

# ANTI-AMERICANISM PAST AND PRESENT

The recent upsurge in anti-Americanism has a long history, explains **Gregory Melleuish**

Since September 11 2001 and the American response to that tragedy there has been an upsurge in anti-Americanism in many parts of the world, including Australia. There has also been an increase in books and articles purporting to explain and analyse the anti-American phenomenon. Strangely, as Paul Hollander has argued, it has not attracted a great deal of serious scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> Much of the discussion is more general and discursive as for example Jean-François Revel's *Anti-Americanism*.<sup>2</sup>

Anti-Americanism is still somewhat of a mystery to most of us. It may well be the case that anti-Americanism is, as Hollander puts it, 'an angry and anguished response' to modernity.<sup>3</sup> But its protean, irrational and contradictory qualities make it so much more than this.

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On the one hand it appears to be about a real thing, that is to say the enormous power that America enjoys today relative to any other country on the planet. On the other hand it is often about fantasies that bear no or little resemblance to the real world.

Russell Berman has written that anti-Americanism is a 'prejudice and an obsession' and that there is a 'disjunction between American reality and the anti-American fantasy.'<sup>4</sup> Philippe Roger notes that anti-Americanism 'has never been ashamed to utter two mutually exclusive grievances at the same time.'<sup>5</sup>

It is important to distinguish between what might be termed legitimate criticism of American policy and anti-Americanism. Since 9/11 America has been much more active in the world and has engaged in political and military actions that are sometimes questionable and have attracted a considerable amount of criticism. This is no more than one would expect when the world's major power exerts its strength.

Anti-Americanism is something different because it is a mindset, a frame of mind, a discourse that prejudices every American action in terms of a fixed set of images of America that are less than complimentary. This anti-American discourse prevents those who are influenced by it to examine American actions in a fair and reasonable fashion. By definition, America is always in the wrong and the events since 9/11 have simply provided those influenced by anti-American discourse to indulge in their hatred of America.

Anti-Americanism discourse is just another illustration of the capacity of the human mind to believe in its own imaginings and to impose them on the empirical facts. This dominance of mind over matter is often viewed as something that

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only existed pre-Enlightenment when there was a belief that reality was but a pale reflection of its ideal Platonic form. Hence the Catholic Church in the medieval period forged the Donation of Constantine, giving the Church power over the secular realm, because it knew that such a document must exist. It was just a small matter of adjusting the world of appearances to acknowledge that reality.

One might have thought that the apparent triumph of modern empiricism and its insistence that theories be based on facts might have knocked such quaint modes of thinking on the head. But alas many intellectuals since the Enlightenment have persisted in wanting to bend reality to their imaginings of it. Unlike 'le bon' David Hume they have not demonstrated serenity and good humour in the face of a world that they can ever only describe provisionally. Rather like Rousseau and his Jacobin disciples they have raged at a world that refuses to conform to its ideal Platonic form.

European intellectuals have had some five centuries since the original voyages of discovery to 'imagine' the world and its peoples and how that wider world relates to Europe. Anti-Americanism has been but one aspect of this exercise of their imagination. More significant for a long time was the creation of the Orient or the East as a place of despotism, religious obscurantism and stagnation against which they could contrast the dynamism

and energy of Europe. That vision of the East, the vision as much of Marx and Hegel as of more liberal thinkers, was about as accurate as their depiction of America. As China and India now emerge as major world economic players their past as commercial, even capitalist, societies can be seen much more clearly.

But the East was always a moveable feast; when French intellectual Henri Massis wrote his *Defence of the West* in the 1920s he saw himself as engaged in a spiritual war defending Latin civilisation against the combined forces of Russian Bolshevism, Indian mysticism and German obscurantism.<sup>6</sup> At the same time other French intellectuals were condemning America for a quite different set of sins, including materialism, superficialism and lack of culture.

Hence when one reads Philippe Roger's excellent *The American Enemy* one cannot help feeling that one is getting only half the story. For example when Roger discusses Charles Maurras' attack on President Wilson one longs to know how this connects with Maurras' well known attacks on the 'East' and the Germans. One strongly suspects that the link is anti-Semitism. The cultures that have spawned anti-Americanism, especially France, Germany and the Arab-Islamic world have also been infected with the anti-Semitic virus. China and India, civilisations whose primary contact with Jews was through the Baghdadi Diaspora tend not to be anti-Semitic and anti-American.

