

The Historical and Philosophical Antecedents to the Current Wave of Anti-Americanism

The following excerpted article demonstrates how deep-seeded Anti-Americanism can, in part, be traced back to nineteenth century Germany. It also reflects how these sentiments manifest themselves today in the anti-American propaganda spewed both by nationalistic and opportunistic German and European politicians and the larger European green and social ('civil society') movements. These anti-globalization movements, which transcend national boundaries, have been increasingly harnessed by European governments for propagandist and trade protectionist purposes. Having grown in size and political influence, they are now largely beyond the control of such governments, and threaten not only American interests, but also those of developing countries.

Most unfortunately, this scholar, while acknowledging that such sentiments have, to some extent, resurfaced and contributed to the souring of current transatlantic relations, seeks to conceptually isolate, distinguish and re-analyze them from the past – he suggests that they be viewed mostly as current events-based reactions to an evolving global transformation. Apparently, this scholar's goal is to minimize what are likely more *fundamental philosophical and societal differences* between America and Europe, as well as, longstanding European historical insecurities. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to recognize how current anti-Americanism is not only reflective of past anti-Americanism, but also indicative of an exacerbated sense of frustration among ideological Europeans that American capitalism has not only vanquished the dreaded communist state, but now also threatens their beloved socialist order.

This author's goal of devising an interpretation of history to enhance rather than detract from the larger goal of fostering transatlantic cooperation in furtherance of international peace and diplomacy is truly laudable. However, we must remember to learn from history, rather than to dismiss, forget and/or misinterpret it. The French have a saying that is here apropos: *Le plus ca change, le plus les meme chose*. This means roughly, the more things change, the more they remain the same. In other words, peoples' natures don't really change that much over time; rather it is our *perceptions* of them and their contexts that mostly change. While modern anti-Americanism is said to constitute a general antithesis to the notion of a sole global hegemonic superpower and of the economic globalization which it symbolizes, the bases for such sentiments do not differ too much from the anti-industrial populism expressed during the earlier Victorian and pre-World War era of globalization. Arguably, therefore, contrary to what this author concludes, we should *not* be ambivalent about recognizing that which is obvious, as has been demonstrated by history. Therefore, if Americans fail to pay careful attention to history, they will proceed at their own peril. In the words of the famous American philosopher George Santayana¹: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The following excerpts are quite revealing:

Anti-Americanism is often treated as if it was a uniform reaction toward some undefined but concrete experience. In reality the phenomenon is only

understandable if analyzed against the background of the dual break in October 1989 and the attacks in 2001, two events which together mark the end of the short 20th century and the beginning of the present era... [T]he following essay mainly focuses on the German case. Here, an astonishing ambivalence toward the US developed in 2001 and 2002, which is as paradoxical as it is a decidedly new occurrence. The contradictory reactions of German society and its most transatlantic post-war government can only be fully understood if the September attacks in New York are connected to its corresponding German time stamp: 9/11 cannot be adequately grasped without 11/9 — with November 9, 1989, when the Berlin wall collapsed and a new era irrevocably began. **Contemporary forms of anti-Americanism are not identical with older forms of anti-Americanism: though there are some continuities, they receive their energy from very different sources than the resentment towards the US that was prevalent in the Germany almost one hundred years ago.**

Back then, the most intellectually pronounced of such debates were initiated during the first decade of the 20th century, after **renowned European social scientists** such as Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Joseph Schumpeter, following on the European encounter with America occasioned for many by the St. Louis World's Exposition in 1904, **argued that the mode of modernization witnessed in America would soon be coming to Europe.** Though these debates tended in many ways to underestimate the power of the tremendous social change then underway, they were absolutely correct in establishing the necessarily transatlantic character of modern social observation.

