

Publications

Are Germans Anti-American?

by Dieter Rucht

Whether Germans are anti-American is a question which can be answered in an easy and a difficult way. The easy answer is, of course there are Germans who are anti-American. One need only consider statements regarding the recent war against Iraq. A number of reputable German intellectuals blamed their compatriots protesting against war of being anti-American. There are right-extremists who believe in the superiority of the Germans vis-à-vis all other peoples. But easy answers often tend to be superficial. Let me try to disentangle some implications of the question and then move towards a more complicated answer.

The question "What is America and who is American?" may serve as a useful starting point. It is amazing to see time and again that US citizens, but also many people in other countries, actually mean the USA when using the term "America." Trivial as it is, we have to remind ourselves that the USA is only one part the of much larger continents named North and South America. This widespread slip of language denotes the implicit assumption that the USA is somehow perceived as the centerpiece or heartland of the whole continent (and probably the western world). Yet "Americanism," rather than being associated with a distinct territory or citizenship, usually refers to a certain way of life, habits and values. Hence we deal with the realm of "culture" with all its fuzziness, ambiguities, contests over meaning, and the like.

Strangely, in the recent German debate, the verdict of "anti-Americanism" did not re-emerge as an explicit contest over cultural values but over a contingent political decision. Anti-Americanism was attached to those who opposed the war against Iraq that was initiated and led by the current Bush government. This second narrowing of the meaning of "American" (next to the narrowing of what constitutes geographically America) was particularly evident after the war had begun. If the Bush government defines and pursues what is in the interest of "America," and if this government identifies itself as the most ardent and determined defender of the "realm of the good," then those who refuse to ally themselves with the US government are, at best, defined as wimps and, at worst, as supporters of evil.

Anti-Americanism, when not simply equated with opposition to the current US government, becomes a meaningful concept in precisely the sense in which a term such as anti-Semitism or anti-Black is understood. It implies a racist position based on prejudice, discrimination and probably hate. The reference point of such anti-attitudes is a perceived domestic and/or foreign community with its real or alleged cultures, values and habits. On the whole, this community is perceived as culturally, morally and/or biologically inferior while at the same time seen as a threat to one's own group, however defined. When understood in this way, the reference point of anti-Americanism is what is perceived as "America": big money, greed, the will to dominate other people, cultural shallowness, immorality, etc. Not by accident, anti-Americanism often goes hand in hand with anti-Semitism. The most explicit voices of such attitudes can be found among right-extremist groups and a number of religious fundamentalisms, including radical Islamism. Quite often, in these groups anti-Americanism serves as a

key to maintain and sharpen their own collective identity. One would hardly find right-wing radicals and Islamic fundamentalists who would not claim to be anti-American. Among some left-radical groups, anti-American attitudes are also to be found, though these are certainly not a defining trait of the radical left which, in principle, embraces an internationalist position, egalitarian values and, consequently, all sorts of anti-racisms.

It cannot be denied that in the months around the recent war in Iraq signs of anti-Americanism could be observed in Germany. However, the debate on who is anti-American and how widespread is the phenomenon was fundamentally flawed. First, some of those defending the war tended to equate anti-war positions with anti-Americanism. Second, there was a tendency to exaggerate existing signs of anti-Americanism. For example, in their open letter to the peace movement ("Against political naiveté") on February 17, 2003, a number of public figures, including a few intellectuals from both the conservative and the left side of the political spectrum, strongly criticized the organizers and participants of the huge anti-war demonstration in Berlin on February 15 (for the full document, see www.uni-kassel.de/f10/frieden/bewegung/antiamericanismus.html). They stated that, in spite of the organizers' announcements not to tolerate nationalist, racist and anti-Semitic slogans and signs, such expressions could be observed. Besides mentioning that German flags were shown during the demonstration, they also pointed to banners which named Israeli political leaders "child murderers."

Based on such examples, the signatories came to a more general conclusion: "above all the demonstration was characterized by a dangerous mix of anti-Americanism and political naiveté. So, on the one hand one could find on banners and placards the whole arsenal of anti-American resentment: the will to rule the world, the characterization of the American establishment as blood-greedy promoters of war, the identification of the USA with money and calculated interest, Americans' lack of culture and, nearly as a logical consequence: the one-sided positive loading of the European counter proposal....Furthermore one could not overlook the specific German spin of this resentment. On many placards and banners the politics of the Americans was paralleled to the German war of extermination, and the bombing of Germany by the allied forces during World War Two was rendered analogous to a potential attack on Iraq." To me, the moral intentions of the authors of this letter issued by the "Alliance against Anti-Semitism, Berlin" are beyond doubt. One also cannot deny that a few expressions of what was, or could be interpreted as, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism were present among the half million protesters. Note that among the latter were also political groups of Iraqis and Palestinians.

