A genealogy of anti-Americanism

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AMERICA’S rise to the status of the world’s premier power, while inspiring much admiration, has also provoked widespread feelings of suspicion and hostility. In a recent and widely discussed book on America, Après L’Empire, credited by many with having influenced the position of the French government on the war in Iraq, Emmanuel Todd writes: “A single threat to global instability weighs on the world today: America, which from a protector has become a predator.” A similar mistrust of American motives was clearly in evidence in the European media’s coverage of the war. To have followed the war on television and in the newspapers in Europe was to have witnessed a different event than that seen by most Americans. During the few days before America’s attack on Baghdad, European commentators displayed a barely concealed glee—almost what the Germans call schadenfreude—at the prospect of American forces being bogged down in a long and difficult engage-
ment. Max Gallo, in the weekly magazine *Le Point*, drew
the typical conclusion about American arrogance and ign-
orchance: "The Americans, carried away by the hubris of
their military power, seemed to have forgotten that not
everything can be handled by the force of arms ... that
peoples have a history, a religion, a country."

Time will tell, of course, if Gallo was even near cor-
rect in his doubts about U.S. policy. But the haste with
which he arrived at such sweeping conclusions leads one
to suspect that they were based far more on a pre-existing
view of America than on an analysis of the situation at
hand. Indeed, they were an expression of one of the most
powerful modes of thought in the world today: anti-Ameri-
canism. According to the French analyst Jean François
Revel, "If you remove anti-Americanism, nothing remains
of French political thought today, either on the Left or on
the Right." Revel might just as well have said the same
thing about German political thought or the thought of
almost any Western European country, where anti-Ameri-
canism reigns as the lingua franca of the intellectual class.

**The symbolic America**

Anti-Americanism rests on the singular idea that some-
thng associated with the United States, something at the
core of American life, is deeply wrong and threatening to
the rest of the world. This idea is certainly nothing new.
Over a half-century ago, the novelist Henry de Montherlant
put the following statement in the mouth of one of his
characters (a journalist): "One nation that manages to lower
intelligence, morality, human quality on nearly all the
surface of the earth, such a thing has never been seen
before in the existence of the planet. I accuse the United
States of being in a permanent state of crime against
humankind." America, from this point of view, is a sym-
bol for all that is grotesque, obscene, monstrous, stultify-
ing, stunted, leveling, deadening, deracinating, deforming,
and rootless.

It is tempting to call anti-Americanism a stereotype or
a prejudice, but it is much more than that. A prejudice, at
least an ordinary one, is a shortcut usually having some
basis in experience that people use to try to grasp reality's complexities. Although often highly erroneous, prejudices have the merit that those holding them will generally revisit and revise their views when confronted with contrary facts. Anti-Americanism, while having some elements of prejudice, has been mostly a creation of "high" thought and philosophy. Some of the greatest European minds of the past two centuries have contributed to its making. The concept of America was built in such a way as to make it almost impervious to refutation by mere facts. The interest of these thinkers was not always with a real country or people, but more often with general ideas of modernity, for which "America" became the name or symbol. Indeed, many who played a chief part in discovering this symbolic America never visited the United States or showed much interest in its actual social and political conditions. The identification of America with a general idea or concept has gone so far as to have given birth to new words that are treated nowadays as normal categories of thought, such as "Americanization" or "Americanism." (By contrast, no one speaks of Venezuelanization or New Zealandism.) Americanization today, for example, is almost the perfect synonym for the general concept of "globalization," differing only in having a slightly more sinister face.

Although anti-Americanism is a construct of European thought, it would be an error to suppose that it has remained confined to its birthplace. On the contrary, over the last century anti-Americanism has spread out over much of the globe, helping, for example, to shape opinion in pre-World War II Japan, where many in the elite had studied German philosophy, and to influence thinking in Latin American and African countries today, where French philosophy carries so much weight. Its influence has been considerable within the Arab world as well. Recent accounts of the intellectual origins of contemporary radical Islamic movements have demonstrated that their views of the West and America by no means derive exclusively from indigenous sources, but have been largely drawn from various currents of Western philosophy. Western thought
is at least in part responsible for the innumerable fatwahs and the countless jihads that have been pronounced against the West. What has been attributed to a "clash of civilizations" has sometimes been no more than a facet of internecine intellectual warfare, conducted with the assistance of mercenary forces recruited from other cultures. It is vitally important that we understand the complex intellectual lineage behind anti-Americanism. Our aim should be to undo the damage it has wrought, while not using it as an excuse to shield this country from all criticism.

