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## Europe’s Enduring Anti-Americanism

MICHAEL COX

The litany of transatlantic fallings-out since the beginning of the twenty-first century has been narrated enough times over the past few years to require little in the way of repetition here. Different reasons have been suggested for the divide; Robert Kagan in 2002 asserted that its sources lay deep in the wellsprings of European and American roles in the wider international system. But this analysis ignored simple facts: presidential politics and the change in the US administration after 2000. There is little doubt that the arrival of George W. Bush altered the mood music in Europe and, following a brief interlude in the wake of 9-11, the very relationship itself.

Of course, what some saw then—and still see now—as the “new” transatlantic crisis has to be set in context. There were many such spats during the cold war and even more during the 1990s. Still, it is difficult to ignore the obvious: The Bush administration’s coming to power and the subsequent deluge of policy controversies—the Kyoto Protocol, the war on terror, Iraq, etc.—have provoked in Europe a steep decline in regard for US policies and for the American nation itself.

Considerable attention has been paid to the prospects for change, repair, or even recovery in the official transatlantic relationship. Indeed, during Bush’s second term the debate about the relationship has been decidedly upbeat, at least at the elite level. The prospect of Bush’s departure from the political scene has significantly reinforced this hopefulness.

The optimism, however, is premature. This is so not because relations have not improved since the

crisis of 2003 in reaction to the US-led intervention in Iraq, but rather because anti-Americanism has embedded itself in a very profound way in Europe’s foreign policy discourse. There is today a tendency among large swathes of Europeans to view the United States, US policies, or US power in an increasingly negative light. This fact, more than any changes about to take place in the White House, will shape the transatlantic relationship for years to come.

The future, in my view, looks anything but bright. Anti-Americanism has taken root in Europe; consequently, some seriously testing times still lie ahead for the alliance after Bush leaves office.

### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

European anti-Americanism contains several different features, including the discussion of America in terms of crude stereotypes; the casual attribution of malign intent and implausible (sometimes conspiratorial) omnipotence to the US government; and the desire to narrow one’s own society’s contact with corrupting American influence. Analysts differ as to whether anti-Americanism in Europe is best conceived as a response to particular policies or as a sort of emotional reaction that has its basis not in reason but in passions. The difference is significant, of course, because if anti-Americanism is diagnosed simply as the unavoidable by-product of resentment against American power in all its forms, or even as a psychological predisposition against all things American, then this removes from the table any consideration of reorienting US policy in order to ease the problem.

In one of the better known past works on the subject, Paul Hollander in 1992 leaned toward the diagnosis of irrationality, presenting anti-Americanism as a form of a priori prejudice akin to sexism or racism: “a particular mindset, an attitude

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of distaste, aversion, or intense hostility, the roots of which may be found in matters unrelated to the material qualities or attributes of American society or the foreign policies of the United States.”

In a vigorous counterattack on America's critics in Europe, Hollander attributed flourishing anti-Americanism to jealous resentment of US wealth and cultural presence, the emboldening effect on foreigners of anti-American criticism from within America itself, and the low-cost nature of throwing barbs at an America lacking the political will to do anything serious in response. Encouraged by these structural factors, certain standard intellectual postures within Europe and elsewhere, such as nationalism, fear of modernity, and defense of tradition, could spiral into a self-sustaining “irrational dynamic” that attempts to explain away the woes of people's lives by reference to the malign influence of a powerful outsider.

Hollander's analysis—which leaves little room for optimism, whoever becomes the next US president—has been challenged by another school of thought. It insists that the problem is less rooted in deep structures of antipathy but is rather a reasoned opposition to America's conduct in international affairs. If it is Washington's policy choices that determine the level of anti-American sentiment, then it follows that a change in US behavior might reduce it.

