained a clearer sense of what it meant to be American.

In six thematically organized chapters, which focus more on the 1920s than on the 1930s, the book provides fascinating vignettes into the experiences of Americans in Paris. After two mapping chapters that lay out Americans' views of Paris and Frenchness and their hosts' reactions to their presence, the author focuses on anti-Americanism as an important element in French attempts to define their own identity. In the third chapter she deals with popular street riots against the execution of the Italian-American anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts in 1927. Chapter four examines the heavy-handed anti-vice campaign of Paris' right-wing police prefect Jean Chiappe, which did not specifically target Americans, but was aimed at rooting out an amusement industry often frequented by Americans. The 1927

Paris meeting of the American Legion, the major veterans' organization of the U.S., offers Blower another opportunity to examine Franco-American cultural and political debates. In the sixth and final chapter Paris vanishes from sight, as the author reconsiders the global pathways of famous expatriates, such as Langston Hughes, Vincent Sheean, or John Dos Passos, focusing on the importance of the Spanish civil war as a politically defining moment.

Blower's account relies on an array of literary sources, diaries of overseas students, newspapers, and travel guidebooks. She has also consulted some French periodicals and police documents. Broad public interest in the subject matter adds an enormous amount of secondary literature. All these sources are effectively woven into a fluent narrative, which is presented with great verve. The book is full of sparkling anecdotes and catchy literary quotations that provide lively glimpses into the everyday life of Americans in Paris. Blower's style is captivating throughout, making the book not only a joy to read but also accessible to an audience well beyond academics. Moreover, the two central arguments are solidly substantiated: namely that interwar Paris was not merely a place of unrestrained bohemian happiness and that the Americans' tangible presence in the city brought questions of U.S. as well as French national identity into sharper focus.

For the more academically inclined reader the book also has some pitfalls. Popular clichés about interwar Paris as an insouciant playground for cosmopolitan artists and writers are an easy target to be dismissed as false, while many European readers will probably have quite different associations to begin with. And as any exchange student will know, staying abroad stimulates thinking about the country of origin. Blower's two central arguments are therefore not especially surprising to anyone who is vaguely familiar with twentieth-century French history and who has spent a little thought on the nature of transnational exchange. Although this in itself is not necessarily a problem, I would have wished for a more sustained engagement with existing historical scholarship. As it stands, the narrative remains impressionistic, offer-

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ing lots of wonderfully intriguing flashlights into the life of Americans in Paris, but ultimately little sense of why and how they matter for any broader debate among historians.

The book's impressionistic air is reinforced by Blower's tendency to use her overwhelmingly literary sources not only as literature, to be examined for its language or the ideas conveyed through it, but also as trustworthy surveys of Paris' social history. Her approach to numbers and to referencing sources is casual at times. Descriptions of people's looks, allegations concerning their thoughts, and too many of the book's more detailed claims are neither backed up by evidence nor do they add much to the broader question at stake.<sup>1</sup>

The most obvious larger question would have been whether the sense of American-ness that Americans developed in Paris differed from constructions of American identity elsewhere. There is little indication in the book that this was the case, primarily because Americans in Paris were such a diverse lot and because most stayed there only for short periods of time. The many interesting anecdotes about them are held together by the fact that they all have something to do with Americans. But this makes one wonder (as Blower occasionally does herself) how much African-Americans working as dishwashers, bouncers or jazz performers in Montmartre night-clubs had in common, and to what extent they interacted, with wealthy white exchange students in the Latin Quarter or even wealthier and equally white businessmen in the opera district – and how much all of them had to do with the overwhelming majority of Americans in Paris, who were simply tourists; or with the war veterans who descended upon the city in their thousands, but for no more than a few days, in 1927. As Blower deftly shows, all these groups had vastly different experiences in Paris and felt American in very different ways – whether before, after or regardless of their stay in Paris. The specificity of Paris as a generator of identity narratives about the United States gets lost in the diversity of the Americans who came to the city.

If there was no single and reasonably stable American community in Paris and no core Parisian-American identity narrative, then French anti-Americanism could serve as the

book's unifying thread. The author emphasizes this theme strongly and provides ample illustration from French sources, but she unearths few examples of American complaints that they were discriminated against. Even on the occasion of the Sacco-Vanzetti disturbances, which are the study's chief piece of evidence of anti-Americanism, the Paris Herald claimed, as Blower records, that the „mob felt no particular animosity toward Americans“ (p. 122). The reader ultimately gets the impression that anti-Americanism was one – and perhaps a rather marginal one – of many possible ways of negotiating other, more pressing, social and political conflicts that engulfed interwar Paris.

Blower, however, remains careful not to overstretch her point. Throughout the book she treats Americans' experiences in Paris, their rethinking of what it meant to be American and Parisians' reactions to all this as a window into Franco-American cultural exchange rather than as a decisive driving force of world politics or American or French nationalism. It is on this level where the book provides many interesting insights and delightful stories. If it raises more questions than it answers, this is probably what a good history book should do. Historians interested in U.S.-French transnational exchange and, more particularly, in the emergence of French anti-Americanism should certainly read it.

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, Blower estimates 40,000 permanent American residents by the mid-1920s (p. 6), which stems from an article in the Chicago Tribune. She dismisses the French census, which she claims (p. 270), without giving page numbers, put the number at 18,000 in 1926. The published result (République Française: Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 7 mars 1926 [Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1928], vol. 1, part 5, pp. 232-233) actually gave a figure of 8,374. In all other censuses the number of Americans in Paris was significantly lower. Another example is the unsubstantiated claim that Latin Americans in Paris lived in the city for longer and were richer than residents from the U.S. (p. 63). All of this is admittedly unimportant for Blower's argument, but it is symptomatic of the book's lack of interest in separating literary anecdotes and speculations from the more verifiable social-science data.

*the World Wars*. New York 2011, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 07.03.2012.