**Degeneracy and monstrosity**

Developed over a period of more than two centuries by many diverse thinkers, the concept of America has involved at least five major layers or strata, each of which has influenced those that succeeded it. The initial layer, found in the scientific thought of the mid-eighteenth century, is known as the "degeneracy thesis." It can be conceived of as a kind of prehistory of anti-Americanism, since it occurred mostly before the founding of the United States and referred not just to this country but to all of the New World. The thesis held that, due chiefly to atmospheric conditions, in particular excessive humidity, all living things in the Americas were not only inferior to those found in Europe but also in a condition of decline. An excellent summary of this position appears, quite unexpectedly, in *The Federalist Papers*. In the midst of a political discussion, Publius (Alexander Hamilton) suddenly breaks in with the comment: "Men admired as profound philosophers gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America—that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed awhile in our atmosphere." The oddity of this claim does not belie the fact that it was regarded for a time as cutting-edge science. As such, it merited lengthy responses from two of America's most notable scientific thinkers, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. In Jefferson's case, the better part of his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, consists of a detailed response to the originator of this thesis and the leading biologist of the age, the
Count de Buffon. The interest of Franklin and Jefferson in refuting this thesis went beyond that of pure science to practical politics. Who in Europe would be willing to invest in and support the United States if America were regarded as a dying continent?

Although Buffon was its originator, the most earnest and best known proponent of the degeneracy thesis at the time was Cornelius de Pauw, whom Hamilton cited for the aforementioned claim of canine quietude. Pauw's three-volume study of America, which was widely regarded as the book on the subject, begins with the observation that "it is a great and terrible spectacle to see one half of the globe so disfavored by nature that everything found there is degenerate or monstrous." (The attribution of monstrosity, seemingly in tension with the more general characteristic of contraction, was thought to apply to many of the lower species, such as lizards, snakes, reptiles, and insects, producing a still more sinister picture of America.) It was Pauw who insisted as well on the inevitability of an ongoing and active degeneration in America, a point on which Buffon equivocated: No sooner did the Europeans debark from their ships than they began the process of decline, physical and mental. America, accordingly, would never be able to produce a political system or culture of any merit. Paraphrasing a sentence of Pauw's, the great Encyclopedist Abbé Raynal famously opined: "America has not yet produced a good poet, an able mathematician, one man of genius in a single art or a single science."

Rationalistic illusions

The degeneracy thesis could not in the end stand up to Franklin's and Jefferson's careful empirical criticisms, which demonstrated that nothing, on the surface at least, was degenerating at an unusual rate in America. Nature, as Jefferson so felicitously put it, was the same on both sides of the Atlantic. But what their responses could not entirely refute was the contention that the quality of life and the political system of America were inferior. Precisely this claim lay at the core of the second layer of
anti-American thought, developed by a number of romantic thinkers in the early part of the nineteenth century. These thinkers placed degeneracy—for almost the same language was used—on a new theoretical foundation, arguing that it resulted not from the workings of the physical environment but from the intellectual ideas on which the United States had been founded. Anti-Americanism now became what it has remained ever since, a doctrine applicable exclusively to the United States, and not Canada or Mexico or any other nation of the New World. Many who complain bitterly that the United States has unjustifiably appropriated the label of America have nonetheless gladly allowed that anti-Americanism should refer only to the United States.

The romantics' interpretation of America owed something to the French Revolution, which inspired loathing among conservative philosophers such as Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre. The French Revolution was seen as an attempt to remake constitutions and societies on the basis of abstract and universal principles of nature and science. The United States, as the precursor of the French Revolution, was often implicated in this critique. These philosophers' major claim was that nothing created or fashioned under the guidance of universal principles or with the assistance of rational science—nothing, to use The Federalist's words, constructed chiefly by "reflection and choice"—was solid or could long endure. Joseph de Maistre went so far as to deny the existence of "man" or "human-kind," such as in the Declaration of Independence's statement that "all men are created equal." According to Maistre, "There is no such thing in this world as man; I have seen in my life French, Italians, and Russians ... but as for man, I declare that I have never met one in my life; if he exists, it is entirely without my knowledge." Not only was the Declaration based on flawed premises, but so too was the U.S. Constitution with its proposition that men could establish a new government. "All that is new in [America's] constitution, all that results from common deliberation," Maistre warned, "is the most fragile thing in the world: one could not bring together more symptoms of weakness and decay."
By the early nineteenth century, as the principal surviving society based on an Enlightenment notion of nature, America became the target of many romantic thinkers. Instead of human reason and rational deliberation, romantic thinkers placed their confidence in the organic growth of distinct and separate communities; they put their trust in history. Now, merely by surviving—not to mention by prospering—the United States had refuted the charges of the inherent fragility of societies founded with the aid of reason. But the romantics went on to charge that America's survival was at the cost of everything deep or profound. Nothing constructed on the thin soil of Enlightenment principles could sustain a genuine culture. The poet Nikolaus Lenau, sometimes referred to as the "German Byron," provided the classic summary of the anti-American thought of the romantics: "With the expression Bodenlosigkeit [rootlessness] I think I am able to indicate the general character of all American institutions; what we call Fatherland is here only a property insurance scheme." In other words, there was no real community in America, no real volk. America's culture "had in no sense come up organically from within." There was only a dull materialism: "The American knows nothing; he seeks nothing but money; he has no ideas." Then came Lenau's haunting image, reminiscent of Pauw's picture of America: "the true land of the end, the outer edge of man."

