

Anti-Americanism in Europe: From Elite Disdain to Political Force

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One need not be a diligent student of survey research to know that antipathy towards America and Americans has become a worldwide phenomenon. Just a glance at newspaper headlines, editorials, and television talk shows, as well as casual conversations at parties and dinner tables, reveal a widely held hostility towards the United States that is seemingly unprecedented. A steady – and growing – resentment of the United States (indeed, of most things American) has permeated European discourse and opinion, in particular, since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the corresponding end of the bipolar Cold War order that had dominated Europe since 1945. However, this antipathy has a very long and fertile history.

Anti-Americanism is a particularly murky concept because it invariably merges antipathy towards what America *does* with what America *is*. It is like any other prejudice insofar as its holder “pre-judges” the object and its activities apart from what actually transpires in reality. Where it differs from “classical” prejudices such as anti-Semitism, homophobia, misogyny, and racism, however, is the fact that, in contrast to these latter cases – where Jews, gays and lesbians, women, and ethnic minorities rarely, if ever, have any actual power over the majority of populations in most countries in which they reside – the real existing United States most certainly does have power, and plenty of it. In contrast to these other prejudices – which have by and large become publicly illegitimate in most advanced industrial democracies – anti-Americanism thus remains not only acceptable in many public circles, but even commendable, indeed, a badge of honor, and perhaps one of the most distinct icons of being a progressive these days. After all, by being anti-American, one adheres to a prejudice that *ipso facto* also opposes a truly powerful force in the world. Thus, in the case of anti-Americanism, one’s prejudice partially assumes an antinomian purpose, thereby attaining a level of legitimacy in certain circles that other prejudices – thankfully – no longer enjoy.

For hundreds of years now, Europeans and Americans have created imagined versions of each other that have served all kinds of purposes, not least of which was to delineate a clear “other” for themselves. These mirror images have been rightly characterized as a “compulsive *folie a deux*.” Yet there is an important difference in the respective agencies of this *folie a deux* on the two continents. In the United States the carriers of prejudice and antipathy toward Europe have predominated, if at all, in the lower social strata. In contrast, American elites – particularly cultural ones – have consistently extolled Europe, and continue to do so. This love for and

emulation of European tastes, mores, fashions and habits remained a staple of American elite culture even during the country's most nativist and isolationist periods. Virtually all of America's high brow culture continues to be European in derivation. One need only look at the humanities departments of any leading American university to observe this continuing cultural hegemony, which remains European in orientation even as it attempts to negate its Eurocentrism. Any resentment of Europe by American mass opinion has been of a completely different order of magnitude than anti-Americanism's presence in Europe. "Freedom fries" never had any traction and "Europe" as well as "European" continue to conjure up quality, excellence, desirability, and "class" in most venues of the American vernacular. Terms analogous to "anti-Americanism" – such as "anti-Europism" or "anti-Europeanism" -- do not exist. Americans in their history have been known to be anti-French, anti-German, anti-Russian, anti-British, anti-Communist but never anti-European. To be sure, one important aspect of acculturation to America was to oppose things from "the old country", to try to distance oneself from the "old world" in an attempt to create a new one. In that sense, one could speak of a distancing from Europe. But this never attained the degree of aversion that anti-Americanism has had for Europeans. And here, too, there are huge differences by social class and status. "Ordinary" Europeans have never – at least until now – exhibited the aversion towards America that has been held by their elites. Indeed, as demonstrated by regular public opinion surveys since the 1950s, a solid majority of Europeans have expressed positive views of America, with only about 30 percent holding negative ones. Tellingly, the higher one proceeds on the social scale of the respondents, the greater the extent of negative attitudes towards America becomes. As such, anti-Americanism is arguably one of the very few prejudices in contemporary Europe which correlate positively with education and social status: the higher the education, the greater the prejudice. To European elites, America has always represented the epitome of tastelessness, inauthenticity, mediocrity, vulgarity, venality -- in short, an inferior entity. Yet, these elites also resented America as a threatening parvenu, and they did so well before the United States possessed any power that rivaled those of the established European states. While European elites disdained America, they also found it profoundly threatening and unsettling, not least because it embodied such an eerie attraction to Europe's masses – certainly not the elites' friends – and willy-nilly represented modernity and the future. In sum, European masses have by and large liked and respected America while European elites have certainly not, whereas American elites have liked and respected Europe with American masses much less so.

Lest there be any misunderstandings about what exactly I mean by anti-Americanism, here is the definition offered by Paul Hollander in his definitive book on the subject: "Anti-Americanism is a predisposition to hostility toward the United States and American society, a relentless critical impulse toward American social, economic, and political institutions, traditions, and values; it entails an aversion to American culture in particular and its influence abroad, often also contempt for the American national character and dislike of American people, manners, behavior, dress; and a firm belief in the malignity of American influence and presence anywhere in the world."

