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Bienvenido, Mickey Mouse!?: Hopes for a Magic Kingdom in Post-Franco Spain

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Introduction

Although few realize it today, Disneyland Paris almost ended up in sunny Spain. Only after years of public negotiations and back-room dealing was the decision finally made in favor of France. At the Hôtel Matignon in Paris on March 24, 1987, against the background of a grand tapestry depicting the story of Don Quixote, Michael Eisner, the president of Disney, and Jacques Chirac, the French prime minister, signed a contract for the building of a new theme park east of the French capital.¹ For Spanish observers the irony must have been close to overwhelming. After spending more than two years and thirty-five million *pesetas* trying to lure the park to Spain, Spanish officials had lost their bid to host the park. The leaders of France and Disney signed the final contract with the image of Don Quixote literally stitched helplessly behind them. Spaniards, whether they liked it or not, had been spared America's latest effort at cultural imperialism. Or did Spaniards not perceive the building of a four-billion-dollar American theme park on their soil as a cultural threat? This is the main question at the heart of this article.

Unfortunately, fully answering that question is not so easy. While such questions related to the topic of Americanization have been well explored in West Germany and France, and to some extent in England, Austria, and Italy, very little research has been done on the subject with regards to Spain.² Despite the presence of numerous American military bases (for more than sixty years) and Spaniards' obvious love for blue jeans, Marlboro cigarettes, and American movies, Spain has nonetheless been curiously left out of many of the debates over Americanization. While scholars have largely ignored the processes of Americanization within the Spanish context, several important interpretive issues have merged over the past

¹ "Eurodisneyland; Mickey Hops the Pond," *The Economist*, March 28, 1987; Montse Capdevila, "Chirac firma el polémico contrato de la 'Eurodisney,'" *El Periódico de Catalunya*, March 25, 1987.

² Each of the following anthologies contain chapters on Americanization in Europe, with the curious exception of Spain: Mike-Frank Eptropoulos, ed., *American Culture in Europe: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999); Rob Kroes, ed., *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); R. Kroes, ed., *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe* (Amsterdam: Vu University Press, 1993); George McKay, ed., *Yankee Go Home (& Take Me with U): Americanization and Popular Culture* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Roger Rollins, ed., *The Americanization of the Global Village* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1989); David Slater and Peter Taylor, eds., *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999); Heide Fehrenbach and Uta Poiger, eds., *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); and Per Lundin and Thomas Kaiserfeld eds., *The Making of European Consumption: Facing the American Challenge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). A chapter on Spain can be found in this more recent volume on Americanization in Europe: Dorothy Noyes, "Waiting for Mr. Marshall: Spanish American Dreams," in *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 305-334.

three decades. The first debate focuses on the question of whether or not the process of Americanization produces global uniformity and convergence under American cultural influence. The second debate centers on intentions and motivations. Some scholars have viewed Americanization as a benevolent process of modernization by which the United States promotes liberal democracies, market economies, and consumer cultures abroad. However, other critics have seen Americanization as a blatant and destructive form of cultural imperialism, wiping out cultural diversity and enhancing America's political and economic power around the globe.

Aside from these two main debates, there has also been a more recent trend toward examining how American products have been received by specific individuals and different groups abroad. In other words, the focus has increasingly shifted from the simple "transmission" of American culture to the rather more complicated and nuanced question of its "reception." It turns out that not everyone understands or "uses" American culture in the same way or for the same purposes.³

Despite these different interpretive positions, scholars do agree that America's impact on Europe as a whole in the postwar period has been significant. Few dispute the fact that Europeans ate, dressed, worked, lived, and entertained themselves more like Americans in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. But, again, what about Spain? Was Americanization – and Disney, in particular – seen as a significant threat? Overall, it appears as though many Spaniards were willing to adapt American cultural influence in order to serve their own ends, namely economic development and European "convergence," and expressed little *cultural* insecurity during this period.

Disney in the Spanish Context

Over the past three decades, scholars have used a number of American cultural artifacts to study the process of Americanization: Coca-Cola soft drinks, McDonalds fast food restaurants, American films and T.V. shows, and even American MBA programs.⁴ But, the Walt Disney Company may in fact be the best place to focus, as its symbols are well established around the world and are almost universally recognized. For example, more than ten million French children read the weekly *Le Journal de Mickey*, even before Disneyland Paris (originally called Euro Disney until 1995) opened outside Paris in 1992.⁵ Some have even argued

³ For a more complete review of the debates surrounding Americanization in Europe in the late twentieth century, see Hamilton M. Stapell, "Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Rethinking Americanization, National Identity, and 'Difference' in Post-Franco Spain," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* 41, no. 1 (2016): 79-91.