Even America's vaunted freedom was seen by many romantics as an illusion. American society was the very picture of a deadening conformity. The great romantic poet Heinrich Heine gave expression to this sentiment: "Sometimes it comes to my mind/To sail to America/To that pig-pen of Freedom/Inhabited by boors living in equality." America, as Heine put it in his prose writing, was a "gigantic prison of freedom," where the "most extensive of all tyrannies, that of the masses, exercises its crude authority."

The specter of racial impurity

A third stratum of thought in the development of anti-Americanism was the product of racialist theory, first systematically elaborated in the middle of the nineteenth century. To understand today why this thought qualifies as
anti-American requires, of course, allowing oneself to think in the framework of another period. The core of racialist theory was the idea that the various races of man—with race understood to refer not only to the major color groups but to different subgroups such as Aryans, Slavs, Latins, and Jews—are hierarchically arranged in respect to such important qualities as strength, intelligence, and courage. A mixing of the races was said to be either impossible, in the sense that it could not sustain biological fecundity; or, if fecundity was sustainable, that it would result in a leveling of the overall quality of the species, with the higher race being pulled down as a result of mingling with the lower ones.

The individual most responsible for elaborating a complete theory of race was Arthur de Gobineau, known today as the father of racialist thinking. Gobineau’s one-thousand-page opus, *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, focused on the fate of the Aryans, whom he considered the purest and highest of all the races. His account was deeply pessimistic, as he argued that the Aryans were allowing themselves to be bred out of existence in Europe. America became an important focus of his analysis since, as he explained, many at the time championed America as the Great White Hope, the nation in which the Aryans (Anglo-Saxons and Nordics) would reinvigorate their stock and reassert their rightful dominance in the world. In this view, while America’s formal principle was democracy, its real constitution was that of Anglo-Saxon racial hegemony. But Gobineau was convinced that this hope was illusory. The universalistic idea of natural equality in America was in fact promoting a democracy of blood, in which the very idea of “race,” which was meant to be a term of distinction, was vanishing. Europe was dumping its “garbage” races into America, and these had already begun to mix with the Anglo-Saxons.

With notable perspicacity, Gobineau foresaw the Tiger Woods phenomenon. The natural result of the democratic idea, he argued, was amalgamation. America was creating a new “race” of man, the last race, the human race—which was no race at all. Gobineau modeled his system
on Hegel's philosophy of history, substituting blood for Spirit as the active motor of historical movement. The elimination of race marked the end of history. It presented—and here one could, in his view, see America's future—a lamentable spectacle of creatures of the "greatest mediocrity in all fields: mediocrity of physical strength, mediocrity of beauty, mediocrity of intellectual capacities—we could almost say nothingness."

Racialist ideas persisted throughout the nineteenth century and affected many of the social sciences, especially anthropology, a discipline that remains so traumatized by its origins that even today it cannot treat questions of race without indulging in paroxysms of guilt. The extreme of racialist thinking in the early twentieth century served as the foundation of Nazism. Today, the substance of the racialist philosophy is rejected except by a few elements on the extreme right. Yet traces of it have managed to find their way, often unconsciously, into subsequent theorizing about America. The European anti-American Left today has been divided in its criticisms of race in relation to America. Some follow the analysis, though not the evaluations, of Gobineau, arguing that the universal principles in the American experience, when they have not produced the brutal repression of the "Other" (the Indian and African), have fostered blandness and homogeneity. Alternatively, it is sometimes said that the process of amalgamation is not proceeding rapidly enough, especially in regard to African Americans. America is tardy and hypocritical in its promise to eliminate race as a basis of social and political judgment.

