

International America:

Analyzing Cultural Influence
Based on the Voice of Ann Tizia Leitich,
a 20th Century Austrian Woman

By Emma Leigh Boone

 In the aftermath of World War I, Europe was left with scars that went much deeper than that of the physical wounds. One of these wounds was a cultural identity crisis whose most vulnerable victims were the old regime of nobility and the cultural elite. Although all of Europe suffered, Austria became particularly susceptible. Because the Austrian upper class had been shown first-hand the depravity of their once strong culture, citizens were left trying to redefine themselves. Significantly, at that same time the American culture was soaring in influence, leaving Europeans in general, and Austrians in particular, wondering as to the real importance of the traditional arts that had once been so loved. In looking towards a new future and way of life, was American culture the only other option? Or was it essential to hold on to the traditional ties of Europe's past?

While most of the inhabitants of Austria, in a state of post-war chaos, ultimately chose to side with one or the other, one woman envisioned a world in which both societies could learn the best from each other and leave the worst behind. This phenomenal woman was Ann Tizia Leitich. Leitich was born to an upper-class Austrian family and lived from 1891 to 1976. She became well educated and influential in her profession, and in

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the early part of the twentieth-century, moved to the United States to become a correspondent for a popular Austrian newspaper, *Die Neue Freie Presse*. In 1926 she published *Amerika, Du hast es besser!*, a book that specifically addresses the Austrian/American cultural problem. Leitich's was a unique voice that acted as a mediator in an attempt to align these two cultures. She was interested in how she could diffuse the battle. How could they keep the old *and* incorporate the new? How could they integrate the best of both worlds and define a new European modernity?

Leitich's ideas and solutions are unique and intriguing in efforts to understand American culture because her glimpses of society show how it affected tradition on an international scale. Using Leitich's book *Amerika, Du hast es besser!* I will show how Leitich addresses this cultural crisis. I will do this by exploring her belief that a tired European cultural elite *wanted* a cultural reformation, one which America provided; that America became a capitalistic leader which Leitich compares and relates to the Austrian socialistic economy; and that by providing her news correspondences, two distinct cultures finally became aware of each other and their mutual influence through international communication.

Amerika, Du hast es besser! is a journal relating Leitich's own thoughts and feelings as she explores this new world of America. She, as many others, has heard that it is a land of opportunity, a land where the streets are paved in gold. She knows that it is the center of trend-setting in politics, finance, media, and all aspects of culture—and she recognizes just as poignantly that her own beloved homeland of Austria is not. Regarding the division of the old tradition versus the newly found popularity of modernity,

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she states:

Denn diese schöne und versinkende Kultur, unsere europäische Kultur [...] war eine individuellaristokratische, respektiv bürgerliche Kultur, wie bis jetzt noch jede, die altgriechische ausgenommen. Sie gehörte jenen, die durch Geburt, Klasse, Stand, sie in die Wiege gelegt bekamen. Sie ist uns allein teuer, die wir in ihr aufgewachsen [...]. Aber nicht um Vergangenen nachzuweinen, greife ich zur Feder; ich bin in Amerika und da gibt es nur Gegenwart und Zukunft, keine Vergangenheit (Leitich, 50).

Leitich recognizes that the society of Austria comes from an old world of tradition. She notes that those to whom society belongs are the wealthy; those who were born to the right parents at the right time under the right circumstances. But in reality, the inhabitants of this elitist society were ultimately the ones who had to pay, and the cost was high. They paid the price for their strong traditions and national identity. In this excerpt Leitich shows that she is looking towards a new way of thinking by attesting that in America there is no past; there is only present and future. Humanity has no tethers binding them to an ancient era. In America culture is defined by the *now*—by people becoming who and what they want to be, regardless of class, heritage, and the situation into which they are born.

In order to better understand the customs people of Leitich's time dealt with, it will be beneficial to have some of the background information of the cultures at that time, and to recognize what kind of influences were then prevalent. For decades Austria had been under the rule of a single family called the Hapsburgs, and the absolute influence of the Hapsburg family had left the nation seeking monarchical guidance as long as

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they could remember. With the post–World War I fall of that dynasty, however, the people were left with the power and the responsibility to choose who they would become. This obligation of the elites to define society is fundamental to understanding the role of Leitch because of her upper-class background and her own aristocratic ideals of what culture *should* be. Thaler, one scholar who has studied the development of the Austrian identity in great detail, wrote a book entitled *The Ambivalence of Identity*, in which he addresses the crucial role of elites in the formation of national identity. Because Leitch was one of these elites, she especially had the opportunity to influence the thinking of the time. The following statement is given with regards to the influential prowess of the aristocratic society:

As possessors of wealth or culture or both, the Austrian bourgeoisie disputed the monopolistic pretensions of the aristocracy to political power. Yet underneath, middle-class folk [...] or some of them [...] secretly envied the “bluebloods” and in their social attitudes and appetites paid them the most flattering variety of flattery [...] imitation (May, 175).

