

« Anti-Americanism »

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ANTI-AMERICANISM

“Anti-Americanism” refers to a wide range of often mutually contradictory denunciations of the role played by the United States of America on the global stage. As a label, it is deceptive insofar as it suggests that there could be one coherent ideology unifying what is in fact a mere superimposition of heterogeneous and incompatible agendas and worldviews. Just as “America” often functions as a screen onto which various oppressed social groups, all over the world, project their frustrations and anger, similarly “anti-Americanism” is often used as a smokescreen to disqualify the potentially relevant forms of criticism raised about the global implications of US (domestic and foreign) policies.

The heterogeneity of anti-American feelings and agendas results first from *various local geopolitical factors*: in different parts of the world, the image of the USA is associated with very different threats, frustrations and hopes. More than a century of direct political and military interventions have led large segments of Latin American populations to consider the USA as a colonial power; in the Middle East, the unflinching support provided by US administrations to the various Israeli governments, including the most hawkish, have fuelled long-lasting forms of resentment; as for Western Europe, a highly complex mixture of nationalistic nostalgias and emancipatory ideals have generated the most unlikely coalitions under a few common anti-American slogans.

As the West-European example amply shows, a second source of heterogeneity is to be found in the *various temporal frames* within which anti-American feelings are situated. Philippe Roger has shown, in the case of France, how remarkably stable anti-American rhetoric has remained over the past two centuries: virtually all of the accusations and criticisms raised against G. W. Bush’s America were in place as early as the 1920s. Memories of the atrocities of the Vietnam War or of the US remote-controlled coup that replaced Allende’s democratic government with Pinochet’s brutal dictatorship in Chile on September 11, 1973, still loom large over the hostile perceptions worldwide of US foreign policies. The reactions to the Bush administration’s decision to go to war against Iraq in 2003 must therefore be resituated against this multilayered background: the military intervention seemed to confirm (a) 19th-century clichés about trigger-happy American cowboys, (b) 1970s perceptions about US neo-imperialist policies, and (c) criticisms against the unilateral nature of the choices made by the G.W. Bush White House.

The most important source of heterogeneity, however, comes from the *various ideological orientations* that guide anti-American perceptions: within the same country, at the same period of time, different groups of people will make very

different, and often totally contradictory, reproaches against the USA. One can isolate at least five broad orientations which motivate the various forms of resentment aggregated under the label “anti-Americanism” – five axes of conflict at the point where globalization meets US world hegemony, along with five potential narratives of resistance.

(1) *Traditionalist resistance to Western modernity.* This certainly is the most visible (and stereotypical) form of anti-Americanism, with its sadly familiar images of 9/11 and bearded mullahs. Defenders of traditional (hierarchical, inegalitarian, immutable, “totalitarian”) forms of social organization take arms and (push each other to) commit suicide operations as a response to the threat posed to their socio-cultural (oppressive) order by the model of a more “open” society, represented first by the USA (but also by Western Europe). According to this first narrative, the West set in motion, from the period of the European Enlightenment onwards, a corrosive process of emancipation bound gradually to erode all forms of traditional social order – al Qaeda and the Talibans being only the latest (but probably not the last) to resist such a movement towards secularism, individual rights, formal equality, freedom and democracy.

(2) *Modernist resistance to US archaism.* Another axis of anti-Americanism turns the previous narrative against the USA itself. Large segments of West European populations perceive the USA as a “backward” country, for instance in terms of insufficient secularization (frequent references to the divine in political rhetoric), human rights (the death penalty and other “barbaric” tough-on-crime policies), or cosmopolitan awareness (deficient coverage of world issues in mainstream media). According to this second narrative, the USA itself represents a major factor of reaction *against* the emancipatory values promoted by the European Enlightenment.

