

Europe and America couldn't be more different, right? Not so fast, says historian

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Marshalling data on everything from colon cancer to the accuracy of public clocks, Peter Baldwin illustrates how differences between the U.S. and Western Europe are much smaller than commonly supposed.

The United States is a sharp-elbowed, competitive place defined by glaring [income disparities](#), violent crime, destructive individualism and prudish morals. Europe, meanwhile, enjoys the benefits of a more egalitarian society, a live-and-let-live ethic, a dolce vita quality of life, and a generous social safety net and universal [health care](#).

Right? Not so fast, a UCLA historian argues in a new book.

Marshalling quantitative comparative data on subjects as diverse as colon cancer deaths and the accuracy of clocks in public settings, Peter Baldwin illustrates how differences between the U.S. and the nations of Western Europe are much smaller than commonly supposed. And where differences do exist, they just as often defy — as support — expectations.

"I hope to apply a swift and well-aimed karate chop of fact and figure to the prejudices and mistaken assumptions that have become common currency in periodicals, popular books, talk shows, and conversations on both sides of the Atlantic," Baldwin writes in "The [Narcissism](#) of Minor Differences: How America and Europe Are Alike" (Oxford University Press, November 2009).

To be sure, America's bad rap isn't entirely baseless, Baldwin admits. The U.S. murder and imprisonment rates, at two to five times higher than any European Union country, are really off the charts. And depending on the measure, the nation's gun ownership rate either ranks second behind Finland, a country famously populated by hunters, or exceeds all EU countries. But once this troublesome trio of comparative statistics is off the table, America looks a lot like Europe, argues Baldwin, a professor of history at UCLA who has lived abroad half his life.

"Everything else falls within the spectrum of European rates," he says.

Take health care. Despite the high cost of care and the high rate of uninsurance in the United States, the quantifiable outcomes of the American health care system compare favorably with Europe's, Baldwin found. Proportionately speaking, fewer Americans die of major diseases, strokes, heart attacks, hypertension and cancer than citizens of several European nations.

"If these measures were stripped of any identifying information and you were asked to choose the country which doesn't have a national health care system, you wouldn't necessarily pick the United States," Baldwin says. "In every respect, America falls more or less smack dab in the middle."

In fact, when it comes to the four major cancer killers — colorectal, breast, lung and prostate — Americans actually have better five-year survival rates than Europeans, who are covered by national health insurance systems of one form or another. And these figures include the 15 percent of Americans who don't have health insurance.

The United States also has an unexpectedly strong track record when it comes to public transportation, Baldwin found. True to reputation,

Americans drive much more than Europeans — some 70 percent more than their closest peers, the Italians. And the U.S. public transportation system leaves, as Baldwin puts it, "much to be desired."

But it's not because America doesn't have a good rail system, he says. It's just that Americans rely less on rail to move passengers than do Europeans. In the United States, rail much more frequently moves goods than in Europe. In fact, well over three times as much freight is carried by rail per capita in the United States than in the closest European nation, Sweden. All European nations, meanwhile, send a higher percentage of freight by road than America. As a result, a smaller percentage of transportation-related carbon dioxide emissions is caused by road travel in the United States than anywhere in Europe other than Norway.

"It may be that Europeans virtuously ride the rails as passengers," Baldwin says. "But their refrigerators, their Corn Flakes and their mail are hauled around in trucks. From Mother Nature's point of view, it doesn't make much difference if you're sending your passengers by rail but your freight by truck rather than the other way around. Pollution is pollution."

While Europeans may have a reputation for being far more indulgent of the sexual antics of their leaders than Americans, they actually come off as relatively prudish in Baldwin's book. America ranks behind only one country — Iceland — when it comes to the percentage of respondents who claim to have had "three in a bed during sex" and ranks first in respondents claiming to have had at least one homosexual experience.

And although Americans have a reputation for displaying less solidarity than their European brethren, the figures don't reflect that either. When compared to a range of European countries, America ranks first in blood and organ donation and individual charitable giving and second in

volunteer work and participation in civic groups.

"The view of America as a balkanized stew of multicultural tribes, each arguing their right to separate identities, turns out to be an exaggeration," Baldwin writes.

Americans even have a slower pace of life than Europeans, according to several studies cited by Baldwin.

All of which begs the question: If the facts don't support these stereotypes, where did they come from and how have they managed to persist?

In most cases, pundits have "cherry-picked" countries — typically Northern or Central European ones — that have some dramatic differences in comparison the United States, Baldwin contends. By overlooking the Mediterranean nations and the English-speaking fringe of the United Kingdom and Ireland, not to mention nations like the Netherlands and Switzerland, those who make comparisons between Europe and the U.S. make the differences that exist across the Atlantic look larger than in fact they are.

"If Europe as a concept is to mean anything, then it has to include all its members, prosperous and poor, Protestant and Catholic, Nordic and Mediterranean," Baldwin insists. "No one would allow the numbers for the [United States](#) to be similarly cherry-picked — including Connecticut but not Alabama, Minnesota but not Missouri, and so forth."

Mostly, though, past transatlantic comparisons have failed to take the whole picture into account, Baldwin argues. Looking at inequality, one finds that relative disparities are high in the U.S. But if one looks also at absolute poverty, the situation appears less full of contrast.

Baldwin measured the number of citizens who live below an absolute poverty line (the cash-sum equivalent of 60 percent of the median income of the original nations of the EU) and found that Florida, Oregon, Kansas and North Dakota have proportionately fewer poor than Sweden. Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Nebraska, South Dakota, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Wisconsin and eight other states have fewer poor than Germany. Iowa, Maryland and Missouri have fewer poor than Austria. No U.S. state — even Arkansas, which proved to be the poorest by this measure — has as large a proportion of absolutely poor citizens as Greece, Spain, Italy or Ireland, Baldwin found.

The American crime rate does seem alarming when rates of gun ownership, murder and imprisonment are considered. But on every other measure — assault, car theft, property crimes, sexual assault, fraud and corruption — the U.S. falls somewhere within the European norm. And the U.S. murder, gun ownership and incarceration rates aren't a reflection of some inherently violent tendency of the American culture, he argues. Rather, he says, his research shows that the [statistics](#) most frequently cited to bolster a picture of crime in the U.S. actually reflect more on another, albeit possibly more insidious, issue: racial and ethnic marginalization.

"It has to do with the continuing problems that have been bequeathed to modern America by slavery and by racism and our continuing inability to do very much or to be willing to do very much about it," Baldwin says.

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