Because of this imitation, it was up to the higher class to begin the flow of trends that would create the new national identity. They were able to determine the course of the future, and then lead the way to the outcome of the new Austrian cultural identity.

While the Hapsburg Dynasty creates the foundation, it is also important to recognize that there were many other influences in Austria at the time, and especially in the capitol, Vienna. Because of the post-war identity crisis, “Vienna in the

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early twentieth century was a great forcing-house of artistic and intellectual innovation in at least six different fields: music, literature, art, and architecture, psychology, philosophy, and economics” (Mason, 46). New ways of thought and expression of oneself had become imperative. Another interesting factor in this development, and perhaps much less considered, is that of the Jewish influence and growing anti-Semitism. While not often considered as a reason for social and cultural adaptation, the persecution of the Jews taking place throughout Europe was particularly influential in the movement. The political unrest gave some people a cause for which they could fight, and others a plague for which they needed something to help them forget. Mason, in relation to the power of change that the Jews influenced, stated the following:

Carl Schorske has offered a class explanation for the great flowering of culture and art in Vienna around 1900. He has argued that the liberal bourgeoisie had lost their political power in 1895 and reacted by taking refuge in aesthetics. They substituted the life of art for the life of action. As civic action became increasingly futile, Schorske declared that, ‘art became almost a religion, the source of meaning and the food of the soul’ (Mason, 50-51).

As stated by Schorske, the persecution of the Jews gave the population a desire to seek sanctuary in culture. By focusing on something that was not life-changing, they could hide themselves from something that was. While the Jewish persecution was only a fraction of the influence, we see that there were innumerable manipulators in the search for a new cultural identity. It is a movement whose coming about cannot be pinned down or solely blamed upon any one source. Because of these many influences, Austria was in a perfect state of mind—and had

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indeed set itself up to be influenced—to join this international cultural reformation.

While it is fairly simple to recognize a cultural rebuilding in Europe, it is also imperative to recognize that America at that time was also seeing a reformation. Every type of artistic development was being asserted, even on American soil. According to one source, “The plea for cultural nationalism [...] asserted yet once again the value, the necessity, of an art nourished in native soil” (Ruland, 317). America was in the midst of the Jazz Age, women’s suffrage, the invention of the automobile, and mass production. The culture was coming alive and held more influence on an international scale than anyone, including themselves, had ever dreamed possible.

This brings us to the first point of discussion, that of Europe seeking a cultural reformation. Because of Europe’s faltering ego, they were exploring new ideas, which in essence changed the face of their level of acceptance in the world around them. The following quote illustrates that the questioning of tradition coming from Europe helped America to be able to flout the old rules of convention that the civilized world had, for so long, embraced and respected. George Santayana stated that,

The illegitimate monopoly which the genteel tradition had established over what ought to be assumed and what ought to be hoped for has broken down [...]. Henceforth there can hardly be the same peace and the same pleasure in hugging the old propinities (Ruland, 270).

This reference shows that although America was flourishing by its own rights, the timing could not have been more perfect. Europe, which had once been the ultimate cultural icon, gave

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America a large gap in which they could slide ahead, and very soon become the absolute forefront of what was accepted and emulated.

Despite the fact that many Austrians were questioning this development, Leitich became one of the most vocal in validating the role of America as an influence for the Austrian culture. Expounding on her own reasons for exploring the culture Leitich states:

Ich kam nicht aus Hunger nach Brot oder Gold: denn eine leidlich gute Krippe hatt' ich im alten Land in den Wind geschlagen und vom Gold war ich klug genug zu wissen, da_ es auch hier nicht auf der Stra_e liege. Ich kam aus dem Zusammenbruch eines Lebens, um die Möglichkeit neuen Lebens zu suchen. So stand ich Amerika gegenüber mit blanker Seele, aus der die Vergangenheit weggebrannt war fraggend; Was bist du, wo bist du, wer bist du, was bringst du mir, was der Welt? (Leitich, 51).

Most people of the time period were asking that same question: “America, what are you bringing to the world?” Leitich recognized that in Austria the same means for food, money, and livelihood existed, but she, like so many others, wanted more. To the world, arts and culture had become a way of refinement and often a means of self-preservation for the soul—the chance to become something more. Because of the fall of so many of the fundamentals of Austrian society, Leitich became awakened to this hunger that had existed throughout the ages. Only now the hunger was more pronounced for most of the people of Austria.