The US itself had little to do with the resentment and rejection that it has generated on the European continent. Rather, America has repeatedly served as a metaphor of change and as an unacknowledged comparison case, through which Europeans interpret occurrences with no historical precedence. During the era of rapid industrialization, massively growing metropolitan cities, chauvinist nationalism, and politicized cultural differences among the European peoples, the gaze across the ocean was often the constitutive, if unacknowledged historical gesture. **The US had recently appeared on the world stage as a serious actor, home of a rival, more advanced system of Western-style modernization. The future had already commenced on the other side of the ocean: Americans had abandoned the folkways, mores, and customs of traditional society,** even as, paradoxically, first-generation American sociologists like William Graham Sumner turned to anthropological rather sociological terms to describe this change. **The heterogeneous and unprecedented context in which a nation of nations had been established became the focus of distorted perceptions within the emerging mass societies of Western Europe.**

The self-declared country of the free and the brave readily served as a projection screen upon which could be cast feelings of European shortcoming and fears of losing traditional benchmarks in a rapidly transforming society. European attempts to “reject” America’s path into the twentieth century can only poorly be understood in terms of the concept of divergent paths toward cultural modernity; far more commonly, it was merely a weak form of historical consciousness, a largely European impulse to recapture a vision of clarity, hierarchy, and cultural assuredness that the European past seemed to offer. Thus, anti-Americanism established itself as a negation of the idea of a New World that lacked aristocratic rituals and authoritarian rule; it was the attempt to repatriate modernity into a symbolic America, to map the ills of contemporary society onto an imagined geographic point of origin. Modernity of course has no national origin, it embodies, rather, an internationalized and displaced subjectivity in its historically revolutionary character. The power of the concept of modernity to symbolize this social abstraction meant that modernity in its anti-American form began to thrive during the first two

decades of the 20th century, when modernization processes were being acutely felt in Europe. As a particularly modern ideology it was accomplishing sociological miracles, claiming to explain and translate experiences of increasingly abstract and alienated societies into concrete and local terms. ***Thanks to the appearance of a geographical locus to modernity, a surplus of anger and fear could be projected onto the US, the home of barbaric, uncultured capitalism.*** Five centuries of shared history were reified into an abstract rejection of the past: the Atlantic ocean came to symbolize the divide between a bad modernity and an idealized present. **The philosopher Martin Heidegger reflected the depth of such *distorted worldviews* when he lamented, “the surrender of the German essence to Americanism has already gone so far as on occasion to produce the disastrous effect that Germany actually feels herself ashamed that her people were once considered to be ‘the people of poetry and thought.’”** For him and many others the development of modern mass culture on the West Coast of the US epitomized all that was wrong with modernity.

...The September 11 attacks and subsequent warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq only amplified and deepened a new ideological constellation that did not develop in a historical vacuum but was a knee-jerk reaction to the political and cultural disintegration of the Eastern hemisphere after 1990. **With the end of the Soviet Union even the most unattractive alternative to Western-style modernization had disappeared...The emerging political vacuum was filled with modern ideologies and distorted perceptions of a new world that had lost the stabilizing point of reference assured by the threat of mutual annihilation. *And with no more points of orientation in sight, “America” became the cipher that granted sense (and power) to a senseless, unorderly world.*** Although it does not make much sense to speak of the “sole remaining superpower,” the Cold War vocabulary seems to not allow a more differentiated expression, and the mindless notion of a new imperialism is even less adequate.

...This does not imply that such notions cannot outlive their reality. ***After the fall of state socialism, the rhetoric of the American hyperpower multiplied, and all visions of power, authority, and control were projected onto the US. In the imagination of many people the year 1990 provided a déjà vu of the 1920's and of 1945, when the historical and social divergence between a traditional and an advanced capitalist society “froze into geographic difference — between Europe and the United States.”***

...The ongoing political impact of the changes that occurred after the historical disruption of 1990 is reflected in the fact that the image of the cold war superpower of the US became the cipher “America”...Since no one could be certain which principles would arrange the new, globalized world, it became a lot more important how people *imagined* it was structured. The lack of stability and clarity after 1990 led to the simultaneous emergence of a new, distinctly modern piety in many parts of the world.

...In Western Europe the new consciousness was less often expressed in overt religious but in cultural and nationalist forms. Seemingly old national stereotypes were revived, often in negative reference to the US, which as a unique nation of nations and locus of successful diversity served as an ideological antipode.