## VARIETIES OF DISDAIN

It is not necessary, however, to pose a dichotomous choice that classifies anti-Americanism as either an irrational prejudice or a rational reaction to US policy. In different situations anti-Americanism may be one or the other or a vexing blend of both. Europe, after all, has a plentiful share of citizens who loathe the United States based on nothing more than emotional impulse. On the other hand, it is possible to think oneself into a position of the most thoroughgoing anti-Americanism while remaining quite rational. Such a position encompasses objections to particular policies, for example the invasion of Iraq, but moves from the particular to argue that such policies are merely the external manifestation of forces lying at the root of American society.

To different critics, different forces may be identified. One of the more frequently cited is a powerful sense of uncritical American nationalism, typically expressed in declarations that the United States is “the greatest country in the world,” and has thereby every right to promote its superior val-

ues abroad. In any case, the essential intellectual structure of the critique remains the same: that one cannot realistically expect a US government to change its “bad” policies, because they stem from a social system that produces such policies.

Thus one can argue, logically, both that Bush's foreign policy is an abomination, and further that it is the typical, perhaps inevitable, product of a society that operates on the core cultural and political principles of the United States. With the use of this argument, one distinction often used to separate “reasonable” critics from irrational anti-Americans—that of judging whether the critic is attacking merely policies or lashing out at American society as a cultural whole—collapses, since policy is taken to be the symptom of a fundamentally flawed society.

Such a position is strikingly hard-line, subscribers who leap to mind being either full-blooded anti-capitalists of the old school or stern religious intellectuals, or even Americans themselves. Indeed, some of the more influential sources of anti-Americanism in Europe have actually come from within the United States. Consider the extraordinarily popular work of Noam Chomsky, whose unified field theory of international relations is that most problems in the world today can be explained by reference to the very structure of America. Despite its rationality, there can be little doubt that such thinking is “anti-American,” in that it condemns precisely what it identifies as the defining features of American society.

In the middle ground is the largest and slipperiest category of all: those who mingle reason and hostility, maintaining proclaimed liberal fairness in their political thinking while nevertheless persistently contriving to end up on the side of the anti-Americans. Such critics, based on an instinctive, emotionally founded tendency to believe that America is invariably in the wrong (the nonrational basis of their thought), then sift through the facts and arguments of the field to find some combination that supports their desired conclusion: namely that America is at fault. Reasoned arguments in this way are grafted, patchwork, onto a base of pre-existing ill will.

As American policy changes, such critics must then change the facts and arguments to which they look in order to explain why America, despite the new circumstances, is still in the wrong. The process continues indefinitely, with no prospect of resolution; for the position of the critic is determined not by the failure of America to do that of

which he or she approves, but rather by a default by the critic into opposition to whatever America happens to be doing at the moment.

Though more moderate than the harder-line anti-Americanism outlined above, this position is the less intellectually sustainable. The rational anti-American can fall back on a coherent blueprint of die-hard ideology to explain his or her position. The more butterfly-like critic, alighting here or there on the shifting sands of opportunistic critique, has no such option. Though possessed of rational subcomponents, for example, a list of arguments why the Iraq War is a poor idea, the conclusions-to-facts nature of many critics' reasoning undermines their claim to rationality and sets up multiple future inconsistencies.

Let me be clear: There is a genuine difference between criticizing American policy and being anti-American. The difference, however, lies not in the distinction between reason and prejudice. Rather, it lies in the distinctions among four different kinds of criticism. The first kind of criticism disapproves of policies of the United States, while hopefully sharing its basic principles and holding to a consistent position, thus obliging support for America if and when it acts in line with one's views. This is rational fairness toward America. The second kind perceives evil so deeply imbedded in US society that it simply can do no right. This is rational anti-Americanism. Third, an underlying emotional prejudice against America may lead one to reason backwards—from conclusions to facts and arguments—with the sole goal of condemning the United States, consistency and coherence be damned. This is semi-rational/inconsistent anti-Americanism. Finally, one may simply utter abuse aimed at America, without pretense to reason or argument. This is nonrational anti-Americanism.

Unlike the nonrational anti-Americanism, which is the habit of the casual, unthinking Americanophobe, and the rational anti-Americanism, which is the preserve of the ideological zealot, the semi-rational/inconsistent form of anti-Americanism is the version most frequently encountered in Europe.

