

'To See Ourselves As Others See Us'

BY ALVIN TOFFLER

What are our strengths, weaknesses? These six candid opinions of America and Americans go beyond the headlines

■ WHAT DO a Christian Dior model, a Dutch tavern keeper, a Cambridge University professor, an Italian newspaperman, a Finnish broadcaster, and a ravishing Austrian actress have in common? Two things. First, they are Europeans. Second, like most Europeans, they have passionate ideas about what is right and what is wrong with America and Americans.

Today—as Europe slowly moves toward unity, and as many Europeans begin to think of themselves as Europeans, rather than as Austrians, Frenchmen, or Finns—public opinion in Europe is becoming more and more important to America.

Western Europe is linked to us by political, military, and economic bonds. And, with intercontinental travel increasing rapidly, it is linked by personal friendships, pleasant memories, and private attachments.

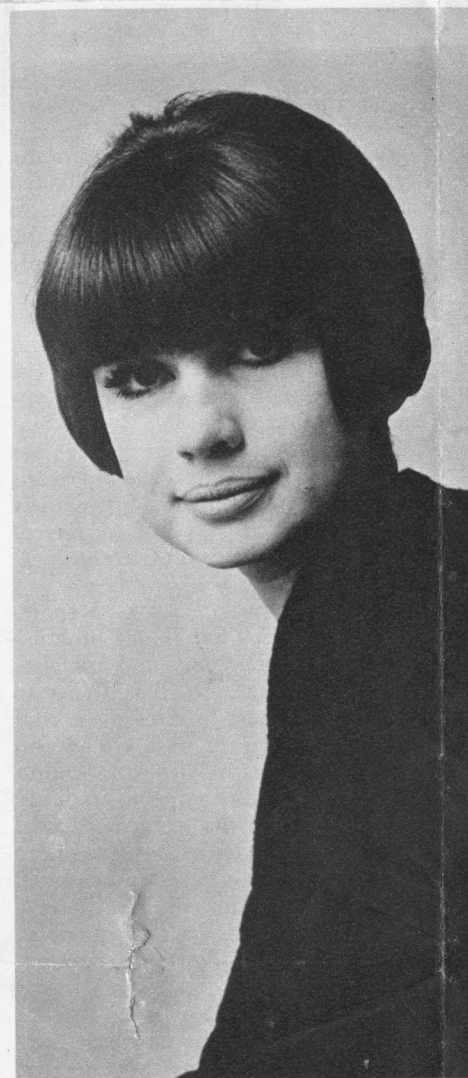
Still, for many Europeans, Ameri-



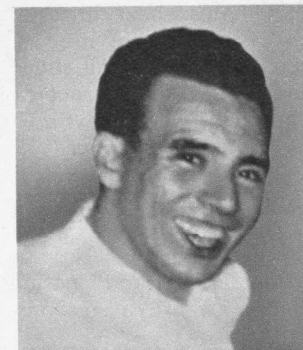
Cambridge professor



Austrian actress



Dior model



Dutch tavern keeper



Italian reporter



Finnish broadcaster

ca remains a hazy, distorted, dream-like caricature of itself. Often the same European will show amazing insight into the character of Americans—and in the next breath reveal astounding ignorance.

What, then, do young Europeans think about America?

Here are the views of half a dozen intelligent and energetic individuals from six different nations. Their comments are in response to two questions:

- What quality about America or Americans do you like best? (Some people had a hard time with this question.)

- What do you like least about America or Americans? (This was an easy query for most of them. They had thought about it.)

The poll yields no statistics for sociologists to pore over. Future historians will not consult it. But thousands of Americans who go to Europe this year will hear similar comments and caustic criticisms—remarks that are varied, colorful, often amusing, sometimes, acutely insightful, and passionately held.

In a small way, therefore, these statements by six Europeans give us some idea of how we look to others. They raise some doubts worth mulling over and help to answer the plea of the poet Robert Burns:

"Oh wad some power the giftie gie us/To see oursels as others see us!"

Renate Berg, Austria. Let us start with Renate Berg—a young, beautiful Austrian actress—a member of the famed *Theatre der Josefstadt* in Vienna. Dark, pert, and alert, she is a former student of economics. Renate comes from Tyrol, that western

part of Austria where villages nestle at the foot of craggy, snow-cloaked mountains. She has never been to the United States. Despite that, she speaks English well and is keenly interested in this country.