After 1990, in many political discussions about the future of modern societies people referred to pre-modern forms of community as if all the answers lay in the past. The US, the only society that could not provide for an illusion of a past based on visions of ethnic tradition or on homogeneous self-certainty, became the natural cipher of negative self-

definition: it was easy to invent meaning in times of disorientation by defining one's own national aspirations against the experience of modernity; "America" was the cipher, the US the real existing power against which such identifications could easily be projected.

...Modern social organization really does mitigate against traditional structures of authority, while simultaneously pushing human beings toward forms of legitimation that take the shape of imagined communities, invented traditions, or increasingly extreme fundamentalisms. Such modern ideologies only pretend to be remnants of something old, in truth they are more constitutive for social reality than their 19th century predecessors. It is because religious and cultural traditions are lost — not because they have been conserved and prorogued — that they have their appeal.

...**This process, situated at the core of the short 20th century, has been reflected in the paradigmatic shift from the analysis of society to that of memory in the social sciences.** Though one cannot live without either, the imbalance produced by making one the substitute for the other, rather than its dialogue partner, is dangerous. Such a stance points to a period of “decaying memory” induced from the enforced “loss of conscious, historical continuity.”

...**Such reinscription of religious dogma into the canons of national belief is nothing new; it was analyzed in the 1940s when the displacement of collective religious faith paved the way for authoritarian consciousness.** In a renowned study, Adorno argued that belief was disintegrating into mere opinion when he wrote, **“formerly the idea of belief was emphatically related to the religious dogma. Today it is applied to practically everything which a subject feels the right to have as his own, as his ‘opinion,’ without subjecting it to any criteria of objective truth. The secularization of ‘believing’ is accompanied by arbitrariness of that which one believes: it is molded after the preferences for one or the other commodity and has little relation to the idea of truth.”**

...*The German Case*

It was an impressive sight when 250,000 Berliners gathered only a couple of days after the September 11 attacks in front of the Brandenburg Gate and all along the city's main avenue, 17th of June, to show their affection and solidarity with the people of the US... Soon Chancellor Schroeder's promise of “unconditional solidarity” followed, and only a few weeks later **the red-green government** went through a narrow vote of confidence in order to send German troops to Afghanistan. Such bold statements were quickly overshadowed and the positions they represented eventually reversed.

...[S]peakers at the Berlin demonstration... quick to express his concern about possible American overreactions, almost as if America represented Polyphemus just released from his cave. [Johannes] Rau was swiftly joined by a number of church representatives, as well as such conservatives as former deputy Defense Secretary Willy Wimmer and Norbert Blum, ex-minister and the icon of Rhineland style social-Catholicism. **After the beginning of the war in Afghanistan the murmur turned louder and more pronounced, especially among the Hitler youth generation who crossed old political lines to express their concern about the US.**

...Erhard Eppler, the old-style social democratic mentor suggested that **Europe might offer lessons to the US in how to deal with conflicts in a peaceful way.** Liberal historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler, during an Afghanistan-roundtable in Berlin, started talking about Palestine as a bloody wound kept open by Israel, a thesis which he fluidly ran together with his suggestion that ‘once again’ the Air Force Generals were in charge in world history...

Whereas **Green Party Vice-President of the German parliament Antje Vollmer worried that the US was prepared to “convert the war against the Taliban into a worldwide campaign against an unlimited number of private fiefdoms,”** controversial right wing author Martin Walser said that Europe was obliged to “tell the friend that historical failures and aberrations cannot be corrected through war but solely through peace.”