The other thing that spurs on anti-Americanism is a culture of complaint. The three major areas of anti-Americanism in the world, the Arab Islamic world, Latin America and 'old Europe' of France and Germany contain cultures that have, in one way or another, failed in coming to terms with the modern world. This failure has generally involved an unwillingness to appreciate and adopt liberalism and the undoubted benefits that liberalism brings with it. Although one might dispute the inclusion of France and Germany in this group, both failed in their attempts to become powers on the world stage and both embraced anti-modern regimes in the twentieth century in the shape of Vichy and Nazism.

As well, there can be no doubt that the intellectual source of anti-Americanism is Europe, in particular France and Germany. Hence Michael Radu has argued that Latin American anti-Americanism is intellectually dependent on Europe and especially France and the same is undoubtedly true of the Arab-Islamic world.<sup>7</sup> Consequently an understanding of French anti-Americanism is crucial

for a proper appreciation of the phenomenon. Roger's scholarly tome records the long history of French Anti-Americanism. It goes back to the 18th century and the need for France to define itself in relation to the New World. It has mutated over time according to circumstance and, in part, was encouraged initially by what the French saw as America's ingratitude over the assistance that the French had provided for them during the War of Independence. It was also spurred on by France's slow decline over the past two centuries, a decline that has been mirrored by the rise of America. There are a number of significant features and themes of that anti-Americanism.<sup>8</sup>

America was largely defined in terms of 'Yankeedom'. It was the commercial and Puritan Yankee that lay at the centre of the French intellectual's anti-Americanism. Hence French sympathy during the Civil War was with the South, despite the opposition to slavery, partly in hope that America would become divided and weak. Initially at least there was a strong connection between anti-Americanism and anti-Englishness particularly as America was defined as an Anglo-Saxon country. Later, however, America was attacked as a migrant nation, a 'jumble of people' and a 'human hodge-podge.'<sup>9</sup>

America came to be defined in terms of its cities, its cold urban spaces and its skyscrapers. America was seen to be full of Yankees who lived in cities and continued to practice the values of their Puritan forebears. There was no appreciation of the extraordinary diversity of American civilisation or of the importance of the small town in American life.

America was defined as modernity taken to excess in the shape of metropolis and cosmopolis. It is easy to see how this connected to the 19th century view of Asia as stagnant and despotic. The French wanted to define themselves as sitting somewhere in the middle, as representing the golden mean between two excesses. When placed side by side, America and Asia combined demonstrate the superiority of Europe.

And the contradictions abounded. The French saw themselves as representing community as opposed to the uprooted nature of American life. But the French also considered themselves as individualistic in comparison to the conformist and 'totalitarianism' of American society!

All of this was fitted into the belief that America was culturally inferior to Europe.

There were some odd aspects to anti-

Americanism. For example, the American woman was regarded with immense suspicion and America viewed as a place where women exerted more power than they should, something seen most recently in Emmanuel Todd's view of the American woman as a castrating and threatening figure.<sup>10</sup>

In the 20th century the nature of anti-Americanism changed. With increasing American dominance and the role of America in the two World Wars there was increasing fear of being in the debt of America. The role of America in saving Europe in both conflicts earned little gratitude from the French intelligentsia. As France declined the focus also shifted from France versus America to Europe versus America.

For many French intellectuals the opposite of America was the Soviet Union that they imagined as democratic and humanistic while America was imagined as 'totalitarian', mechanical, abstract, in a word de-humanised. In fact much anti-American rhetoric is derived from the Communists. Anti-Americanism needs to be put alongside the long love affair that French intellectuals had with the Soviet Union. They fantasised about how both they and Joe Stalin shared the 'revolutionary' ideal, an ideal that Americans, forgetting their gratitude to France, had failed to adopt.