What does she like best about America? Her answer is terse and quick: "Bette Davis." But Miss Berg has another, more serious, answer to that question. "I like best the fact that Americans are not afraid to kid themselves. Americans make themselves ridiculous in their movies. But this is not a sign of weakness. It's a sign of strength. It means they are not afraid."

"For example," says Renate, "Doris Day in *That Touch of Mink* satirized psychology and psychoanalysis in America. This ability to joke about oneself represents a kind of maturity. In the past, Hollywood just turned out movies for a child's mentality. Today some of its films, and especially its comedies, deal with real problems. They're more sexy, more realistic. For example, Shirley MacLaine in *The Apartment*. These films are for grownups, and they give Hollywood a new importance."

"This ability to poke fun at American life—this is something special. We Austrians can't do that yet. We can't laugh at ourselves," says Miss Berg. "We as Europeans don't understand everything in these films, of course, but we like, even love, you Americans for them."

What does Renate hate about this same America, though? "Your advertising on television that breaks right into a play to sell a product. I haven't seen this, but I've heard about it. And I think that's an offense to the actor, to the play, to

the dramatist, and to the good taste of the audience. We simply can't conceive of something like that. It makes it appear as if the problems of human life that the play deals with are on the same level as the sale of soap or beer or watchbands. That's awful!"

Martin van der Pluim, the Netherlands. Six hundred miles west of the *Theatre der Josefstadt* in Vienna is a place called "The Lightship"—a down-to-earth tavern on the waterfront of Europe's biggest port, Rotterdam. "The Lightship" is presided over by a chunky, ebullient proprietor, a former ship's steward named Martin van der Pluim.

Mr. van der Pluim has visited the United States several times and has relatives in New York and Florida. He speaks English fluently, punctuating his talk with laughter and gesticulation. Van der Pluim likes many things about America, but he singles out President Kennedy's handling of the Cuban crisis last fall as the most important.

"Your other Presidents were more like Chamberlain in 1938," he says. "Kennedy wouldn't let the Russians go too far, I hear a lot in my bar—English, Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Germans, and Finns all come here off the ships. And we all say, why didn't America do it before? Of course, we don't want war, but it was necessary for America to take direct action when Khrushchev sent missiles to Cuba. Kennedy did the right thing. And at the same time, he didn't go too far. That gives us more confidence in America."

There are a number of things van der Pluim doesn't like about

America. "Americans don't bother to learn other languages. They don't know much about other countries. For example, they all think we wear wooden shoes here. I'm thirty-nine, and I've never had a pair on my feet. Wooden shoes are mostly worn to entertain the tourists, although we see a pair on a farmer now and then." According to van der Pluim, "Americans are surprised when they come here and find that things in Holland are up to date. We have cars and everything else. Do they teach in your schools that we are behind or backward?"

But his most important criticism has to do with something more basic. "If Negroes have brains and behave properly, they should have the same right to study and vote as anyone else. We know about the Meredith case, and we think it's terrible. America is always talking about freedom, but maybe you permit your southern Governors too much freedom."

"We see American television programs here," says van der Pluim, "and we saw on one of them how a Negro tried to register to vote. You see the registrar—a big man, obviously not much brain. That registrar had a criminal record. Yet he failed a Negro who just wanted his right to vote. I think that's too much democracy to let things like that happen."

Kaarle Nordenstreng, Finland. Despite his age—he is only 21—Kaarle Nordenstreng is already known as Finland's "Mr. Radio." As broadcaster, editor, and documentary producer for the Finnish Broadcasting Company, he has brought surprising depth and imagination to

his work as director of radio programming for Finland's youth.

Kaarle (pronounced *Carlie*) has never been to the United States, but he would like to come. He is particularly interested in a firsthand look at our scientific and psychological research activities.

"When I was a schoolboy," says Nordenstreng, "America was the butt of many jokes. Any time something bad happened, someone attributed it to the influence of America. I shared the common opinion. Then I bought an American car, a 1934 Buick Special, and found that even though it was ancient, it was well made.

"At about the same time," says Nordenstreng, "I met some American students and some Finnish-Americans visited my country. I learned that America could produce excellent human beings as well as machines. In the university I caught a glimpse of American science and was impressed again. And it was with pleasure that I accepted a Californian as my brother-in-law."