⁴ For one of the best analyses of the processes of Americanization in Europe in the postwar period see: Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005).

⁵ Miles Orvell, "Understanding Disneyland: American Mass Culture and the European Gaze" in Kroes, *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions*, 240.

that Disney may represent the very best manifestation of American culture abroad, thus making it the perfect object to study Americanization in Europe. Umberto Eco argues that Disney has perfected America's ability to fabricate, recast, duplicate, crossbreed, and mass-market American consumer culture: "what is falsified is our will to buy, which we take as real, and in this sense, Disneyland is really the quintessence of consumer ideology."⁶ In other words, Mickey Mouse is perhaps America's most potent and exemplary cultural export.

In order to understand the issues involved in the Walt Disney Company's international expansion in Spain and Europe, it is helpful to review the background of Disneyland Paris. On April 15, 1983, the Walt Disney Company opened its first theme park outside the United States in Tokyo, Japan. This theme park became an instant hit. In fact, since the Walt Disney Company executives believed they learned so much about operating a theme park in another country, they immediately began to search for a site for a fourth park. To find a site for its new park, the company looked to Europe where Disney films historically have done better than in the United States and because the Western European audience already was familiar with Disney entertainment and merchandise. After more than a year of examining potential sites in France and Spain, a decision was made at the end of 1985 to locate the new park at Marne-la-Vallée, twenty miles outside of Paris. The creation of these two new foreign parks set the stage for close encounters of the cultural kind.

A number of studies have already looked at how the confrontation between American and local cultures played out in Tokyo and Paris. In Tokyo Disneyland, the designers sought to create an American version of Disneyland in the heart of Japan in such a way that little concession was made to the local culture.⁷ According to Mary Yoko Brannen, this "keeping the exotic exotic" represents not the assimilation of Japanese culture by American culture but a means of differentiating Japanese cultural identity from that of America and the West.⁸ Yoshimoto argues that "to have sought too much of an accommodation with local customs and traditions would have run into the problem that the Japanese revel in simultaneously asserting their national identity and valorizing American products to the extent that American cars are unpopular in Japan because they are not sufficiently American."⁹ However, that kind of direct transfer of American culture did not work in France.

To the surprise of many executives at Disney, the French demanded greater assimilation from Disney. For example, to appease French critics and the French

⁶ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Picador, 1987), 43.

⁷ Slater, *The American Century*, 262.

⁸ Mary Yoko Brannen, "'Bwana Mickey': Constructing Cultural Consumption at Tokyo Disneyland" in *Re-made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society*, ed. Joseph Tobin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 226-231.

⁹ Cited in Alan Bryman, "Global Disney" in Slater, *The American Century*, 262.

public, the names and attractions within the park were translated into French, most of the cast members that were hired were French, wine and beer were allowed in certain restaurants, and certain American attractions like the Jungle Cruise were left out in order not to offend post-colonial sensitivities.¹⁰ Overall, the park outside of Paris included a number of significant concessions in order to blend into preexisting French and European cultural norms.¹¹ At the same time, while it is clear that park's designers were forced to adapt to specific demands, Alan Bryman's study on the reception of British visitors to the park also points to the issue of cultural imperialism. The British visitors in his study appeared to have imbibed Disney's artificial emphasis on fun, and showed little evidence of being disturbed by its Americanization, or domination, of some aspects of European culture. Bryman concludes, "This finding unmistakably identifies the cultural power of Disney's global offerings."¹²

While Tokyo Disneyland and Disneyland Paris offer excellent case studies of the actual intersection between American and local cultures, we cannot directly see how the confrontations between American and Spanish culture over Disney played out because no park was actually built in Spain. It is nonetheless possible to see how Spaniards confronted the *idea* of accepting a large chunk of American culture into their country. Even though a park was not built on Spanish soil, the very real possibility that it would be built in the mid and late 1980s created a discourse within Spanish society that can be compared to the French response, and thus can be used to analyze Spaniards' reaction to accepting the "Wonderful World of Disney" into their country.

The Battle over the Mouse in France

The French, we know, immediately and overwhelmingly saw the expansion of Disney into Europe, and especially into their own backyard, as a serious cultural threat. A year before the official contact was signed, the popular French magazine, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, appeared on the newsstands with a cover that showed a Godzilla-sized Mickey Mouse towering over the Eiffel Tower and on the verge of smashing through the streets of Paris. "American Cultural Invasion," shouted the banner headline.¹³ And French intellectuals were just about unanimous in voicing their concern over the possibility of Mickey and his friends landing in France. In the most frequently cited quote from this period, the prominent theater director,

¹⁰ Alan Bryman, "Global Disney" in Slater, *The American Century*, 262-263.