What Roger demonstrates is the extent to which intellectuals can delude themselves and live in a fantasy world that is often more metaphysical or theological in nature rather than an attempt to come to terms with empirical evidence. Their world does not have a lot to do with the reality of how the world really works. It is tied to the psychology of inferiority/superiority and of real and imagined power. Anti-Americanism is in many ways simply the rage of intellectuals awash in the impotence of their feelings of inferiority and inability to exercise any real power.

It is worthwhile placing all of this in some historical context. The original vision of American inferiority was made at a time when European intellectuals could easily look down their noses at the barely developed North American continent. It is sometimes forgotten that the creation of the United States was in many ways a by-product of the struggle for dominance on a world wide scale between Britain and France in the years between 1688 and 1815, a struggle that France ultimately lost. Moreover France not only lost that struggle but was also the midwife for a second Anglo-Saxon power, one that soon discovered that it still had affinities with Britain.

The French Revolution can also be considered a consequence of France's inability to defeat Britain as the chaotic state of French finances (France had become bankrupt on a number of occasions in the 18th century) opened the door for political radicals. Sure, the Revolution led to an efficient military machine under Carnot and ultimately Napoleon, but Napoleon managed to grab defeat out of the jaws of victory. The Anglo-Saxons had triumphed.

France since 1815 has been a declining power in the world. While other European powers in the 19th century underwent massive population increases her birth rate declined. But to compensate for this decline in real power France was compensated with an increase in virtual power, the power of ideas. In the French case, the Revolution was central to the intellectual tradition both for the progressive radicals who claimed its mantle and the conservatives who opposed all that they deemed it to stand for.

French liberals from Montesquieu to Benjamin Constant appreciated the advantages that the new commercial regime provided for Britain. Alexis de Tocqueville had a sympathetic understanding of the fledgling American democracy. But French liberalism withered in the face of France's failure to dominate Europe and by the 20th century French intellectual life was dominated by the nationalists of the extreme right and the socialists of the extreme left.

Germany was the latecomer on the European scene. It resented the established European powers that seemed to have carved up the world amongst them, leaving only the scraps for Germany. Even more than France it forsook liberalism for nationalism. In the face of apparent national impotence German intellectuals attempted to compensate for their lack of real power by their intellectual power. While many of them constructed metaphysical castles in the air they also managed to look down on commerce and commercial values as embodied in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Both French and German intellectuals attempted to compensate for their lack of real power by asserting their superiority in the realm of ideas, a superiority initially over Britain and subsequently over America. This superiority focused on the disparagement of liberalism and commerce.

For Russell Berman anti-Americanism is not really about America at all. It is about Europe and the creation of a European identity out of set of prior national identities.<sup>11</sup> A similar claim could be made about Orientalism. It attempted to define

Europe in relation to Asia at a time when Europe discovered that it was no longer the poor relation of Asia. Both represent different aspects of the process by which European identity was established. Considered together they say a lot about not only European identity but also about European insecurities regarding its place in the world.

In many ways European anti-Americanism is complemented by the dream that Europe is about to become the next great world power, a theme enunciated in a number of recent books. Europe apparently is about to fulfil the Kantian dream of creating a world without war.

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Works that idealise Europe and over inflate European virtues do so invariably by comparing them to the vices of America. Jeremy Rifkin, for example, contrasts the American Dream founded on 'personal material advancement' with the European Dream that emphasises community relationships, cultural diversity and quality of life. He even wants to believe that this 'European dream', founded on post-modernism, will create a 'new history'.<sup>12</sup> This contrast between bad America, and it is bad because it persists in its religious beliefs, and good Europe is just another version of the way in which intellectuals denigrated America while heaping praise on the Soviet Europe.

In a similar vein Stephen Haseler fantasises about not only about the idea of Europe replacing the American dream but also about the possibility of Europe becoming a super-state.<sup>13</sup> What both Rifkin and Haseler fail to discuss is Europe's looming demographic crisis, its unemployment and its military weakness. And following the French rejection of the European Constitution one suspects that such books will soon be consigned rightly to the remainder section of book shops.

Contemporary Europe, I believe, resembles the Southern Song Chinese Empire of the 12th century: civilised, prosperous but militarily weak and dependent for survival on the goodwill of genuinely powerful countries.<sup>14</sup> It was the home of the educated and sophisticated bureaucrat and it is possible that Europe like the Southern Song will suffocate under the burden of its effete bureaucracy.

