Richard Wagnleiter’s study *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War* is an analysis of the development of American cultural dominance in post-World War II Austria. He establishes that the growing influence of American cultural forms in the wake of World War II was a planned effort to expand America’s political sphere. He accepts the hegemony of American cultural forms in European culture, but he notes that the meanings attached to objects are changed at the point of contact. The use of a wide variety of primary source material, such as published government records as well as national archival information is contextualized through perceptive use of secondary material. Apart from this research, the author’s personal attachment to the period under review adds a personal quality to the analysis. The end result is a well-crafted discussion of the effects of American cultural foreign policy initiatives.

Wagnleiter describes the U.S. foreign policy as a development from the informal exportation of culture before 1938 to a conscious effort to promote American values abroad. He shows that the exportation of culture became a major part of the United States’ development of a cultural and political sphere in Europe. As World War II drew to a close, the United States became more interested in establishing a democratic society in Europe, so policy shifted toward “reeducation”—that is, “indoctrination via any means of mass communication and all attempts to democratize the education system and all other areas of culture” (67). The Austrian model was deemed “reorientation.” In this sense, the American mission after the war was to remove all vestiges of fascist culture or ideology, later expanding to include the defense against Communist
control. The methods employed include radio, cinema, graphic display, press, and other types of mass communications.

The book moves from a discussion of the planning of American foreign policy to a series of chapters that show how that policy was implemented. The press became a major vehicle for diffusing American ideas, as the United States used information officers to impose an Americanization of newspapers. Control was exerted through the issuing of press licenses and financial control of papers, and most newspapers included Americanized comic strips, which became an important method for promoting American cultural ideals. The radio also became an important way for American culture to find root in Europe. The use of radio presented a method of information diffusion that could penetrate Communist nations, providing a potent way to attack those regimes. By issuing programs that promoted American values, the use of entertainment as cultural propaganda was a key element in the American foreign policy.

Apart from the press and the radio, the United States exported music, drama, and film to Europe during the Marshall Plan. With theater, America sought to indoctrinate the high society of Austria, though they were mostly unaffected by it, though the purpose of introducing American drama and music played a dual role of presenting American values and reinvigorating the Austrian theater and music scene (167). The irony of this is that jazz and other music associated with black America were the most successful, horrifying high culture on both sides of the Atlantic and emphasizing the importance of those interpreting the new cultural ideas in deciding what became the most acceptable imports. A key point in Wagnleiter’s analysis is that the meaning of cultural symbols is not created at the point of origin but is altered at the point of contact. This idea pervades the analysis, as Wagnleiter emphasizes the change in the meaning of American imports as they are appropriated and modified by Austrians. The censorship of
American films did little to reduce their popularity. The acceptance with which these films were received is an important point in the creation of post-war Austrian culture. The only reason to censor them was to promote an idealized sense of American values to promote in Europe.

Ultimately, the story told in this book is about the homogenization of culture and the mixing of cultural influences. Written in 1993, Wagnleiter’s analysis is informed by the fall of communism and the extension of American culture to new levels. The cultural backlash that he points out in his analysis has become even more pronounced since that time, and cultural differences are beginning to reassert themselves. Similar studies could shed light on the importation of culture in countries that were not part of the Marshall Plan, such as Spain in the 1950s, when tourism brought large numbers of foreigners to visit. This would provide a glimpse of a similar process that was not part of a government program.