¹¹ For more on the controversies surrounding the construction and opening of Disneyland Paris see: Andrew Lainsbury, *Once Upon an American Dream: The Story of Euro Disneyland* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

¹² Bryman, "Global Disney," 270.

¹³ *Le Nouvel Observateur*, January 23, 1986.

Ariane Mnouchkine, declared the project “a cultural Chernobyl.”¹⁴ A member of the conservative press, Dominique Jamet, echoed similar fears:

In ever increasing numbers, the new generations are singing, eating, dressing and thinking, in English. They consider that fast food and Coca-Cola is an integral part of our cultural heritage, to the extent that we are incapable of [experiencing] our films, our books, our fashions, our way of life. We have been reduced to the level of simple consumers, intoxicated with American culture.¹⁵

Other French news outlets suggested that the park would be “the greatest American intervention in France since D-Day.”¹⁶ Before a single set of plastic ears had been sold on French soil, intellectuals, cultural critics, and members of the press all voiced their opposition to the possibility of a Disney park in France.

But, the cultural elites were not the only ones upset with Disney’s plans.¹⁷ In the spring of 1987, three French protesters were hurt in clashes with police over the construction of the park in Marne-la-Vallée.¹⁸ Hundreds of protesters demonstrated against the numerous financial concessions made to Disney by the French government in the final contract. Many local residents also voiced concern over what the large American development might do to the French way of life on the outskirts of Paris. The major concerns focused on traffic problems, the destruction of agricultural land, noise and light pollution, and disruption to the rhythm of everyday life.

As the park neared completion, the level of protests increased. And despite the company’s attempts to persuade the French that, “It’s not America, it’s Disney,” the criticism of the park also grew increasingly harsh.¹⁹ Writer Jean Cau described the project as a “horror made of cardboard, plastic and appalling colors, a construction of hardened chewing gum and idiotic folklore taken straight out of comic books written for obese Americans.”²⁰ The philosopher Alain Finkielkrant

¹⁴ Cited in Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 309.

¹⁵ Michael Dobbs, “A French Disneyland?” *The Washington Post*, January 22, 1986.

¹⁶ “La Disney niega que haya elegido París por motivos políticos,” *El País*, December 20, 1985.

¹⁷ For one of many such examples see: Montse Capdevila, “Muchos franceses ya han dejado de soñar con Disneylandia,” *El Periódico de Catalunya*, June 29, 1986.

¹⁸ “Varios heridos en las protestas por la firma del contrato de Disney,” *El País*, March 25, 1987.

¹⁹ Todd Gitlin, “World Leaders: Mickey, et al.,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1992.

²⁰ Alan Riding, “Only the French Elite Scorn Mickey’s Debut,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 1992. It should be noted that, despite its title, this newspaper article presents little evidence that ordinary French men and women – or any other significant segment of French society – actually supported the new park.

argued that the plan was “a terrifying giant’s step toward world homogenization.”²¹ According to others, Disney commercialized the fairy tales of children everywhere, thereby stifling their dreams and preparing them to become mere spectators and consumers.²² Jean-Marie Rouart, a novelist and literary critic of *Le Figaro*, argued that the park was “the very symbol of the process by which people’s cultural standards are lowered and money becomes all conquering.”²³ He went on to say, “If we do not resist, the Kingdom of Profit will create a world that will have all of the appearances of civilization and all the savage reality of barbarism.”²⁴

Many politicians voiced their fears as well. Max Gallo, a Socialist politician, predicted that Euro Disney would “bombard France with uprooted creations that are to culture what fast food is to gastronomy.”²⁵ Jack Lang, the French Minister of Culture, who often supported the economic benefits of the project in public statements, even worried that Euro Disney might be the beginning of an American takeover of the leisure industry in France.²⁶ While most commentators feared the prospect of Disney landing in their backyard, some pushed their criticism to the extreme. Recalling the May 1968 fire set to the Parisian stock exchange, Jacques Julliard declared: “I hope with all my heart for a May 1992 that will set fire to Euro Disney.”²⁷ Unfortunately for Disney, when you wish upon a star, sometimes dreams do come true.

