



Understanding Transatlantic Relations:  
Whither the West? By Serena Simoni.  
New York and London: Routledge, 2013.  
ISBN 978-0-415-50159-0. Figures. Tables.  
Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp.vii- 206.

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pp. 55-57

Recommended Citation

Dille, Ph.D., Benjamin. "Understanding Transatlantic Relations: Whither the West? By Serena Simoni. New York and London: Routledge, 2013. ISBN 978-0-415-50159-0. Figures. Tables. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp.vii- 206.." *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2 (2014): 55-57.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.7.2.7>  
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol7/iss2/8>

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***Understanding Transatlantic Relations: Whither the West?* By Serena Simoni. New York and London: Routledge, 2013. ISBN 978-0-415-50159-0. Figures. Tables. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp.vii- 206. \$130.00.**

*Understanding Transatlantic Relations: Whither the West?* is a timely work, raising important issues about the present and future of the cooperative relationship between Europe and the United States and citing important global issues, particularly in the Middle East, that are currently challenging transatlantic relations, though the current Russian intervention in the Ukraine occurred after publication. Serena Simoni, PhD, an associate professor of Political Science at Samford University, has produced a valuable work breaking away from the Liberal versus Realist dichotomy, instead approaching the question from a Constructivist analysis, arguing the identities of Europe and the United States are the primary factor in their ability, or inability, to cooperate. Her approach offers a fresh view of this relationship.

Dr. Simoni divides her analysis into two broad eras, to each of which is dedicated a part of the book: transatlantic relations in the period between the end of the Cold War until 9/11, and from 9/11 to the present. She has been able to incorporate recent developments in Libya and Syria into her work, which gives her work currency in touching on those events, with some utility in framing contemporary events in Ukraine.

After setting the stage in Part I with a discussion of both the history of transatlantic relations and theories applied, Dr. Simoni moves to the period from the end of Cold War to 9/11, with Chapter 4 focusing on how NATO's enlargement and the end of a common threat meant the development of a new identity for NATO. Chapter 5 discusses Europe's embrace and U.S. rejection of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and Chapter 6 highlights different motives for an approach to debt relief and assistance. Part III examines the period from 9/11 to the present, portraying in Chapter 7 the Arab Spring as a missed chance for a common approach by Europe and the United States. Chapter 8 ponders solutions to Libya. Chapter 9 looks at assistance to Africa.

This book reads very much like a doctoral dissertation, meaning the discussion at times seems forced into an intellectual exercise about Constructivism versus Realism/Liberalism, rendering the valuable study of different motivations on each side of the Atlantic less accessible to policy-makers and interested non-academics. She rejects a compact Western identity. Still, carving a clear thesis out of myriad events may leave the impression of overstating various points, such as the differences between Europe and the United States in how they reacted to the Arab Spring; though reasons for the reactions (Europe concerned about immigration and the U.S. concerned about political and military consequences) were different, it could be argued that their actions were similar.

The author discusses the various theories applied to transatlantic relations, the Realist, Liberal, and Constructivist approaches. To her, a key point is the very different rationales that Europe and the United States have used to justify foreign assistance. She considers, for Americans, religious charity as the key motive for assistance, while, for Europeans, social justice is the main reason. One could argue in light of the historical Western tendency for charity and concern for the poor that the original roots of social justice and religious concern for the poor are based on the same foundation, with the very term 'social justice' coined by a Jesuit in 1840 at a time when clergy were concerned about some of the effects of the Industrial Revolution, influencing even Protestant thinking. Simoni does not address recent, significant moves away from conservative Christian values that are fast changing the topography of American politics, with same-sex marriage simply one example of the pace of ideological change. In its place seems to be arising

– at least on the coasts – an attitude more sympathetic to social justice and closer to Europe’s view.

She does make a good argument – with plenty of citations – for the influence of religion in voting and in U.S. policy decisions in support of foreign assistance. I wonder whether it could be that the horrors of the World Wars and dictatorships have led Europeans away from religion and faith in messianic ideals and towards a willingness to accept external constraints on the nation state. This could make ICC jurisdiction and other external international controls more palatable to Europeans than to Americans, whose bloodiest conflict was much earlier and over a clear question, whether slavery should exist in American society.

The author, in my view, overstates to some degree the contrast between the U.S. focus on hard military power and the European preference for soft power. Even in eras of its most militarized foreign policy, under Reagan and Bush II, the United States has relied on soft power in the form of both assistance and diplomatic hard work. George W. Bush, despite presiding over two wars, has rightly received high praise for his administration’s efforts to confront the AIDS epidemic, in the form of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Even now, in times of tight budgets, the Obama Administration continues to use foreign assistance as a key part of foreign policy, bucking popular resistance to such aid, which the average American citizen wrongly estimates at 28% of the federal budget (the actual figure is about 1%).

Simoni does not really delve into how individual European states might themselves have different approaches, which a Constructivist approach might dictate; her work is replete with examples of different trends within the European whole, as where Berlin stood against intervention in Libya while Britain and France came to advocate it. Perhaps the post-colonial status of the latter two, in a Constructivist analysis, could be the reason for their more interventionist approach, with Germany’s harsh war experience the reason for its approach.

Some small points I might raise include a certain number of assertions, which I concede are true, that stand without examples or citations (such as the G-8 not always honoring commitments), which a quick footnote could remedy. I would like to have seen more discussion of why she maintains that the economic assistance (aid rather than trade) offered by the West was not of the right type.

While her deductions may seem overstated from the facts she presents when identifying possible reasons for divergent approaches in Europe and the United States, the recent spat involving leaked telephone transcripts with criticisms of the United States and the EU by each other perhaps underscore the exact points Simoni is making. Some might have expected that the natural reaction to such unguarded comments would be acceptance of an exasperated comment by a friend, but the fact that it at least temporarily drove a wedge between the two (since eclipsed by Russian intervention in Ukraine) suggests that those third-country players likely behind the recording of the calls understood well the very concept Simoni highlights.

Despite some differences with the author, I congratulate her for her valuable contributions to the important dialogue concern the present and future of the transatlantic relationship. Her refreshingly innovative approach to examining the contrasting perspectives and motives of the United States and Europe add new insights to this dialogue. Though I am more optimistic than she is about the future of this relationship, she has produced a work that policy-makers and observers can add to their interpretive tools.

*Dr. Benjamin Dille is a career Foreign Service Officer. This review was prepared in his personal capacity and the opinions expressed are his own and do not reflect the position of the Department of State.*