...There are of course good reasons why people *imagine* the US as having a disproportionate effect on world history. When the forty-year era of unprecedented stability, peace, and economic growth ended in 1990, the disintegration of the bipolar order resulted in the loss of power not only for the Soviet Union but also for the US. Since there is less order in the world, more possibilities of revolutionary change and instability, ideologies become more independent of reality as well. Thus, **a broader understanding of the present historical situation must be developed before one has anything approaching a reasonable assessment of the anti-Americanism presently observable not only in Germany, but in many other countries as well.**

When one takes a step back, it is clear that two years after the initial outburst of German anti-war sentiment and in light of the increasing complications in Iraq, anecdotal observation and **a number of opinion polls agree not only that anti-American feelings are on the rise in Europe,** but that European societies are themselves only part of a global trend toward resentful estrangement from the US...Although **German ambivalence toward the US certainly participates in the same resentment and distorted representations that feed the more uncompromising and violent forms of anti-Americanism,** the two varieties are only partly comparable.

...**In the absence of real empires or world order in the classical sense, anti-Americanism fulfills multiple functions for those who (reasonably or not) wish to see themselves in national or subjective opposition to a global force.** It is a form of communicative bonding and smallest common denominator uniting of those who otherwise might have little other means to associate with each other: a universal symbol that prepackages the world and makes it readily understandable.

...**Since it helps interpret a modern society it is mostly a middle-class phenomenon, a convenient ideology for people with a certain amount of education, ambition, and self-confidence to construe the world in bold terms. For its constituency, the discourse of anti-Americanism condenses overarching and sometimes overwhelming economic and cultural developments into a simplistic worldview. Such false abstractions are quotidian practices in many societies, and “America” is the cipher and the canvas for these projections.**

...The current ambivalence toward the US is rooted in contemporary experience. Germany is no exception, and thus *the changing public atmosphere should not be obscured by analogies to earlier epochs.*

...Anti-Americanism in Europe and Beyond

Once one recognizes how “America” can serve as cipher in a given society’s integration of itself to the idea of the West, one can begin to see how not all forms of this mystification are the same; each society, even as it forms its relation to America, retains elements of its own traditional — religious or non-religious — identifications. These traces are indeed sociologically legible. Whenever a community undergoes full-scale modernization and undergoes reorganization around the principle of economic competition, the self-perception of every individual undergoes a transformation.

...With regard to this transformation, Western and Arab societies underwent similar experiences during the first few decades of the twentieth century, when conventional ideologies and belief systems collapsed under the weight of the new.

...*Anti-Americanism in Historical Transformation*

Conflating very different phenomena by diagnosing an all-encompassing anti-Americanism destroys indispensable distinctions. It is crucial not to underestimate the genesis of modern consciousness, for ideologies also have a history and undergo transformations...

...Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the cultural struggle was widely misunderstood and misused for mythologically inspired aesthetic and political illusions. This distorted version of Nietzsche's notion of culture was combined with fantastic speculation regarding a future German world power and served to constitute the famous "Kultur" versus "Civilization" debate. **This distinction, in turn, came to be imposed upon the US, which by 1912-13 had become the world's biggest economic entity, and which therefore appeared as a true imperial rival to a German bourgeoisie that was anti-modern and antisocialist to the point of self-destruction.**

This transatlantic opposition had other historical antecedents as well. Germany was a belated nation, and the hostile feelings towards the US also mirrored the democratic failures of the Wilhelmine state. Anti-Americanism then migrated into the core of German elite self-perception, became an integral part of the nationalistic folklore and its anger against the real-world power shared by many intellectuals. A second important ingredient was the emergence of modern mass cultures in the period before WWI and in the Weimar period, which further enhanced these modes of consciousness. It was an era for which Karl Kraus, looking to Chicago and Detroit, invented the beautiful term "Fordschritt" instead of the German "Fortschritt" for progress. **Cultural and political anti-Americanism merged in the hatred of Woodrow Wilson's internationalism, and against the League of Nations, which anticipated the National-Socialist imperialism of the have-nots.**

In the postwar period, economic modernization produced *déjà vu* as past experiences appeared under new circumstances. The increasing strength and social mobility of a broad middle class, a reality which had already existed in the US a generation earlier, became the universal standard in the Western world. Uneven developments thus led to the perception that the world was being Americanized. From the European perspective, the future was already present in the US, and "America" became the territorial insignia of what was to come. From the post-1945 perspective, there was a further reason for envy: America seemed to be the only industrialized society which had survived two devastating wars without major internal changes.