By all accounts, the opening of the Parisian Disneyland in 1992 was a disaster. Echoing the words of Jacques Julliard, two small bombs exploded outside the park on opening day in an effort to cut off the main power supply.²⁸ This incident was only the beginning of Disney’s problems. French farmers blocked local roads because they believed that they had not received sufficient compensation for their land.²⁹ Commuter train workers also went on strike to protest “imperialist colonization.”³⁰ And most importantly for Disney, and contrary to their expectations, the park was simply not popular at first. French men and women expressed their fears of cultural domination and homogenization by simply not visiting the park. In the first year, the park lost more than \$300 million. Hotel occupancy was also well below predicted levels: fifty-five percent in the first year

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 228.

²⁷ Riding, “Only the French Elite Scorn Mickey’s Debut.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “La pasión según Mickey; Euro Disney es ya una visita obligada para los españoles que viajan a París,” *El País*, April 19, 1992.

³⁰ “Walt Disney, en el París de Nunca Jamás,” *El País*, April 12, 1992.

against a forecast of sixty-eight percent. Euro Disney's share price also fell the first year by sixty-six percent.³¹ Despite Disney's many efforts to quiet cultural fears, people stayed away from the park. The company's publicists even tried to play up Walt Disney's family connection to France. The family's original name, the French were told, was not Disney at all but "d'Isigny."³²

Roger Dupont, the leader of a local branch of a labor union, neatly summed up the feeling for the park when he said, "Disney's is a culture of hegemony."³³ And Dupont was not alone. French intellectuals, workers, and vacationers had all expressed their concerns in public. Each group expressed different concerns and voiced them in different ways, but expressed serious reservations about the project nonetheless. From the decision to build the park in France, to the opening day and beyond, many French men and women expressed fear, anger, and consternation over the idea of hosting Mickey Mouse and all the perceived cultural baggage that came along with him.

The Spanish Reaction to a New *Disneylandia*

Yet Spaniards' reactions to the possibility of Disney setting up shop in their country were remarkably different. Over the course of two years Spanish officials went to tremendous lengths to win the park and expressed little fear of the possible cultural consequences. In addition, Spanish intellectuals and ordinary Spaniards expressed little opposition either. In fact, almost all of the public commentary from the period appears to have welcomed the idea of a Spanish *Disneylandia*.

For example, even before Disney officially opened the selection process in February of 1985, Spanish officials first privately expressed their interest in hosting the park as early as 1983.³⁴ They then worked publicly throughout 1984 and 1985 to lure the park to the Iberian Peninsula.³⁵ Not only did they want to bring Disneyland to Spain, Spanish officials, led by the Minister of Transportation, Tourism, and Communication, Enrique Barón, wished to bring more American tourists to their country. Citing the fact that only three percent of the visitors to

³¹ Roger Cohen, "When You Wish Upon a Deficit," *The New York Times*, July 18, 1993. The park finally first turned a profit in the summer of 1995 after an internal reorganization and an official name change from Euro Disney to Disneyland Paris. However, the theme park has continued to struggle financially. For instance, in 2014 the Walt Disney Company offered a \$1.25 billion bailout package to rescue Disneyland Paris from mounting debt and weak revenue: Hugh Carnegie, "Euro Disney faces €1bn bailout by Walt Disney parent," *Financial Times*, October 6, 2014.

³² Riding, "Only the French Elite Scorn Mickey's Debut."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Laura Bellester, "El año en que Valencia soñó con la Disney," *Levante - El Mercantil Valenciano*, June 16, 2012.

³⁵ See for example: "España ofrece su candidatura como sede europea de Disneylandia," *El País*, March 1, 1984; "España cuenta con grandes posibilidades de convertirse en la futura sede de la Disneylandia europea," *El País*, May, 4, 1984; and "Todos quieren a Mickey Mouse," *El País*, June 30, 1985.

Spain were from North America, Barón traveled to New York, Washington, California, and Florida in May of 1984 to promote Spain's bid to host the theme park and bring more Americans to Spain.³⁶

From May of 1984 to December of 1985, when the decision was made to locate the new park in France, the Spanish central government went to truly extraordinary lengths to win the park. In total, the central government was willing to offer more than eighty billion *pesetas* in incentives and spent more than thirty-five million *pesetas* to try to win the park. In fact, the headline in the Spanish newspaper *El País* at the time proclaimed: "Disney, the dream that cost one *peseta* per Spaniard."³⁷ Such expenditures were allocated because it was believed that the park would offer real economic benefits to a country suffering from high unemployment and slow economic growth. The Director General of Tourism Promotion, Ignacio Vasallo, worked especially hard to realize the construction of Euro Disney in Spain because he believed "it would mean an investment of \$2 billion and the creation of 12,000 jobs during construction, and 8,700 permanent jobs, and another 35,000 indirect positions in the area around the park, including hotels and golf courses."³⁸ In fact, the construction of the park was claimed to be "one of the largest foreign investment ever undertaken in any country."³⁹ It was estimated that the park would bring in an additional twelve to fourteen million tourists to Spain each year.⁴⁰ The project was likened to "a splendid cake."⁴¹ And many Spaniards were prepared to do what was necessary to get their cake and eat it too.