Both Rifkin and Haseler are obsessed with Europe and barely notice rising countries at the other end of the world, India and China, although Rifkin speculates about the possibility of both of them 'deconstructing' into smaller units.<sup>15</sup> There is a strong element of narcissism at play here. Europe can only establish its identity by proving its superiority over America. European intellectuals are unable to take their decline graciously, unlike *1066 and All That* which recognised that 'America was thus clearly top nation and History came to a .'.<sup>16</sup> As Europe becomes weaker one might expect its anti-Americanism to become even shriller.

European intellectuals now have a dream that they can now restart history. This dream is behind the resurgence of anti-Americanism. Really they should be blushing about the sins of Europe's youth when it was the most violent place on earth and like Cephalus in Plato's Republic enjoying the fact that in old age they have been released from the grip of many mad masters. They have the opportunity to realise something that is rare in human history and that is the ideal of Commonwealth, of enjoying cultural pre-eminence having forsaken the desire to exercise military power.

Unfortunately Europe, or at least its intellectuals, prefers rage to calm in its old age having inflicted postmodernism and deconstruction on the world as an expression of that rage. Anti-Americanism is another expression of this fury. It would be far better if Europe were to emulate Athens and be satisfied with the equivalent of the cultural prestige that Athens enjoyed under the Roman Empire. Then, at least, it might cease the flow of intellectual poison that has helped to fuel anti-Americanism in the Middle East and Latin America, although it must also be recognised that America and American intellectuals have been responsible for a lot of anti-Americanism.

Australian anti-Americanism should be viewed in this light. Many Australians in the 19th century were very positive about America and the model that it provided for a new society like Australia. That all changed after World War I. The change in attitude coincided with the development of the Protectionist mentality. Australia became a country in which nationalism invariably trumped liberalism. America was now perceived as inferior to Europe and especially Britain. In a similar way to Latin America many Australian intellectuals now take their lead from Europe and would like to be considered 'Europeans' rather than 'Americans'. Hence they fawn on French and German intellectuals and

idealise the European Union. And often, far too often, they despise America. There are often good reasons for criticising America and American foreign policy. Australians have a tradition of being fair and reasonable; anti-Americanism is neither fair nor reasonable because it substitutes blind prejudice for the careful evaluation of facts.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Hollander, 'Introduction', in his *Understanding Anti-Americanism: Its origins and impact at home and abroad*, Ivan R Dee, Chicago, 2004, 5.
- <sup>2</sup> Jean-François Revel, *Anti-Americanism*, Trans. Diarmid Cammel, Encounter Books, San Francisco, 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> Hollander, 'Introduction', 14.
- <sup>4</sup> Russell Berman, *Anti-Americanism in Europe: A Cultural Problem*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 2004, 34, 35.
- <sup>5</sup> Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*, Trans. Sharon Bowman, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, xvii.
- <sup>6</sup> Henri Massis, *Defence of the West*, Trans. F S Flint, Faber & Gwyer, London, 1927.
- <sup>7</sup> Michael Radu, 'A Matter of Identity: The Anti-Americanism of Latin American Intellectuals,' in Hollander, *Understanding Anti-Americanism*, 146, 147.
- <sup>8</sup> The following paragraphs are based on Roger, *The American Enemy*
- <sup>9</sup> Roger, *The American Enemy*, 178.
- <sup>10</sup> Roger, *The American Enemy*, 185, Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order*, Trans. C Jon Delogu, Columbia University Press, 2003, 176.
- <sup>11</sup> Berman, *Anti-Americanism in Europe*, 77–8.
- <sup>12</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York, 2004, 3, 7.
- <sup>13</sup> Stephen Haseler, *The New Europe and its Challenge to America*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2004.
- <sup>14</sup> On the Southern Song see F. W. Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1999, Chapter 13.
- <sup>15</sup> Rifkin, *The European Dream*, 359.
- <sup>16</sup> William Carruthers Sellars & Robert Julian Yeatman, *1066 and All That*, Folio Society, London, 1990, 115.