### THE HOPE OF A COMMON THREAT

With the "global war on terror" and the proclamation of a transformational strategy in the Middle

East, Bush's presidency painted a grand new canvas of international affairs to replace the fading paradigm of the cold war. The reactions of Europeans to the new American grand strategy have been broadly consistent with their former cold war instincts. The left, for example, combines an ideological rejection of the US political and economic model (or at least their European caricature of it) with complaints, implicit or explicit, that the United States itself is acting in significant part as the cause of the world's defining problems (extremism and terrorism), or at the very least is serving to exacerbate them.

One might ask whether the threats posed by today's world—terrorism, extremism, weapons proliferation—might not serve as the same sort of external threat that the Soviet Union once did, promoting cooperation on the basis of passably common values and interests. One might have hoped this would happen. Again, however, the evidence points to less optimistic conclusions.

Europeans and Americans, in terms of values and interests, may well be as close as two separate continents can have any reasonable expectation of finding themselves. Nevertheless, it seems that without a pressing reason for Europeans to doubt their basic security, the war on terror (or any other issue) will not provide the basis for the sort of self-denying coordination of policy to which the latter half of the twentieth century made us accustomed.

This means that the instincts of "anti-Americanism lite"—to talk in stereotypes, ascribe sinister global omnipotence to America, and seek defense against guilt by association by minimizing ties—will likely continue to be a major part of public discourse in European societies, no matter the next occupant of the White House.

### VISIONS OF THINGS TO COME

What are the political consequences of the resurgence of anti-American attitudes in Europe? The first is an effect on the tone, not just of public discourse but of political leadership. European politicians increasingly are forced to operate in an environment where anti-American positions are regarded as statements of commonsense wisdom, while statements of support for the US government are subject to prolonged, hostile analysis. There

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are, as a result, more straightforward political rewards to be reaped from pronouncements, and even off-the-cuff remarks, deriding American positions than from any effort to justify collaboration. This means that, without some realignment of public attitudes, policy in most European states will probably remain tilted over time toward reflexive suspicion of the United States and a predisposition to be critical of US policies whatever they may be.

To be sure, there are leaders from time to time, such as Tony Blair of Britain and Nicolas Sarkozy of France, who are capable of resisting such a trend in the popular sentiment of their nations and are disposed to do so. It would seem foolhardy, however, to predict that a general movement of public feeling in democracies will not tend to dictate a drift in the thinking of elected representatives toward at least compatible positions.

Public anti-Americanism makes it more difficult for European leaders to sustain a pro-American stance, or to support policies that are associated in the public mind with the United States, even if the leaders themselves might by their own instincts be disposed to favor such policies. In short, the political price of visible pro-Americanism has risen substantially, with predictable effects for the number of political actors willing to buy the product. The next US president will have to deal with the consequences.

Second, if domestic political conditions make it more difficult for pro-American politicians, or at least pro-American policy positions, to succeed in Europe, then there will also be an effect on alignment within the broader international community. The world has been accustomed to seeing the United States and leading European nations collaborate closely on the serious issues of international affairs, often to the extent of viewing them as a cohesive Western bloc. It seems unlikely that continuing anti-American sentiment in Europe could produce such an extreme effect as to drive Europe into the arms of any other partner in opposition to America. But it is plausible that the next US administration will have to devote more energy to shoring up support from Europe, which in the past it might have taken for granted.

Third, the drift toward resistance against following the “American course” may be accompanied by another political consequence: a certain forgetful-

ness regarding the degree to which European and US interests and values still coincide. Much has been written concerning the differences between Europe and the United States—America is a less statist, more individualistic, and more religious society than European nations can claim for themselves. Nevertheless, there are rudimentary principles to which both America and Europe adhere with a steadiness that cannot be found so readily in other places.