In fact, a headline in Spain's main left-of-center newspaper, *El País*, on August 10, 1985, read: "Everyone wants Disney here at whatever the price."⁴² The centrist newspaper, *Diario 16*, frequently published articles that cast a favorable light on the project, and even called the prospective contract with Disney "fabulous."⁴³ The conservative newspaper, *ABC*, supported the idea of bringing the Magic Kingdom to Spain as well. While much of its early reporting appeared skeptical that such a project could be brought to the country, a multi-page feature story in September of 1985 clearly backed the construction of the new theme park

³⁶ "España cuenta con grandes posibilidades de convertirse en la futura sede de la Disneylandia europea."

³⁷ Spain had a population of approximately thirty-five million residents at the time: "Disney, el sueño que ha costado una peseta por español," *El País*, December 22, 1985.

³⁸ "La ubicación de la 'Disneylandia europea' se conocerá en agosto," *El País*, May 13, 1985.

³⁹ "Todos quieren a Mickey Mouse."

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "Todos quieren Disneylandia a cualquier precio," *El País*, August 10, 1985.

⁴³ Pedro Arnúero, "El Gobierno consigue el apoyo de operadores turísticos europeos para Eurodisney," *Diario 16*, May 20, 1985; also see for example, Pedro Arnúero, "Walt Disney deshoja la margarita," *Diario 16*, February 27, 1985.

in Spain for its perceived economic benefits.⁴⁴ The article begins by stating, “if the bureaucracy and the slowness of the Socialist government does not end up spoiling the operation” then the new Eurodisney park would greatly benefit Spain.⁴⁵ *ABC* also published an editorial in the same edition that called the possibility of the new park “truly stupendous.”⁴⁶ Specifically, the editorial favored the project because of its international prestige and economic benefits.

The possibility of Disney coming to Spain was seen as such a prize that officials from various regions actually fought over locating the park in their respective districts. Reports in the press even referred to a possible political “war between the regions” over the park.⁴⁷ Tarragona, Castellon, Valencia, Alicante, and Catalonia all hoped to win the right to host Disney’s new home in Europe.⁴⁸ At the same time, Disney appeared to try to make the most of this rivalry between the regions. For example, on the same day in September 1985, executives of Walt Disney hopped by air from Valencia to Catalonia – where they were wined and dined in both locations – to meet with Joan Lerma, the regional leader of Valencia, and Jordi Pujol, the leader of Catalonia.⁴⁹ By all accounts, the competition to land the park during this time was intense, and the only apparent opposition to the park stemmed from environmental concerns. Specifically, some critics in Alicante worried that locating the park in that region would damage the Pego-Oliva marshlands.⁵⁰ In other words, there was clear support for the theme park, but just not in such environmentally sensitive areas.

In fact, further to the south, the mayor of the coastal town of Ametlla declared that locating the park in his area “would be like a kind of miracle that has never existed before. Greater than *el gordo* [Spain’s national lottery], it would be *el gordísimo*.”⁵¹ And it was not only Spanish politicians who wanted the park. *El País* reported that: “From Santa Pola, in Alicante, to Ametlla de Mar, in Castellon, the dozens of business men, hotel owners, and ordinary citizens interviewed for this newspaper stated that the area of development...would enormously benefit from

⁴⁴ “El Eurodisney, camino de España,” *ABC*, September 23, 1985.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ “Disneylandia,” *ABC*, September 23, 1985, Editorial.

⁴⁷ See for example: “Los hombres de Disney hablen con Pujol and Lerma en un solo día,” *El Periódico de Catalunya*, September 16, 1985; Pedro Arnuero, “La Walt Disney aplaza la decisión de su parque europeo hasta principios de año,” *Diario 16*, September 22, 1985; and Miguel Cifuentes, “Andalucía se suma a la carrera por lograr el parque de Disney,” *El Periódico de Catalunya*, November 7, 1985.

⁴⁸ Bellester, “El año en que Valencia soñó con la Disney”; and Carla Pons, “1985: El año en que Disney casi se instala en Pego,” *La Marina Plaza* (Valencia), January 14, 2018.

⁴⁹ “Los hombres de Disney hablen con Pujol and Lerma en un solo día.”

⁵⁰ Pons, “1985: El año en que Disney casi se instala en Pego.”