What Kaarle Nordenstreng likes best about America is, as he puts it, "the freedom and fluidity of daily life as I understand it. We in Europe have a heavy burden of the past. It makes us much more stiff and formal. You are less so. This is not just a matter of dress and manners, but, more important, you are more open and easy and receptive to ideas. We tend to be more rigid in our thinking. I think, also, you Americans have a kind of delight in life that seems lacking here."

But to Kaarle, America is not all sweetness and light. "What I like

least," he continues, "is the commercialism of America, the pursuit of selfish interest, the coldness of your business. It penetrates too far into daily life. We in Finland, of course, are not exempt from this criticism. We scold you for this, we smile at your commercialism and your funny gadget-mindedness. But we adopt your ways as soon as we can. We want cars and television sets and everything. And we know that whatever is in America today will be in Finland tomorrow.

"Still, there's a difference in the atmosphere," adds Kaarle. "It is as if the sharp edges are off this dollar-mindedness here. While in your country, I believe, the edges are very sharp, indeed."

Michel Belverger, France. Three years ago, two nervous French teenagers walked up to the door of Christian Dior's fashion salon in Paris and shakily applied for jobs as models. One of them, to her astonishment, was hired, and today Michel Belverger—known professionally as "Mickey"—is the youngest of Dior's world-famous mannequins. Her fawn-like face has graced the pages of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Elle*, and other top fashion magazines in both America and Europe. Today, at only 20, Mickey (pronounced *Mickay*) is still a bit awed by her own rapid rise.

Mickey visited the United States once with a Dior exhibit, then she returned here twice more to fill photo-modeling assignments.

"What do I like best?" she asks. "That's easy. Supermarkets. They are marvelous. I don't know why I like them. They're funny. They're new to me. We really don't have

anything quite like them in France.

"I was walking around New York City one afternoon between assignments, and I wandered into one. I stayed all afternoon. It was like a new world to me, like a big store full of toys would have been when I was a child. All colors, and movement, and everything you could think of to buy. Everything was so systematic.

"I lived in a beautiful hotel on Fifth Avenue near Greenwich Village where I saw all those funny young people with beards. I liked everything new in New York," adds Mickey. "It's a wonderful city. It's not at all like the picture postcards, and when you first see it, you are disappointed. But after I was there a little time, I didn't want to go back. And, of course, I like American men—so big, so athletic. Ooo la, la." (Yes, she said it just that way.)

But Mickey was also troubled by some of her impressions. "The tube [subway]—it's horrible! And the average American woman dresses so poorly. Some of the most elegant women in the world are American. But you see many women wearing very long skirts, with flat heels, and flowered blouses, or checked shirts and a different colored scarf. Just bad taste. I don't know why they do, because it's so easy to be well dressed in New York. I bought many dresses in stores like Saks and Bloomingdale's, and I even saw very good things in Woolworth's."

Beyond taste, however, there is something in the manner of Americans that Mickey says she doesn't like. "Very often, when you know an American woman," Mickey says, "she is very sweet and kind but

very superficial. She really doesn't care for you. I don't like that."

Maurice Hussey, England. Maurice Hussey, rumpled and professorial in a maroon corduroy jacket, no doubt also falls far short of the sartorial standards set by Mademoiselle Mickey. But as lecturer at Cambridge University in England, he is not expected to be a fashion plate. He is expected to think, to study, to talk well.

Hussey does this. His acid conversational talents have won him repeated appearances for the British Broadcasting Company. His interests range over literature, music, the arts, and, of course, education. He has not visited the United States and is not at all sure he wants to.

"What I like best about America," he says, "is the fact that you seem to have almost unlimited funds for higher education. A friend of mine toured a number of your colleges and universities, and from his report I was surprised that your colleges are so big, have so many facilities, and are involved in so many different kinds of activity. For example, many of them apparently have artists, composers, or playwrights in residence, that is, who live and work on the campus, so that your students can gain some exposure to them. We have hardly anything like this."

Hussey adds that "This idea could be profitable for us." But he musingly suggests that "With all this said and done, there is such a persistent flow of your academic people to England and Europe that I wonder whether they are really happy in America, or whether things there aren't too 'hot' for real

thinking and too low in intellectual standards."

(Hussey failed to mention, however, the furor in England over just the opposite flow of scholars.)

Asked what he likes least about the United States, Hussey warmed to the topic. "I like least the fact that advertising is the voice of America. It intrudes into areas where it is not naturally needed. This makes people so desperately conscious of sales values that it puts a price tag on everything. What sells best, is best.