Whereas there still was a clear disconnect between elite and mass opinion in Europe following the 9/11 tragedy – with the former venting its *Schadenfreude* barely 48 hours after the crime while the latter expressed genuine sympathy for the victims – there emerged barely two years later a hitherto unprecedented congruence of opinion among both segments of European society in the course of America's war with Iraq. What differentiates the current level and quality of European anti-Americanism from its earlier variants is the fact that, for the very first time in

the history of European anti-Americanism, a solid majority of European publics also bear substantially negative attitudes towards the United States, and their views thus converge on this topic – perhaps for the first time – with those of their elites. In no other instance in Europe's postwar development has there been such a complete convergence of views between elites and masses, between government and opposition, and among voices on the left and the right, as occurred during the four months of build-up to the war with Iraq. Anti-Americanism certainly preceded the Bush Administration's policies, but it was they that created a hitherto unprecedented congruence between elites and masses in terms of their common antipathy towards the United States. While the thrust of this antagonism focused on America's actions, its palpable passion was deeply anchored in what Europeans perceived as America's very core, its identity. To many Europeans, even in the countries where the governing elites maintained the deeply unpopular position of supporting the United States in its imminent war with Iraq – Britain, Spain and Italy come to mind – America had become the “un-Europe”, a clear “other.” This othering was, of course, not totally new and had many precedents. Even under the aegis of Bill Clinton, whom European intellectuals embraced wholeheartedly as a kindred spirit, Europeans commenced the conscious construction of Europe as America's other. “Europe: The Un-America” proclaimed Michael Elliott in an article published in *Newsweek International* in 2000, in which he dismissed any semblance of a common transatlantic civilization. Many European intellectuals appropriated Samuel Huntington's controversial notion of the “clash of civilizations” as a way of characterizing what they perceived as the increasing divergence between Europe and the United States and not – as Huntington had it – a clash between the predominantly Christian West and the Islamic world. The widely voiced indictment accused the United States of being retrograde on three levels: moral (America as the purveyor of the death penalty and of religious fundamentalism, as opposed to European abolition of the death penalty and adherence to an enlightened secularism); social (America as the bastion of what former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt called “predatory capitalism” and of mass incarceration, as opposed to Europe as the home of the considerate welfare state and of rehabilitation); and cultural (America the commodified vs. Europe the refined; America the prudish and prurient vs. Europe the savvy and wise).

It was well before George Bush was running for President that French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine inveighed against the United States as a “hyperpower” – a *hyperpuissance* – which needed to be brought down by an “un-American” Europe, obviously led by France. For Vedrine, the clarion call of Europe's challenge to the United States centered on the following American-inspired ills: “ultraliberal market economy, rejection of the state, non-republican individualism, unthinking strengthening of the universal and ‘indispensable’ role of the U.S.A., common law, Anglophonie, Protestant rather than Catholic concepts.” The points raised by Vedrine bespoke a veritable *Kulturkampf* between “Europe the good and America the bad.” Indeed, the term *Kulturkampf* is often used as a rallying cry by German intellectuals and cultural elites in their battles against the United States. Thus, the well known German director Peter Zadek has said, “*Kulturkampf*? Count me in. I deeply detest America.” Overt hostilities in language and attitude that are taboo among European intellectuals and elites if invoked against any other culture or country have attained acceptability when the United States is concerned. Take the comments of British novelist Margaret Drabble: “My anti-Americanism has become almost uncontrollable.”

To be sure, the Bush Administration's demeanor and actions have contributed to intensifying and legitimating this *Kulturkampf* among European publics to a degree hitherto

unimaginable. No mobilization around the European counter-values adumbrated by Vedrine could have been more emphatic than the huge demonstrations on Saturday, February 15, 2003. Never before in Europe's history did so many millions of Europeans unite in public on one day for one purpose. From London to Rome, from Paris to Madrid, from Athens to Helsinki, from Berlin to Barcelona, Europeans across most of the political spectrum united in their opposition to the impending American attack of Iraq. A number of European intellectuals proclaimed this day as the one that historians will someday view as the true birthday of a united Europe, precisely because like no other day in European history it united Europeans emotionally and not only by fiat of a faceless bureaucracy issued in impenetrable language from Brussels.

At least to my knowledge, the first and most emphatic interpretation of February 15, 2003 as Europe's nascent national holiday was offered by Dominique Strauss-Kahn in a lengthy article in *Le Monde*. Strauss-Kahn could not have been more explicit about the significance of the demonstrations: "On Saturday, February 15, 2003, a nation was born on the streets. This nation is the European nation." Strauss-Kahn makes it unmistakably clear that the only commonality of this nascent nation lies in its opposition to the United States. Lest there be any misunderstanding that this sense of commonality pertains only to policy interpretations, political rivalries, or differences in interest, he leaves no doubt that he sees the chasm between Europe and the United States as a matter of something much deeper, much more irreconcilable – namely, one of values, identity, essences.