## WEAKENING THE WEST

Cold war or no, such values—and the interest in trade and access to resources to which they are coupled—still have enemies in the world. For all their disagreements over the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq, Americans and Europeans have far more uniting them with one another than with the proclaimers of Islamist jihad, vicious pseudo-nationalist autocrats such as the late Saddam Hussein, or Stalinist relics like North Korea’s Kim Jong-Il. Even more acceptable prospective partners such as China or Russia seem on due analysis to be many moons away

from having the basis of commonality with either side required to supplant the transatlantic bond.

Their periodic gestures of spectacular lethal nihilism notwithstanding, it still seems highly unlikely that the enemies of the Western social model have the ability to destroy it, though they can certainly visit harm on its citizens. Even so, the throwing of rhetorical stones and the inculcation of a self-conscious “values gap” between the two continents that provide the supporting pillars of the West cannot but weaken the West.

As suggested above, it seems plausible that a more pressingly existential sense of threat to Europe would more likely reinvigorate than destroy the Euro-American partnership. For now, however, in as much as European and American solidarity tends to protect common interests and values, European anti-Americanism (as well as its reciprocal counterpart in American sentiment) threatens to take eyes off the ball when it comes to pursuing what should be both sides’ highest priority: the uncompromising defense of their shared way of life. This possibility has to concern the next American president, of whichever party, as much as it offers hope to the enemies of the West.

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Fourth, there is a very real risk that anti-Americanism in mainstream political discourse may give comfort to antidemocratic forces within European societies. There will always be in Europe a certain amount of extremism, particularly of the sort characterized by hatred of America and subscription to outlandish conspiracy theories concerning American deeds. We are all by now at least partially familiar, through the analysis of terrorist attacks, successful and foiled, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, with the processes by which citizens of European nations can be led to draw radical religious and political conclusions as a result of exposure to propaganda blaming the United States for a global “crusade” against Islam.

It would be inaccurate and unfair to hold those who posit more moderate criticisms of the United States responsible for the words and actions of extremists. However, in the same way that the Iraq War provoked an upsurge in terrorist intent—without that statement in any sense suggesting that the former justifies the latter—so it may be justly argued that the culture of intellectual hostility toward US foreign policy which has taken root among the general population of Europe will make fighting the “war on terror” more difficult in the future.

### THINKING LIKE ADULTS

Fifth and finally, a sad consequence of the rise of anti-Americanism in Europe may be the entrenchment of an unedifying mental laziness. This is likely to enervate the intellectual content of the European debate about international affairs even as high passions continue to flow. It would doubtless romanticize the process of foreign policy making in democracies to suggest that what emerges is usually the product of dialectics of sweet reason on the part of the general public. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that, at least

on matters of the greatest importance, the public does engage to some degree, and the greater the sophistication and rationality of its analysis the better for the political process.

If, however, European debates continue to feature the kind of reasoning that flows from conclusions to facts and arguments, while assuming the worst concerning agendas associated with America; if crass generalizations about American culture and politics retain their grip over the European public mindset; and if the government of the United States continues to be ascribed a malevolence and omnipotence detached from any balanced reading of the facts; then the result can only be to infantilize and stunt the public discussion of international affairs in Europe, with continuing and unfortunate consequences for transatlantic relations.

Only by eschewing easy intellectual shortcuts that assume generalized good or ill to lie at the root of American policy; only by embracing the reality that the United States is far from all-powerful, and thus far from all-responsible for the world's problems; only by accepting that, despite lacking omnipotence, the United States nevertheless has a shot at achieving at least some important, positive things through the application of its substantial power and is disposed to attempt to do so, even if that may infringe on the claimed prerogatives of others; only in these ways can Europeans who seek to offer critiques of US policy hope to emerge from their analysis with useful, adult conclusions.

It might be noted that Americans themselves would do well to subscribe to similar principles in their judgment of their own nation. Similarly, policy makers in the next administration in Washington would do well to keep their analysis of European political trends clear-headed. Such analysis would offer little support for any hope that the Europeans, even with Bush gone from office, will happily fall in line behind US leadership. ■