



Dissecting Anti-isms

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When General Motors announced plans to cut 12,000 jobs in Germany, *Stern* magazine, with a paid circulation of one million and a readership four times larger, appeared with a cover replete with classic symbols of anti-Americanism. It featured a huge cowboy boot with “GM” branded on the sole. The boot, stitched with red, white and blue colors on its side, was poised to crush hundreds of little people arrayed underneath in the shape of the emblem of Opel, GM’s Germany subsidiary. The cover title read, “Ways of the Wild West.”

Here was an archetype of the long-running story of European anti-Americanism. The circumstances were new, but the “reaction-formation” itself was as old as Heinrich Heine’s denunciation of the United States in the early 19th century. Though this icon of German literature was as liberal and democratic as any intellectual of his age, he fumed, “Worldly gain is the true religion [of the Americans], and money is their Mammon, their one and only almighty God.” Thus was the not-so-hidden hand of the market transmuted into moral degeneracy revolving around inbred greed and false gods. Misery, the image insinuated, was not homemade (Germany’s wages are among the highest

in the world, and its work rules among the most rigid), but the result of a conspiracy by the “Other”, also known previously as the “scape-goat.” There was no one to blame but the mighty, ruthless stranger. Thus was complexity reduced to demonology, which is a defining feature of anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism or, indeed, any “anti-ism.”

Why is this anti-Americanism, as distinct from “anti-Bushism” or anger against a real object like General Motors? How does one distinguish “policy anti-Americanism”, which is what most of the well-known polls measure, from the real thing? What is the difference between anti-ism and criticism, between the rabid and the reasonable?

There are two quick tests one can use to find out. One concerns language, the other selectivity. As to language, take the familiar argument that the Bush Administration defied international law in the 2003 war against Iraq, followed by similar indictments in 2004 and 2005 that targeted detention practices in Guantánamo and prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib. Accusations of illegality may be true or false; they are not *ipso facto* anti-American. But to attribute American behavior to inbred imperialism (“look what they did to the Indians”), to American capitalism (“blood for oil”), or to reli-

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A protester throws stones at riot police in Berlin, May 1, 2003.

gious bigotry (“they claim divine guidance”) transcends policy criticism. Classics in the repertoire of anti-Americanism, such statements equate the *pars* with the *toto*, condemning the country and the culture as a whole. They denounce not the policy but the polity. As such, they deliver good *prima facie* evidence for what more generally might be called anti-ism.

The second test plumbs for selectivity. We may suspect an unconscious or hidden agenda when censure singles out the United States but ignores, say, Islamic terrorism, Russia’s war in Chechnya, China’s deadly oppression of Tibet, the genocide of non-Arabs in Sudan, or state-organized terror against white farmers in Zimbabwe. To take note of selectivity is not to claim that one wrong detracts from another, but it does highlight a double standard that smells of anti-ism. Selective condemnation—pointing reflexively to the same culprit—is a convenient way to hide bigotry from oneself and from others.

Another flag is the selective demonization of American leaders, as happened during the worldwide demonstrations against George W. Bush in 2002 and again in 2003. The telling aspect was the absence of Saddam Hussein from these manifestations of disgust, let alone of lesser targets like Vladimir Putin (for oppressing Chechnya) or Ayatollah Khamenei (for sup-

pressing dissent in Iran) or Yasir Arafat (for manipulating terror against Israeli civilians). It was George W. Bush who was compared to Hitler and condemned for setting the world aflame. A bit farther down the line, it was Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who stood accused of similar crimes against humanity. A distant third was Tony Blair, depicted as an American “poodle”—and thus the graffito visible from the Berlin U-Bahn: “Axis of Evil: US—Israel—UK.”

Yet another flag of the real thing is selective representation. In the European media as well as on the public stage, prizes and publicity go overwhelmingly to Americans who serve as witnesses against their own government and nation. The author Gore Vidal and the linguist Noam Chomsky have been lead players in this role; more recently the filmmaker Michael Moore and the literary critic Susan Sontag have stepped forward (Sontag received the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Publishers’ Association in 2003, and died in December 2004). Their critique may range from the moderate to the malicious, but their main function is to render legitimate what the audience (rightly) fears is not, given the taboo encasing all forms of explicit anti-ism. The defense mechanism is simple enough: “After all, *they* are saying this, too, so how can we be accused of anti-

Americanism?” A similar phenomenon attaches itself to Israel, where “post-” or anti-Zionist spokesmen are given top billing in the European media.