⁵¹ “El Estado prevé destinar 20.000 millones para las expropiaciones de terrenos del parque de Disneylandia,” *El País*, August 9, 1985.

the park.”⁵² Another headline from the same period declared, “Everyone wants Mickey Mouse here.”⁵³ Similar headlines could be found in *Diario 16* as well: “Everyone waits [for Disney] with open arms.”⁵⁴ The same article included interviews with four local mayors on the Mediterranean coast who voiced unanimous support for the new park. One of the mayors even announced: “Let [Disney] come when and however they want, and if they don’t want to pay taxes, we forgive them. We wait for them with open arms.”⁵⁵ Summing up the overwhelming enthusiasm for the park along the coast, the article declared: “All at once, with the local officials in front, they [Spaniards] now shout: ‘Welcome, Mister Disney.’”⁵⁶

Individual regional governments were so eager to bring the park to their regions that they even offered additional incentives above and beyond the official offer from the central government in Madrid. In September of 1985, the Generalitat of Catalonia offered “the maximum level of stimulus and incentives in order that Catalonia would be a main candidate.”⁵⁷ And although never realistically considered as a possible site, Andalusia even tried to get in on the action late in the game by announcing its interest in late September of 1985.⁵⁸

Despite all of these efforts, Disney awarded the park to France on December 18, 1985. After official negotiations dragged on for more than a year, the final contract was signed in Paris at the Hôtel Matignon on March 24, 1987. The reasons for the decision appeared to be mainly economic. Jacques Chirac and his colleagues in the central government were eager to win the contest for Euro Disney because they thought it would strengthen Paris’s claim as the leader of high technology and mass entertainment in Western Europe.⁵⁹ Consequently the French government, through its right of eminent domain, made 4,700 acres of prime real estate available at below market prices to Disney for the construction of the park. The government also arranged for low-interest loans from state-owned banks, helped recruit private investors, and agreed to extend the new high-speed commuter train to the site of the park. Another reason that Marne-la-Vallée was chosen was its central location and vast market. At the time, Paris drew twenty-six million

⁵² “Todos quieren Disneylandia a cualquier precio.”

⁵³ “Todos quieren a Mickey Mouse.”

⁵⁴ Gustavo Catalán, “Bienvenido, míster Disney!” *Diario 16*, August 25, 1985.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ La Generalitat desea complementar la oferta del Gobierno central a Walt Disney,” *El País*, September 20, 1985.

⁵⁸ “La Junta de Andalucía propone a la Disney instalar el parque en la Costa del Sol,” *El País*, Sep. 25, 1985; “Andalucía insiste en su candidatura,” *Diario 16*, September 27, 1985; Cifuentes, “Andalucía se suma a la carrera por lograr el parque de Disney.”

⁵⁹ Pells, *Not Like Us*, 308.

tourists a year, and 109 million people live within a six-hour drive of the park.⁶⁰ However, other, less tangible and more controversial, issues may have been a factor. In Spain, ETA terrorist activity was high in the mid 1980s and there was also the memory of Antonio Tejero's attempted political coup only a few years before. In other words, Spain's democratic credentials still may not have appeared completely secure.

While the reasons for Disney's decision were probably complex, the reaction in Spain was straightforward. There was a feeling that Spain had been excluded from a genuine economic and political opportunity. Three Spanish deputies to the European Community from Valencia were so displeased with the decision that they accused French officials of using money illegally from the EC to lure the park to France.⁶¹ For some, Spain's loss had a greater symbolic significance. The newspaper *ABC* openly blamed the Socialist central government for a "series of errors" that ultimately led to the loss of the park to France and a political embarrassment for the country as a whole.⁶² On the other side of the political spectrum, an editorial in *El País* portrayed the loss to France as a significant blow to Spain's international prestige. Specifically, and strikingly similar to the reporting in *ABC*, the editorial represented the loss as a missed opportunity to be associated with a world superpower and with American values: "The theme park became, both for the Spanish and French governments, a symbol of prestige and the chance to identify with the world of values that Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse represent."⁶³

But what exactly were those values? And why were so many Spaniards keen on bringing Disney to the Iberian Peninsula? Besides the direct economic benefits, it appears that they were also interested in gaining American "know-how." For example, in August of 1985, Vasallo, the Director General of Tourism mentioned above, said, "Less important would be the \$2 billion [of investment]. Most important would be the 'know-how' of Disney, which would benefit all Spanish business men."⁶⁴ It is not every day that a government official says that two billion dollars are not all that important. What seems most important to Vasallo and others was acquiring a certain Disney, or American, way of doing things. The desire to import this "way of doing things" can be seen as a desire to embrace a certain American way of life, and American business practices in particular.⁶⁵ At

⁶⁰ Riding, "Only the French Elite Scorn Mickey's Debut."

