Europe in general and Germany in particular have developed an ambivalent image of America—as a motor of modernity and a symbol of capitalism—in the second half of the 19th century. In a way, America has always been seen as the “Other,” as a counter project to European culture and society—as model and competitor, myth and object of scrutiny, as a target of wishes and dreams, but also of fears and attacks.

This lead to tropes of “America” as a symbol of industrialization, capitalism, technical progress, freedom, modernity, alleged cultural decay, materialism; that is, a fixation on money and business. Strikingly, most of these 150-year-old stereotypes are still virulent in one form or another until this day and can be seen as undercurrents to political debates. One can trace them from Kürnberger’s novel Der Amerikamüde (1855) to Kellermann’s Der Tunnel (1913) to Spengler’s Decline of the West (1918/22) to the high time of “Americanism” in the Weimar Republic to the cultural and economic appropriation in post-war West Germany to the ’68 movement and the critical arguments during the Bush Jr. presidency.

The German image of “America” has always been Janus-faced and linked to phenomena of modernity—which Germans, in a Faustian way, both embraced and feared. Consequently, the German view on the United States has oscillated between admiration and critique depending on current political relations and events between both countries as well as, strikingly, on the American leadership: Germans viewed the US rather positively in the presidencies of Kennedy, Clinton, and Obama and more critically under Reagan, Bush Jr., and, of course, Trump. There is reason to be optimistic that under a future American administration, the German sentiments may tilt towards the positive again.