Language and selectivity serve as better gauges of the real thing, as opposed to “policy anti-Americanism”, because in polite Western society it is usually *infra dig* to say, “Yes, I hate the Americans.” But one is a thousand times more likely to hear, “I hate this American president.” At this juncture, Professor Freud would begin to muse about “displacement”, about the human habit of clobbering one object or person but actually targeting another that is protected by fearsome power, be it because of taboo or real clout. Lashing out at specific American policies and leaders doesn’t risk the raised eyebrows that demonizing the country as such

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would do. In a post-racist age, collectives usually are protected; individuals are not.

Freud might also invoke another standby of his craft: the patient who is in denial. “Thou shalt not be bigoted” is the first commandment of the postmodern consciousness, and though that injunction is more often honored vis-à-vis formerly colonized peoples than Westerners, the injunction against hostile stereotyping does afford some shelter to America as such, too. The denial mechanism offers a clue as to why opinion surveys, though they deliver much harder evidence than voyages through the unconscious, tell only part of the story. A classic Jewish joke of post-Holocaust vintage makes the point nicely. It is about a Jew, suitcase in hand, accosting various passengers in Vienna’s central train station: “Excuse me, are you anti-Semitic?” One after the other fumes, “How dare you! Of course, I am not!” Finally, one fires back, “Yes, I am. I can’t stand the Jews!” Exclaims the Jewish traveler, “At last, an honest man! Would you please watch my suitcase for a few minutes?”

Denial, displacement and taboo are not

amenable to survey research, let alone to covariance or factor analysis. But such concepts at least get a suggestive grip on anti-Americanism (and the related phenomenon of anti-Semitism) where social-scientific tools slip because manifest realities do not necessarily reveal hidden ones. They may be hidden even to a carrier of anti-ism, who claims, “I just hate Bush; I love America, and some of my best friends are Americans.” How, then, to define the distinctive and essential features of anti-ism?

Anti-ism consists—at all times and in all places—of five elements. One is hostile stereotypization, a set of general statements attributing certain negative qualities to the target group. Closely related is denigration, the ascription of moral inferiority all the way to an irreducibly evil nature; hence the application of the Nazi comparison to America (and Israel). Demonization is the third step, moving from what the target group is to what it does or intends to do. The key theme is conspiracy. If the Jews (or African Americans, in the racist imagination) wanted to soil racial purity, America wants to trade “blood for oil”, impose winner-take-all capitalism everywhere, subvert sacred traditions or destroy social justice. Above all, the United States seeks domination over the rest of the world (which is also the theme of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, recently revived throughout the Arab world as well as in Japan, among other countries).

A fourth critical feature is obsession—the *idée fixe* that America (or “x”) is omnipresent and omnicausal, and hence the invisible force that explains all misery, whether Third World poverty, Islamist terror or even the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. As in all cases of obsession, the belief is both compulsive and consuming; that is, it springs to mind reflexively and expands relentlessly to leave no room for alternative explanations, let alone falsification. (This is why all debates on anti-ism degenerate into an endless ballet across shifting grounds.) The final step is elimination, be it by exclusion or extrusion. This is where anti-ism assumes a quasi-religious quality, as in the “Great Satan” motif of the Iranian regime. Satan is not only the symbol of supreme evil; he must also be exorcised. Get rid of those who torment us, and

salvation will be ours. Or as al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri has put it, the task is "purifying our country from the aggressors and resisting anyone who attacks us, violates our holy places, or steals our resources."

Anti-Americanism, to again emphasize the point, is not criticism of American policies, nor is it even an expression of dislike for particular American leaders or features of American life, such as gas-guzzling SUVs or five hundred television channels. It is the obsessive stereotypization, denigration and demonization of the country and the culture as a whole.

The most vicious, sustained and direct expressions of this state of mind these days are to be found in the Arab and Islamic world, often in cartoons. While most cartoons employ white figures as objects of demonization, a few go after black targets like Colin Powell, the secretary of state from 2001 to 2005, and Condoleezza Rice, the national security advisor of the first Bush Administration and Powell's successor in the second. One example from the Saudi newspaper *Okaz* of August 19, 2002 shows Rice with the starkly negroid features of the racist imagination—a quashed, gorilla-like nose and enormous lips. To add to the overload of loathing, she wears Stars of David as ear clips. At best, all of these themes are only remotely related to what American policy does. The message of this and hundreds of similar images is maximal denigration and demonization—indeed, pure hatred.