⁶¹ "Eurodiputados socialistas creen que Francia usó fondos de la CE en su oferta a la Disney," *El País*, March 2, 1986.

⁶² "Las consecuencias de los errores," *ABC*, December 20, 1985; also see: "España perdió el Eurodisney por un solo voto de diferencia," *ABC*, December 27, 1985.

⁶³ "El adiós a Disneylandia," *El País*, December 21, 1985.

⁶⁴ "La Administración intenta evitar una 'subasta de ayudas,'" *El País*, August 11, 1985.

⁶⁵ For more on the desire of Spanish political and business leaders to obtain American business and technical "know-how" in the postwar period see: Sasha Pack, *Tourism and Dictatorship: Europe's*

the same time, there was no hesitation or resentment over the possibility of assuming this business and technical “know-how” in a massive dose of American popular culture: the wonderful world of Disney and all that goes with it. In fact, after the official decision came to locate the park in France, the Spanish press reported in 1986 that the central government was engaged in secret talks with at least six multinational firms – including the American company Six Flags – to bring a new theme park to the Mediterranean coast.⁶⁶ Clearly, Spain’s political and business leaders were not ready to give up on this dream easily. They were apparently ready and willing to adapt American cultural imports in order to serve their own ends, namely economic development, increased international prestige, and, as discussed further below, European integration.

Spain’s disappointment losing the bid eventually changed to celebration when the French park finally opened outside Paris in 1992. That celebration was not out of relief that the project had been built in France instead of Spain, but because Spaniards could now visit Mickey Mouse without having to travel to the United States. A few days after the opening of the park, Spanish headlines enthusiastically announced: “Euro Disney is now a required stop for those Spaniards travelling to Paris.”⁶⁷ Far from being a place to avoid, the new park was presented as a sight not to miss. The Spaniards who visited the park spoke of enjoying their visit, and even believed that the American culture was good for the French: “It should be noted, moreover, that the French have never smiled more nor have been more friendly now that they work for the Americans.”⁶⁸ The Spanish consensus seemed to be, “This is marvelous!”⁶⁹

The Spanish press also reported on many of the problems surrounding the opening of the park, and on French concerns over Americanization. Interestingly, however, the Spanish journalists never expressed any relief over the fact that the park opened in France rather than Spain. French union leaders were simply quoted

Peaceful Invasion of Franco’s Spain (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Neal Rosendorf, *Franco Sells Spain to America: Hollywood, Tourism, and Public Relations as Postwar Spanish Soft Power*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Lorenzo Delgado, “Cooperaciones cultural y científica en clave política: ‘Crear un clima de opinión favorable para las bases U.S.A. en España,’” in *España y Estados Unidos en el Siglo XX*, eds. Lorenzo Delgado and María Dolores Elizalde (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2005); and José L. García Ruiz and Núria Puig, “AmCham Spain and the Transformation of Spanish Business, 1917-2007,” in *American Firms in Europe, 1890-1980: Strategy, Identity, Perception and Performance*, eds. Hubert Bonin and Ferry de Goey (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2009), 385-409.

⁶⁶ Miguel Cifuentes, “El Gobierno negocia con seis firmas el ‘Disney’ español,” *El Periódico de Catalunya*, September 9, 1986.

⁶⁷ “La pasión según Mickey; Euro Disney es ya una visita obligada para los españoles que viajan a París.”

⁶⁸ “Walt Disney, en el París de Nunca Jamás.”

⁶⁹ “La pasión según Mickey; Euro Disney es ya una visita obligada para los españoles que viajan a París.”

as denouncing the project as American “colonization.”⁷⁰ From the Spanish point of view, the new park was celebrated for being a place of fun and enjoyment, rather than a site of cultural domination.

It should be noted, however, that while there was little apparent animosity towards American cultural products, a certain degree of anti-Americanism did exist in Spain as a result of Cold War politics, especially in the 1980s. Debates surrounding the NATO referendum and the presence of American military bases and nuclear weapons did provoke anti-American sentiment in Spain during this period.⁷¹ America’s continued anti-communist stance made Washington champion the cause of European defense and rearmament, which in turn incited some Spaniards to accuse the United States of warmongering and to write “Yankee Go Home” on the walls of Spanish towns. However, as discussed further below, there is little evidence that this political or strategic anti-Americanism was translated or transformed into a fear of American culture. While Spaniards may have had reservations with regards to hosting the American military, they apparently had no problem hosting Mickey Mouse and his friends.