The second point, and a very interesting aspect of Leitich’s own thinking, is that of materialism, economics, and American capitalism as it compares to Austrian socialism. Leitich

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recognizes that one of the main differences between the two cultures is that of economics and resources. In the following quote she points out that in America both the wealthy and the impoverished live their lives with fewer social gaps than that of the classes in Austria. She states,

Europe hat zweierlei Menschen: den Herrschenden und den Beherrschten. In Amerika ist ein kleiner, aber weittragender Unterschied. Hier teilt sich die Menschheit in die Arbeitgeber und die Angestellten, in Herren und Diener. Wer den Dollar hat, ist der Herr, wer ihn nicht hat, der Diener (Leitich, 55).

Here Leitich shows a large cultural difference between the two nations in that Austria has always been set up by class distinction, whereas in America, the common man may be greater than the man who has the right bloodlines, so long as he works hard and earns the money. In America, money, not pedigree, is what determines the Lord and the Lady, the servant or the king. Expounding further on the same idea Leitich attests,

Er ist Diener viele Stunden im Tag, aber wenn er dann seinen Overall Auszieht und auf die Stra_ e tritt, ist er dem Herrn gleich. Er kann sich nicht alles kaufen, was der Herr sich kauft. Aber er sehnt sich ja vielleicht gar nicht danach; er hat jedenfalls nicht notwendig, Bolschewist zu werden. Er ist zufrieden; er wird ein gutes Abendessen bekommen [...]. Nur da_ Selbst-bewu_tsein erfüllt ihn, ebenso gut zu sein (Leitich, 55).

These ideals exemplify Leitich's avowal that all Americans have equal opportunity for success. She has shown that he who has the dollar is the master, yet even in America the lowliest of servants has the opportunity to work hard, earn a good wage,

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and feel a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment for a job well done. Each individual can feel assured of his purpose in life at the end of a long, hard day. This had never been the case in the history of Austria. As shown in these statements, Leitch recognizes the comparative equality of mankind in the United States. Having come from Austria—a culture consumed with class, rank, and status—she understands how phenomenal it is that rich and poor alike can walk together on the streets of America, each of them being able to feel a sense of accomplishment and worth as it pertains to their daily labors and endeavors.

While there were certainly many noteworthy figures in the development of this successful capitalistic society, in many of her writings Leitch recognizes Henry Ford as the mastermind of American capitalism and its success in leading to an industrialized nation. Ford revolutionized a formerly skill-oriented society by opening factories and enabling the mass production of cars and other products. Regarding Ford's influence Leitch states,

Einer der bedeutendsten, ja, vielleicht der bedeutendste Amerikaner der Epoche ist jener, der in seinen Betrieben solchen Wochenlohn zahlt, da_ der Arbeiter mehr haben kann, als blo_ trockenes Brot. Dies nicht aus Idealismus, auch nicht nur als Propaganda-kunststück, aber aus einer mehr schlaun als weisen, ungemein sicheren Voraus-fühlung, mit der er Gestalt findet für Dinge, die da kommen sollen. Dieser Mann ist Ford (Leitch, 57).

Henry Ford was just one of the many who had the vision of a capitalistic society, a utopia of sorts where all men in actuality *were* created equal and had the right to better themselves,

increasing their own means of providing for themselves and their families. Common to the feelings of the time, even Leitch's own writings tended to be somewhat critical of the idea of mass production. Although she recognizes that in many ways trades and specialized skills were becoming a lost art, she was, however, also able to recognize the opportunities of equality which this idea of mass production allowed. Ford, in a manner, exemplified what it meant to live the "American Dream;" the infamous rags to riches story of beginning with nothing but the rags on one's back, and then building an empire through individual sweat, blood, and tears. Leitch notes that although many nations and many leaders have attempted to offer such an idealized way of life—a way to have work and enough money to provide for a family—she cites Ford as the first person to allow for the actuality for this standard to come about. In the past, these promises had been used to exploit people and convince them of an ideal simply for the purposes of propaganda.

Leitch also notes that regardless of whether Europe views capitalism as positive or negative, for America it actually works. She further states:

Gut und schlecht—das Kapitel Ford ist ein Kapitel amerikanischer Kulturgeschichte. Was aber nun den Laufjungen betrifft—es mu_ auch Laufjungen geben, warum sollen sie Ausgeworfene sein, weil sie nur Laufjungen sind? Es wäre entsetzlich, wenn die Welt nur aus Universitätsprofessoren und Bankiers bestände. Ich bin weder Bolschewistin noch Sozialistin, lediglich Amerikanerin—in diesem Sinn—and als solche sage ich: Jeder, wo immer er geboren ist, soll die Möglichkeit haben, sein Leben auszugestalten [...] (Leitch, 57).