...*Carte Blanche: The New Germany*

...The current blend of military responsibility, new democratic policies, and stubborn resentment that characterizes German society and politics these days is helping to free the new Germany from the practices and rhetoric of neutrality-exceptionalism. This is why anti-Americanism should not be equated with either its predecessors of the 1920s or with the radicalized versions of fundamentalist militancy. **Today's anti-Americanism is a different phenomenon, more ambivalent than anti.** German society has undergone dramatic changes in the second half of the Cold War and was part of the Atlantic revolution. Its modernization happened American style when the middle class replaced the reactionary Bourgeoisie. This transformation also codifies the new anti-American resentment of not wanting to be seen as either anti-modern nor as anti-American.

The ambivalence proves once more in how many ways the US is the antithetical standard for self-definition in Europe.

Criteria for the Reconstruction of the West

In the 21st century, which is to say after the end of history's unique bipolar era, remainders of past historical experiences of violent secularization, nationalism, and bureaucratic socialism have alloyed to form new amalgams of ignorance and isolation. In addition, modern ethnic and religious ideologies differ from their nationalist ancestors of the nineteenth century, as they are not bound to statehood and its institutions. New ideologies are restricted and boundless at the same time; they usually refer to straightforward communities but hold the potential for global expansion. History, indeed, seems to result from ideas and contemporary ideologies that operate as blinders while appearing to their users as a *passe-partout*. (emphasis added).

See Michael Werz, "Anti-Americanism and Ambivalence: Remarks on an Ideology in Historical Transformation", *Telos* 129 (Fall-Winter 2004), pp. 75-95. Copyright 2005 by Telos Press, Ltd, at: pp. 75-78, 79-83, 85-88, 90, 94-5, at: (http://www.gmfus.org/doc/TELOS%20Anti_Americanism_2005.pdf).

¹ See The Harper Book of Quotations, Third Ed., Robert I. Fitzhenry, Editor © 1993, at p. 204; (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/santayana>). English philosopher Aldous Huxley took a similar tone towards the lessons that can be, but are often not, learned from history. "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that History has to teach." Id., at p. 202. Unlike Santayana, who "celebrat[ed] creative imagination in all human endeavors (particularly in art, philosophy, religion, literature, and science)...[but yet possessed a]...European suspicion of American industry", however, Huxley's social philosophy was critical of and apathetic towards capitalism, industrialism, and modern technology. He distrust[ed] all of these movements, and fe[lt] they [were] a central threat to freedom for the masses... In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley [wrote] that mass production, mass distribution, and advancing technology, all of which are central to industrialism and capitalism, are imminent threats to democracy (14-15). He reject[ed] large businesses as bureaucratic and oligarchic (94). Huxley speculated that mass distribution and mass production [were] responsible for the ruin of local and small businesses that directly benefit[ed] the people. When Small Business is forced to compete with the Big Business that is owned by the rich and few of society, Small Business is totally destroyed due to Small Business's lack of capital and the means to produce and distribute to the masses (15). As the small, local businesses start to disappear and all of the economic power of the society is manipulated to fewer and fewer people, the state is run by these elite and powerful few (15). In this situation, Huxley note[d] that modern technology and capitalism have produced a concentration of political and economic power in the Big Businesses and Big Governments of the world, a non-aggressive form of totalitarianism (15). According to Huxley, in *Brave New World Revisited*, societies are just and virtuous only if they help the individual to reach his potential and live a fulfilling and creative life (15). He believe[d] that western industrialist societies do not live up to these standards...Huxley believe[d] that the dehumanizing effects on the individual in modern western society is a result of Industrialism's tendency to over-organize its individuals so that they no longer feel that they are an indispensable part of society, but rather a standardized machine (BNWR 16)." See "**Aldous Huxley: Social Philosopher and Critic**", at: (http://www.totse.com/en/ego/literary_genius/aldoushuxleyso172540.html). In effect, one may argue that present day Europe's anti-American sentiments do not differ greatly from those of the past.