Conclusion

This case of Disneyland Paris – and the attempt to lure Disneyland to Spain – shows that not all European countries have embraced (or rejected) American culture in the same way, to the same degree, and for the same reasons. In other words, there has not been a single kind of reaction to American cultural influence in the postwar period. In addition, this case demonstrates that Spain, in terms of national cultural identity or cultural confidence, may be somewhat of an exception to the European norm, at least in the 1980s and 1990s.

As I have argued elsewhere, Spain may in fact have had some kind of a secure national identity, or at least cultural identity, as a result of its specific historical trajectory through the second half of the twentieth century.⁷² For example, Spain, unlike much of the rest of Europe, never suffered defeat and occupation during the Second World War. And while Spain may have been devastated by its own earlier civil war, the country was nevertheless rebuilt by the Spaniards themselves, or at least by some portion of them, and not Americans. In other words, Spain never had to endure a postwar Allied occupation, not even temporarily. Nor did it receive a single penny of Marshall Plan aid. I believe it is

⁷⁰ “Walt Disney, en el París de Nunca Jamás.”

⁷¹ For more on the geopolitical tensions between Spain and the United States during this period see: Felipe Sahagún, “Spain and the United States: Military Primacy.” In *Spain: The European and International Challenges*, eds. Richard Gillespie and Richard Youngs (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 148-169.

⁷² For the full argument regarding Spain’s lack of cultural insecurity in the 1980s, see Stapell, “Beyond Cultural Imperialism.”

also reasonable to suggest that Franco's forty-year effort – through both education and repression – to construct an official national identity had some lasting impact on Spain as well. While many Spaniards, especially those on the left, may have had a strong desire to distance themselves from the central state after the dictator's death, they nonetheless may have retained a certain feeling of "Spanishness" into the late 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, Spain's growing regional identities probably play an important role here as well. It is possible that strong regional affiliations further prevented a feeling of cultural "insecurity" during this period.⁷³

Perhaps most significantly, Spaniards' often enthusiastic acceptance of American culture may also be due to the fact that the process of Americanization first made its way into Spain under the cover of "modernization." In the decade after World War II, much of the rest of Western Europe was "persuaded" to take the American-funded path towards a mass consumer society. In practice, this meant the embrace of many American economic and political ideals, along with an extra-large helping of American cultural products. This process also happened in Spain, but a decade later and in the form of "Europeanization." Just like the Marshall Plan officials, Franco's technocrats in the 1960s hoped for an automobile and disposable income for everyone. The goal was to trade economic development for political stability and acceptance. It is in this shift that we may find the origins of Spain's apparent resistance to the perceived dangers of Americanization. In other words, Americanization first came to Spain in the 1960s; but, it came disguised as the much more palatable ideals of "Europeanization" and "modernization."

Then, after the end of the dictatorship, when the rest of Europe was wrestling with the long-term effects of Americanization, many Spaniards increasingly set for themselves the goal of becoming even *more* European and, perhaps unknowingly, even *more* American. In fact, many Spaniards eagerly hoped for "convergence." In other words, they hoped to reach the same standard of living and way of life as their European neighbors. But, this wish to catch up with the rest of Europe also meant openly embracing mass consumerism and, by extension, a more American lifestyle. In this way, Spaniards may have unquestioningly and unwittingly accepted the processes of Americanization as "normal."

As a result of the combination of these factors, Spain did not appear to suffer from the same kind of cultural insecurity and anxiety that plague countries like France in the postwar period. As described above, and despite a certain degree of Anti-Americanism due to geopolitical tensions, there appears to be surprisingly little fear of American cultural imperialism in Spain, with the country openly

⁷³ For more in the strength of regional identities during this period, see the work of Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, including "Regions, nations and nationalities: On the Process of Territorial Identity-Building During Spain's Democratic Transition and Consolidation," in *Spanish and Latin American Transitions to Democracy*, eds. Carlos H. Waisman and Raanan Rein (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 55-79.

embracing Hollywood movies, fast food, and casual fashion. And perhaps the best example of this was the persistent and enthusiastic attempt to lure Euro Disneyland to the Iberian Peninsula in the mid 1980s. In these examples, certain segments of the population were ready and comfortably willing to adapt American cultural products to serve their own ends, namely economic development, international prestige, and the appearance of full European integration. In the end, the land of Don Quixote never had the opportunity to host Mickey Mouse and his gang. For many in Western Europe, this would have come as a blessing. For many Spaniards, however, it seemed much closer to a curse.