According to this passage, Leitch recognizes that different

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tactics have worked for different nations. For Austria, the majority has felt a sense of security under the umbrella of socialism, but for America it could never have been successful. She also recognizes America's unique situation as a cultural meltingpot as a contributor to their economic situation. While there are functional and beneficial characteristics to both American capitalism and Austrian socialism, she acknowledges that for the American empire, mass production, capitalism, and industrialism have come a long way in providing a rich environment in which man and woman, wealthy and poor, can be assured more equality on the plane of humanity than had ever been seen in the history of the world.

The final, and perhaps most essential, point is the imperativeness that Leitich's voice be heard as it pertains to the dual influence of culture. Though the conflict itself is one of yesterday, historian George Santayana's infamous quip "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Santayana, 2), eloquently summarizes the importance of learning from the past. In her day, Leitich offered a voice of reason in a world of chaos and conflicting values. She was important to her time. What makes her unique, however, is that she is also very beneficial to our understanding of the world of culture as it operates today. This influence comes because of her unique situation as a well-educated European living in America, because her role as part of the Austrian elite would work to define the new cultural identity, and especially because of her position as a correspondent to Austria from her vantage point in the urban United States. Because of these factors, Leitich offers a viewpoint that is hard to find in any other source. Her observations recorded in writing go a long way in helping us to understand the American and Austrian identities—their histories

and their present state. Because both Austria and the United States were in a unique period of their existence, much can be gleaned from her perceptions. While Austria was struggling to “find itself” and the nation as a whole was clamoring to follow the lead of the elitists, America was in almost exactly the opposite situation. America was becoming the leader of culture under circumstances previously unheard of—the middle class working people were setting the standard of acceptance...and the rest of the world, especially Europe, was following! As important as America was, however, they could not have become what they did had it not been for the fundamental building blocks that Europe had been setting in place for centuries. Leitich shows that the two very distinct cultures were becoming aware of their mutual influence and dependency.

Additionally, the changing of Europe—the reformation which they were seeking—allowed for an end to the cultural snobbery that had limited America’s development of its own identity, and now it was leading the movement. According to one American literary historical analyst, there was a spirit prevalent that broke down barriers and swept the cultures together in a way that had never been thought possible. Ruland remarks that during the years of 1912-1914,

The entire temper of [America] altered [...]. America’s coming-of-age occurred [...] it seems as though everywhere, in that year of 1913, barriers went down and people reached each other who had never been in touch before; there were all sorts of new ways to communicate as well as new communications. The new spirit was abroad and swept us all together (Ruland, 269).

This “new spirit” left an excitement that encompassed all aspects

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of life, and most especially that of culture. “It was clear that by 1912 the radical change in the arts that had been sweeping across Europe was finding its way into America. In fact the new tendencies had been developing there for some years” (Ruland, 270). This was the climax of the era, the voice of reason that Leitich had been trying to reach. The cultures were, in fact, coming together, and though it was a process that was many years in the making, Leitich recognized and understood their implications and petitioned for a cultural understanding that was far ahead of her own time.

Leitich, in *Amerika, Du hast es besser!*, shows that America is indeed a land of opportunity. It was a land of growth and reformation socially, economically, and culturally, but it could not have been accomplished had it not been for the European influence that had prevailed for centuries before. On the other hand, however, Europe as a whole, and Austria in particular, needed the guidance of America and the new ideals in order to enable them to make necessary changes. Ann Tizia Leitich is indispensable to that understanding. She provides a strong, unique voice that stands firm in her convictions that the influence of each of these nations was two-sided and essential. Leitich proclaims for all of Austria and all of America to hear,

Amerika, das Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten des Reichwerdens, wie es in den europäischen Märchen vorkommt, ist mehr oder weniger eine Sache der Vergangenheit; aber Amerika, das Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten in der Evolution des Menschengeschlechtes mag wohl eine Tatsache werden (Leitich, 53).

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By using the cliché catchphrase, “das Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten,” she is calling to attention the opportunities that are available. She is a lover of Austria; its beauties, its customs, its class, its traditions. Leitich is on their side. But in this statement she avows that America offers something different. She poses the possibility that maybe fairytales are not just something of the past, maybe in America they are something of the future. By taking the rich cultural heritage and traditions of the past from Europe, and the unlimited possibilities of the future in America, they could work together to create that fairytale—a dream where both cultures contribute to a new and wonderful modern society.

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