Such gruesome tropes will not be found in the European discourse on the United States. But present are all the essential features of anti-Americanism: stereotypization, denigration, demonization, obsession and elimination. On the level of stereotypization and denigration, three basic themes obey a single common denominator: Yahoo America vs. Superior Europe.

The first of these themes is that America is morally deficient. It executes its own people, which Europe does not, and it likes to bomb others, which Europe does only when dragged along by the United States. "On the Old Continent", notes a pillar of the French establishment, "we invoke the moral superiority conferred on Europeans by the abolition of capital

punishment." The Italian President Carlo Ciampi has stressed Europe's gaping moral distance from the United States by defining opposition to capital punishment as a "most eloquent signal affirming a European identity."

America is the land of intolerant, fundamentalist religion, "with screaming televangelists calling homosexuals Satan's semen-drenched acolytes", while Europe is charting a path toward enlightened secularism. The point here is not to note the growing "faith gap" between the United States and Europe—indeed, the progressive "de-Christianization" of Europe, which is a stark (and, until recently, underanalyzed) fact. The purpose of such denigrations is to assert Europe's moral superiority, as in the oft-heard comparison of Iran and the United States as the only two nations ruled by fundamentalist regimes. It is obscurantism versus enlightenment, blind faith versus rational politics. The fact that George W. Bush prays in the White House has been routinely interpreted as proof of insufferable self-righteousness or of a delusional personality, as if he were a latterday Joan of Arc listening to voices in his head.

Jean Baudrillard, the French opinionator (who is also billed as a philosopher), generalizes the point: "There is this dialogue between God and America." Even during the Cold War, "the Americans saw themselves as accomplices of God, even then, they were the Good Guys, and Evil was on the other side." Then his loathing overwhelms all logic: Though engaged in "this dialogue" with God, America is simultaneously a victim of autism, as manifested in the "self-pity" it exuded after 9/11. "There only is what is American", he continued, and it is "locked into its traumatism." There is no conception of the outside world, according to Baudrillard, only a "totalitarian consensus." God, autism and totalitarianism—all in the space of a few paragraphs.

The United States also is a nation that will not submit to the dictates of global goodness; hence it will not respect climate conventions, or ratify the International Criminal Court treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban treaty or the Land Mine Convention. Internationally, it is "Dirty Harry" and "Globocop" rolled into one—an irresponsible and arrogant citizen of the global community. America, in short, is "the

world's biggest rogue state."

Invariably, the bill of indictments reaches its climax with the Nazi-American comparison, which long preceded the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Here is a report from a pro-Serbia demonstration in Vienna in the spring of 1999, four years before the Iraq war:

The posters grew increasingly threatening: 'USA = Nazi', . . . '1939 = Hitler, 1999 = Bill Clinton; Jews = Then, Serbia = Now'. . . Replicas of the United States Flag were all over the rally, many with a swastika covering the blue and white corner. . . . It was clear this was more than a political statement; it was a war against our country's mentality.

Or, as the German essayist and poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger recalls,

The turbulent crowd of '68ers lost no time in denouncing their former object of desire. 'USA—SA—SS', they shouted. 'Imperialism' was their rallying call, the CIA took the place of the Devil, and at the end of the day a few desperadoes on the left went so far as to throw bombs at the very US bases which had protected us from the Soviets.

The second theme is that America is socially retrograde. It is the land of "predatory capitalism" (*Raubtierkapitalismus*) in the words of the former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, a country that denies critical social services, like welfare and health insurance, to those who need it most. Coming from behind in the German electoral campaign of 2002, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder resorted (successfully, in the end) to carefully coded anti-Americanism. In a campaign speech in Hanover, he damned America's ways by praising the superiority of the "German way" (*deutscher Weg*). "The days are now truly over when America and others were to serve as an example to us. The plundering of little people in the United States, who must now worry about their old-age pensions, while top managers carry home millions and billions after a company bankruptcy, that is not the German way we want for ourselves."