What I doubt, however, is the general picture that is provided by the authors of this open letter and others. A number of facts and observations rather point to a different picture, namely one of a demonstration against the war (in principle or under the given circumstances), and hence a critique of the position of the Bush administration and (which is often neglected) an explicit condemnation of the person and regime of Saddam Hussein, but hardly a general anti-American mood.

What is the evidence for this different picture? First, one has to acknowledge the attempt of the peace movement organizers not to tolerate any expression of racism. They said so before the event, and they engaged volunteers to implement this policy, if needed. One of these volunteers, when interviewed by a radio journalist, said he had not identified any views of right-extremist and racist views (although he had

explicitly sought to do so). The effect of the organizers' control can be also seen on the other side. In May of this year I interviewed Frank Schwerdt, the executive director of the right-extremist party NPD (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), in the context of a video documentary on the May Day demonstrations in Berlin. When asked about his attitude to the anti-war protests, Schwerdt said that he had indeed participated in the anti-war demonstration of February 15. Yet he did so only as an individual without expressing his political affiliation or wider political views. Otherwise, he expected he would have been ousted from the demonstration.

The authors and signatories of the open letter point to the "many placards and banners" exhibiting anti-American and anti-Semitic views; however, they must have been at a different demonstration. Few if any anti-American statements were reported by the many journalists covering the demonstration. The same is true for the dozens of participants with whom I have spoken so far, including more than thirty people who helped me to conduct a survey of the demonstrators. When scanning the written responses to an open-ended question in this survey, very few of the several hundred statements could be interpreted as anti-American, and only one ("I hate America") clearly fell into this category. Finally, when reading the speeches that have been held during the event of February 15, it is, in my view, impossible to detect signs of anti-Americanism in the sense that I have specified (for a documentation, see www.friedenskooperative.de/netzwerk/1502e-23.htm).

The fact that most ardent opponents to the war could be found on both ends of the political spectrum may have tempted a number of intellectual observers to attribute the very real anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism on the right also to the left. A small and bizarre group on the left in Germany, the so-called "Anti-Germans," may have also contributed to such a perspective when shouting to the crowd on February 15: "Your pacifism is fascism." This group, centered around the journal "bahamas," blames the rest of the left for being nationalist in criticizing the governments of the USA and, in particular, Israel. One of the speakers of this group publicly expressed his regret that Germany, as a territorial state, was not completely extinguished after World War Two.

Of those more serious Germans who accused their fellow-citizens of being anti-American in the context of the war against Iraq, some, such as Wolfgang Biermann, a prominent singer and writer, reminded Germans of their historical obligation. Because the USA liberated the German people from the Nazi regime, Germany's place should be now beside the USA when it comes to liberating Iraq (Der Spiegel, 24 February 2003, pp. 144-47). In this perspective, anti-Americanism is based on a blindness to this parallel.

A quite different explanation draws on psychological theory. The source of anti-Americanism, some "pro-American" commentators have argued, is nationalist pride. Germans feel humiliated when facing "Americans" because the latter were decisive in crushing the Hitler regime and replacing it by democratic rule. Because today's democracy was not achieved by their own efforts, Germans, including those on the political left, suffer from the trauma of inferiority. Therefore they resent the country and people who have brought, and still most vigorously defend, democracy and liberty. Instead of being grateful to their rescuers, even leftist Germans resort to aggression, i.e. anti-Americanism.

Without thorough empirical research, such speculations cannot be proved or disproved and therefore continue to blossom. What I do know for sure, however, is the reasoning and feelings of Sarah, my nineteen year-old daughter. Having spent not only a number of holidays in the USA but also a year of high school in Kansas, she definitely “loves America.” As many other Germans of all age groups, she was simply not convinced that the Bush government was doing the right thing at the right time. To call such an attitude “anti-American” is either a gross misunderstanding or convenient attempt to silence the critics of this war.