"The best Americans," says Hussey, "are very kind, very generous, very hospitable—but also very naive. Look at the colors of your clothing, the unsubtle size of your automobiles. You are naive, too, in critical standards and even in scholarship. I think, in short, that America panders to the lowest levels—in taste, in your magazines, and on television. And I blame this on your simple-minded pursuit of the dollar."

Franco Cuomo, Italy. If Mr. Hussey speaks with almost crusading ardor, Franco Cuomo, 25, a reporter for the largest newspaper in southern Italy, would probably never let himself be caught dead in the act of crusading. Except against one enemy: military authority. The son of an Italian admiral, Mr. Cuomo has long conducted a relentless—and sometimes hysterically funny—campaign against the military.

Not long ago, Cuomo's paper, *Il Matino*, published a photo showing rows of marching troops and beribboned generals. Over the picture Cuomo wrote words to the effect of: "How many of these brave

soldiers are in uniform only because they lack the money to buy themselves out?"

The result of his caption was a hilarious furor that still is not over, and Cuomo is being sued for something like defamation of the brave military character. Which tickles him, because the courtroom is likely to give him further opportunity for puncturing the pride of the men in uniform.

As a naval cadet, Cuomo carried his campaign onto the high seas. The result: When his ship docked in New York in 1957, Cadet Cuomo spent the entire period restricted to quarters. This is as close as he has ever come to seeing the United States—which makes him at least as much of an expert as many Europeans with far fiercer opinions about America.

Franco is a tall, rosy-cheeked, long-haired Bohemian, who likes Americans because, as he puts it, "They are so enthusiastic, they are able to fill me with enthusiasm. I take an American to visit some sight that is for me no longer beautiful—I have seen it so often. And he awakens my inspiration, my appreciation. Showing Naples, or an old Roman aqueduct—for me these are of little interest. But for you, I can feel your American response. You restore one's sense of beauty in this way."

Filling his glass with vino as he romanticizes, Franco then launches (with very American enthusiasm) into what he does not like about America.

"I am not talking about your cultured Americans now, but about your run-of-the-mill fellow. He is very nice. But he feels superior. He

tries to hide this feeling from me, so he becomes patronizing. He thinks himself so democratic just to be speaking to me. Unfortunately, most Americans who visit Europe are this way. They talk: 'I like spaghetti; I like pizza; I like women; see, I'm just like you.' There are other things to talk about!

"This shallow attempt to be nice," says Cuomo, "comes right out of some State Department rule book or military manual about how to be nice to foreigners. Americans follow these tour books or guide books so slavishly that they lose the very enthusiasm that is so appealing. They lose their own genuine qualities.

"But all this is unimportant," Franco continues. "The one thing I really cannot forgive Americans is that you have killed femininity. American women are too sure of themselves. They behave too often as if they have no use for, or need for, the whole male species.

"I feel so big a pain for them," Franco says smiling. "They sit here at a café sometimes, or a restaurant, and they seem so lonely, because they haven't the courage to say, 'I need a man's company.' European women are—well, female. American women, no!"

Then, in a changed, confidential undertone he adds with a mock frown: "As a matter of fact, I'm planning to marry an American girl here. But she is female. And if

she's not, I'll teach her how to be."

He laughs again. "Of course, when all is said and done, the truth is, I like Americans. But perhaps I'm a pathological case!"

THESE BRIEF interviews, I think, tell us much of importance. Perhaps it is only that Europeans, for better or for worse, are growing in some aspects more like Americans. In Kaarle Nordenstreng's words: "We adopt your ways as soon as we can." Perhaps, too, as the world gets smaller each day, we Americans must begin to ask ourselves more questions.

Are we "too commercial"? Are we "gadget-minded," "superficial," "naive"? Are our women losing their femininity? Are we so provincial that we can only think of Holland in terms of wooden shoes and of Italy in terms of pizza? Are we so "democratic" that we are allowing our southern Governors to trample the rights of Negroes without protesting?

Are we allowing advertising to become "the voice of America"? Are we short on taste, long on forced geniality?

Whether we are, or are not, is important not only to the world but to ourselves. But even if we are not "guilty as charged," it may be just as important to us, in the long run, that bright young Europeans of a generation now rising to leadership think we are. ■■

EMERGENCY

■ WITH THE DIVORCE RATE SO high, some dress manufacturers are planning a line of drip-dry wedding gowns.

—Earl Wilson