Nonetheless, Schröder's "Agenda 2010" provided for precisely the kind of welfare cuts mandated by Bill Clinton's 1996 "workfare" legislation, which would cause seven million people—one-half of all German recipients—to leave the welfare rolls and start working. Apart from the fact that U.S. executives do not make "billions", the point of this tale is the functionality of anti-Americanism in the German domestic political contest. The chancellor denounced the United States while emulating it, setting up the country as a convenient scapegoat (and smoke-screen) for the harsh policies he himself enacted. Freud would clap hands over such a vivid instance of projection.

When the British author A. N. Wilson unleashed his hatred of the Bush Administration, he used language redolent with classic clichés about America: "They are the most merciless exponents of world capitalism, with the determination to have a McDonald's and a Starbucks . . . in every country on earth." The standard lore continues along these lines: Instead of bettering the lot of the poor and unskilled, the United States shunts millions of them, mainly dark-skinned minorities, off to prison. Europe, on the other hand, metes out rehabilitation, not retribution. America accepts—nay, admires—gross income inequalities, whereas Europe cherishes redistribution in the name of social justice. The United States lets its public school system rot, not to speak of America's public infrastructure—a fact that was underscored in the European press after Hurricane Katrina, when many newspapers seemed giddy with glee at the American government's incompetence in responding after the levees broke in New Orleans in August 2005.

The third theme is that America is culturally retrograde. With the exception of John F. Kennedy, America elects only mentally or morally deficient men to the presidency. Roosevelt ("Rosenfeld") was a Jew in the Nazi imagination of the 1930s and 1940s. Truman, who built a towering edifice of international institutions like the UN and NATO, was a haberdasher; Eisenhower, who had commanded millions of men in World War II, was a dolt in uniform. Johnson was a Texan brute and Nixon a thug (even before the 1972 Watergate break-in); both were war criminals. Jimmy Carter, the

nuclear engineer, was a “peanut farmer”, and Reagan, who had cut his teeth in politics as president of the powerful Screen Actors Guild and sharpened them as two-term governor of California, remained until his last day in office a “a second-rate actor” of B-movie fame.

From Portugal to Poland, George W. Bush, a graduate of Yale University and the Harvard Business School, has been depicted as an illiterate, cretinous cowboy, “a political leader who at times can barely string a sentence together.” The defamatory reflex at work here was nicely illustrated by words attributed to Bush that have sped around the world: “The French have no word for ‘entrepreneur’.” This projection of presidential stupidity has become gospel truth in Europe, as has another global myth: that only eighty out of 535 U.S. congressmen carry a passport.

“It is impossible to make a Norwegian say that Americans are intelligent”, notes a Norwegian author of a book on anti-Americanism. Asked whether it didn’t mean “anything that 70 percent of the Nobel Prize winners in history have been Americans”, he responds: “No, it does not help. Even if all Americans were professors, we would call them stupid.” Why? “Because by speaking negatively about them, we elevate ourselves. It confirms that we are the opposite. We Europeans have refinement, culture, and intellectual life. To think this way raises our image of ourselves.”

The litany continues. America gorges itself on fatty fast food, wallows in tawdry mass entertainment, starves the arts and prays only to one God: Mammon. Instead of subsidizing what is serious and high-minded, as do the Europeans, the United States ruthlessly sacrifices the best of culture to pap and pop—never mind the Metropolitan Opera, MoMA and the world’s leading research universities. Although these schools are much admired, the compliment is routinely followed by, “But they are for the rich and well-connected, only.” Like all such anti-Americanisms, the myth is promulgated in blissful (or willful) ignorance of the fact that Harvard, Stanford and the like subsidize 60 percent of their students with loans and grants, while Ph.D. students normally have both tuition and living expenses paid for by the university. Even though this complaint is routine lore in Germany, German data show that

despite open admission and no tuition aid, 85 percent of all German students are middle-class and higher.

The common theme of these stereotypes is the denigration of America and the elevation of Europe. The motifs were summed up neatly in a piece in *Le Monde* right after the terror attacks of 9/11: “Cretinism, Puritanism, barbarian arrogance, unbridled capitalism.” America is morally, culturally and socially inferior to Europe. “The United States”, as the British philosopher Bertrand Russell put it as early as 1967, “is a force for suffering, reaction and counter-revolution the world over.” It is a society where Europe’s finest values—solidarity and community, taste and manners—are ground down by rampant individualism and capitalism. America is Yahoo, whereas Europe is civi-

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lization. Europe, in short, is the “Un-America.”