Scarcely two months later, Jürgen Habermas entered the fray with a hitherto unprecedentedly coordinated endeavor. On May 31, 2003, Habermas published an article in Germany's paper of record, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, on Europe's rebirth following the war in Iraq. Co-authored with Jacques Derrida, a French version of the piece was also published in *Liberation*. On the same day, Habermas' friend, the American intellectual Richard Rorty, published a supportive piece in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, Germany's other paper of record and the *FAZ*'s main rival. Meanwhile, Adolf Muschg wrote in the eminent Swiss paper *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, Umberto Eco in *La Repubblica*, Gianni Vattimo in *La Stampa*, and Fernando Savater in *El Pais*. These other contributions were independent articles, connected to the Habermas-Derrida piece only by a common theme: The war in Iraq was to be the clarion call for a European nation which all writers (with the possible exception of Eco) construed in explicit opposition to the United States. These intellectuals connected with a mobilized popular anti-Americanism that not only created the largest demonstration in European history on February 15, but that had also already permitted Gerhard Schroeder to win one of Germany's narrowest parliamentary elections in September 2002 by running an explicitly anti-American campaign in which he constantly inveighed against "amerikanische Verhaeltnisse" (American conditions) and promised his receptive voters never to allow those to become reality in Germany. America as a negative entity had developed into a potent and legitimate mobilizing factor in European politics.

To be sure, the Habermas initiative conspicuously excluded intellectuals from Britain, the Scandinavian and Low Countries, and especially Eastern Europe. Indeed, even a cursory reading of the Habermas-Derrida text reveals how much its putatively "European" vision consists largely of advocating a Franco-German core that is to lead Europe away from its tutelage to the United States. Habermas speaks openly about a "vanguard" (*avantgardistisches*) "core Europe." Apart from the text's dismissal of other options and its disregard for East Europeans and their five-decade-long experience under Communist rule, it is remarkable how German-centered the document is, particularly given its author's *bona fides* as a genuine *Weltbürger*. Tellingly, the only politician whom Habermas mentions by name is Germany's foreign minister Joschka

Fischer. Moreover, Habermas centers his entire argument on the alleged hegemony of the following clearly preferable European values that he implicitly juxtaposes to their naturally inferior American counterparts: a large dosage of scepticism towards the market combined with an acceptance of the state as a major social actor; a cautious attitude towards technology; a secular conviction that rejects any kind of religiosity in public life. These alleged European virtues have been the staples of Europe's debate about America and Americanism at least since 1945, if not before. As we have already seen in the case of Hubert Vedrine, many European intellectuals have listed them before.

But this was a particularly strange departure for Habermas. After all, more than any other post-war German intellectual, he had always argued that the greatest achievement of the old Bonn Republic was its unreserved acceptance of the West in all its forms: cultural, social, political. And it was obvious to anybody who listened at the time that, for Habermas, the West not only included but actually featured the United States. For Habermas, too, apparently, one aspect of "othering" the United States in the current European development is to claim a strong affinity with the "genuine" United States that over the past decade or so seems to have lost its way. Thus, at least for liberals of Habermas' normative predilections, the new Europe is not only the "un-America" but actually a sort of "ur-America."

At the end of the day, the debate about America and the various views of America held by Europeans have little to do with the "real existing America" itself and everything to do with Europe. It is far from certain in which direction the tendencies analyzed here will proceed, since it remains equally uncertain where, how, perhaps even whether Europe will develop into a more coherent entity. But one thing remains quite significant: Nobody ever spoke of Europe's birth being the fall of the Berlin Wall or the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its communist rule over the eastern half of the continent. None of those events generated nearly the popular enthusiasm that February 15, 2003 did; indeed, while Berliners danced in the streets in 1989-90, Londoners and Parisians fretted in their homes. And nobody in Europe's West thronged public places in support of the celebrations in Warsaw and Prague during that period. Whether Strauss-Kahn, Habermas, and others will prove correct in arguing that this day will come to be regarded as Europe's birthday remains to be seen. One thing is evident, however: the long tradition of a deep ambivalence towards and a constant pre-occupation with America in Europe clearly set the intellectual stage for the powerful symbolic presence of this potentially fateful day. History teaches us that *any* entity – certainly in its developing stages – only attains consciousness and self-awareness by defining itself in opposition to another entity. Every nationalism arose in opposition to another. With the entity of "Europe" now on the agenda, anti-Americanism may well serve as a useful coagulating function for the establishment of this new entity. While it remains unclear what exactly ties Swedes to Greeks or Spaniards to Finns – especially on the all-important levels of emotions and identity – they clearly do share one important centripetal trait: they are *not* Americans. And since *not* being an American has attained such a potent and tangible political momentum in Europe's recent past, this fact cannot but enhance the meaning of what it is to be a European. Anti-Americanism in Europe has for the first time become a tangible political force on the mass level beyond the elite antipathy and resentment that has been a staple of European culture since at least July 5, 1776.