(3) *Nationalist resistance to globalization.* Because of the dominant role played by the USA on the world stage as globalization unfolds, a good deal of anti-American rhetoric seems motivated by a nostalgia for the shrinking powers of the Nation-State. When German autoworkers, Korean filmmakers, Italian farmers or French professors blame Wall Street for the delocalization of industrial production, Hollywood for the difficulty to produce and distribute independent movies, the Midwest agro-industry for economically strangling the small peasantry, or the Anglo-American hegemony for threatening the vitality of minor languages, their resentment often emanates, at least in part, from nationalist agendas, if not from disappointed memories of past imperial dominance. Anti-Americanism is certainly fed by a nostalgic thirst for roots, a thirst which (inappropriately) blames the USA for the consequences of the multiple movements of deterritorialization affecting all our societies (including the American one). In a country like France, therefore, hostile reactions against US-connoted phenomena like political correctness, multiculturalism or mass entertainment are clearly rooted in anxieties and in denials having as much to do with France’s inner evolutions as with any neo-imperialism on the part of the USA. The USA being often perceived as the driving agent of

globalization, it tends to be blamed for various side-effects of the erosion of power suffered by the Nation-State since the 1980s.

(4) *Globalist resistance to US nationalist hegemony.* Here again, however, similar anti-American slogans can find their source in symmetrically opposed narratives. Denunciations of the unilateralist nature of decisions made by G. W. Bush's White House are only the tip of the iceberg: by refusing to submit themselves to the principles of free trade they impose on weaker countries, by refusing to sign multilateral agreements for the enforcement of human rights or against environmental threats, US governments have often appeared, even to advocates of "free-market globalization", to be pursuing narrow nationalist interests under a largely hollow rhetorical commitment to promote universal "prosperity, freedom and democracy".

(5) *Alter-globalist resistance to capitalist globalization.* A deeper form of criticism blames the USA not only for hijacking globalization and forcing it towards narrow nationalist goals, but for promoting a *capitalist* form of globalization perceived as a source of injustice, oppression, exploitation and needless suffering. A growing number of activists refuse the "anti-globalization" label, and prefer to portray themselves as "alter-globalists": they are *in favor* of the new forms of openness, exchanges, mobility, hybridization, and solidarity of fate brought by globalization; what they oppose are *the restrictions* imposed upon such developments by the capitalist framework within which they currently unfold (property rights in forms of patents and copyrights; corporate resistance to environmental laws or workers' rights; homogenizing effects of worldwide advertising campaigns). Such alter-globalist activists denounce the USA only insofar as it represents the most massive champion of capitalism, but their real enemy is a transnational dynamic ("capitalism"), not a particular nation ("the USA"). As a consequence, many among them tend to take distance from the "traditional" forms of anti-Americanism, as they strive to identify allies in social forces that are at work *within* the USA (NGOs, social activists, artists, academics), and as they work towards building *global* networks of resistance to capitalism (for instance in the World Social Forums organized in Porto Alegre or Mumbai).

Once restored to its constitutive complexity (and contradictions), anti-Americanism thus appears as the crossroads where today's perceptions will determine tomorrow's common fate. Decisions taken in the White House, creations produced in Hollywood or calculations made on Wall Street will contribute decisively to selecting some among the many paths still open to globalization. While it is unfair to blame "America" for all the miseries generated all over the planet, it would be equally foolish not to recognize the historical responsibility of US society in reducing the extremely dangerous gap which currently separates self-perceptions of the USA as "freedom fighters" from their dominant perceptions abroad as "ruthless imperialists". Most analysts have stressed the ambivalence of anti-American feelings, where demonstrations of hate are often the flip side of equally powerful forms of love, fascination and envy. Over the last two centuries,

social developments in the USA (and more generally in the West) have fuelled tremendous hopes worldwide, while at the same time generating anxieties and resentment. Much of our global future will depend on whether the USA pursues policies that appeal to, and build on, these hopes, or whether they resort, abroad as well as at home, to the politics of fear.

See Also: Americanization; Enlightenment; Imperialism; Modernity; Nation-State.

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