So much for stereotypization and denigration. When we add the three even more emotionally charged characteristics of anti-Americanism—obsession, demonization and conspiracy—Stanford historian Russell Berman’s description in *Anti-Americanism in Europe* (2004) rings true:

Anti-Americanism functions like a prejudice, magnifying the power and presence of its presumed opponent, turning it into a ubiquitous threat. The empirical superiority of American military power, for example is transformed by the anti-Americanist imagination into a fantasy of infinite omnipotence: there is no evil in the world that cannot be blamed on American action. . . . Anti-Semites, similarly, have always been able to imagine an ineluctable network of Jewish power. As a paranoid fantasy, anti-Americanism is cut from the same cloth. Instead of facing up to the detailed complexity of reality, it can only see Washington’s hands control-

ling every conflict. . . . Anti-Americanism is not a reasoned response to American policies; it is a hysterical surplus that goes beyond reason. That difference is evident in the constant recycling of anti-American images that have a history that long antedates current policy.

This is why, in the end, debates on anti-Americanism or any anti-ism turn into spirals without resolution or escape. It is possible to have a useful discussion with a critic of American policy, and, indeed, necessary to hearken what is right and reasoned while rebutting what is certifiably false. But, in the end, anti-Americanism is not about America, as anti-Semitism is not about Jews. Any “anti-ism” reflects the crisis of the personality or polity afflicted with it. The crisis may be one of complexity, and so the anti-ist mind reaches out for simple antidotes. One such explanation seeks to transmute invisible, abstract causes into concrete, flesh-and-blood culprits. Hence, the General Motors lay-offs described above were not attributed to the might of the market, but to rapacious capitalism as embodied by the United States. Another seeks to explain what *ought* not to happen by conspiracy—why else would transpire what by right should not? For evil to triumph, it must be allied to omnipotence; and since the enemy cannot be defeated, he must operate by hook, crook and secrecy.

The crisis may also flow from a sense of impotence. Arab society has been tormented for hundreds of years by the loss of strategic and cultural preeminence, a crisis compounded by the forcible intrusion of the West in the guise of France, Britain, Israel and America (more or less in that order). At the root of misery lies the failure of modernization in Arab lands. But it is so much easier to focus rage and resentment not on a hidebound culture or on oppressive rule, but on the “Great” and “Little Satan”, religious metaphors for maximum evil and power. Hence the eliminationism that is an integral part of anti-ism. Extrude or even destroy the tormentor, and salvation is at hand.

Anti-ism is also a response to seduction. After all, why would people freely flock into McDonald’s, wear Levi’s, drive SUVs and watch

Hollywood shlock? The problem with America’s enormous “soft power” is that we hate the seducer as we hate ourselves for yielding to temptation. From there it is but a short step to the unconscious remedy of projection and displacement: Blame the source of all these attractions that demote your own time-honored achievements. Hence, any anti-ism comes with the demonization of the “Other” as a way of revalidating oneself.

Power, be it soft or hard, makes enemies—that is the long and the short, but not the end of it. For America was a target of resentment long before George W. Bush—even as far back as the early days of the Republic when it was still weak, as were the Jews in Europe throughout (and the Indians in Africa or the overseas Chinese in Asia). What, then, might be the common denominator of all these anti-isms?

Jews, Indians and Chinese have always embodied the wrenching economic transformation that threatened old habits and dispensations—and Jews suffered twice because they were agents of intellectual and cultural upheaval, to boot. Unlike such high-achieving but highly vulnerable minorities, America has always presented an XXL version of this threat to the rest of the world—as the very steamroller of modernity. And at no time has it flattened as many old ways (and profits and privileges that go with them) as it has at the turn of the 21st century, when it was at the height of its power, hard and soft. Such Behemoths are sometimes respected, always feared, but never loved—especially not by those who once were giants in their own right.

Some anti-Americanism will surely be muted by wiser American policies that reduce the (rational) fear of American power unbound. But *au fond*, anti-Americanism is not about America. At heart, any anti-ism is a crisis of collective self-esteem that cries out for compensation, be it by extolling one’s own culture or by denigrating the Other’s. Hence the vexing limits of a rational-empirical debate. For if such a discourse were indeed constructive, it would soon turn to the real causes of misery—those the anti-ist seeks to conceal from himself as he projects them onto the Other. 🌐