**The empire of technology**

The fourth stratum in the construction of anti-Americanism was created during the era of heavy industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. America was now associated with a different kind of deformation, this time in the direction of the gigantesque and the gargantuan. America was seen as the source of the techniques of mass production and of the methods and the mentality that supported this system. Nietzsche was an
early exponent of this view, arguing that America sought the reduction of everything to the calculable in an effort to dominate and enrich: “The breathless haste with which they [the Americans] work—the distinctive vice of the new world—is already beginning ferociously to infect old Europe and is spreading a spiritual emptiness over the continent.” Long in advance of Hollywood movies or rap music, the spread of American culture was likened to a form of disease. Its progress in Europe seemed ineluctable. “The faith of the Americans is becoming the faith of the European as well,” Nietzsche warned.

It was Nietzsche’s disciples, however, who transformed the idea of America into an abstract category. Arthur Moeller Van den Bruck, best known for having popularized the phrase “The Third Reich,” proposed the concept of Amerikanertum (Americanness) which was to be “not geographically but spiritually understood.” Americanness marks “the decisive step by which we make our way from a dependence on the earth to the use of the earth, the step that mechanizes and electrifies inanimate material and makes the elements of the world into agencies of human use.” It embraces a mentality of dominance, use, and exploitation on an ever-expanding scale, or what came to be called the mentality of “technologism” (die Technik): “In America, everything is a block, pragmatism, and the national Taylor system.” Another author, Paul Dehns, entitled an article, significantly, “The Americanization of the World.” Americanization was defined here in the “economic sense” as the “modernization of methods of industry, exchange, and agriculture, as well as all areas of practical life,” and in a wider and more general sense as the “uninterrupted, exclusive and relentless striving after gain, riches and influence.”

Soullessness and rampant consumerism

The fifth and final stratum in the construction of the concept of anti-Americanism—and the one that still most powerfully influences contemporary discourse on America—was the creation of the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Like his predecessors in Germany, Heidegger once offered
a technical or philosophical definition of the concept of Americanism, apart, as it were, from the United States. Americanism is "the still unfolding and not yet full or completed essence of the emerging monstrousness of modern times." But Heidegger in this case clearly was less interested in definitions than in fashioning a symbol—something more vivid and human than "technologism." In a word—and the word was Heidegger's—America was katestrophenhaft, the site of catastrophe.

In his earliest and perhaps best known passages on America, Heidegger in 1935 echoed the prevalent view of Europe being in a "middle" position:

Europe lies today in a great pincer, squeezed between Russia on the one side and America on the other. From a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same, with the same dreary technological frenzy and the same unrestricted organization of the average man.

Even though European thinkers, as the originators of modern science, were largely responsible for this development, Europe, with its pull of tradition, had managed to stop well short of its full implementation. It was in America and Russia that the idea of quantity divorced from quality had taken over and grown, as Heidegger put it, "into a boundless et cetera of indifference and always the sameness." The result in both countries was "an active onslaught that destroys all rank and every world creating impulse.... This is the onslaught of what we call the demonic, in the sense of destructive evil."

America and the Soviet Union comprised, one might say, the axis of evil. But America, in Heidegger's view, represented the greater and more significant threat, as "Bolshevism is only a variant of Americanism." In a kind of overture to the Left after the Second World War, Heidegger spoke of entering into a "dialogue" with Marxism, which was possible because of its sensitivity to the general idea of history. A similar encounter with Americanism was out of the question, as America was without a genuine sense of history. Americanism was "the most dangerous form of boundlessness, because it appears in a middle class way of life mixed with Christianity, and all this in an atmo-
sphere that lacks completely any sense of history.” When
the United States declared war on Germany, Heidegger
wrote: “We know today that the Anglo Saxon world of
Americanism is resolved to destroy Europe.... The entry
of America into this world war is not an entry into his-
tory, but is already the last American act of American
absence of historical sense.”

In creating this symbol of America, Heidegger man-
aged to include within it many of the problems or mala-
dies of modern times, from the rise of instantaneous glo-
bal communication, to an indifference to the environment,
to the reduction of culture to a commodity for consump-
tion. He was especially interested in consumerism, which
he thought was emblematic of the spirit of his age: “Con-
sumption for the sake of consumption is the sole proce-
dure that distinctively characterizes the history of a world
that has become an unworld.... Being today means being
replaceable.” America was the home of this way of think-
ing; it was the very embodiment of the reign of the er-
satz, encouraging the absorption of the unique and au-
thentic into the uniform and the standard. Heidegger cited
a passage from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

Now is emerging from out of America pure undifferentiated
things, mere things of appearance, sham articles.... A house
in the American understanding, an American apple or an
American vine has nothing in common with the house, the
fruit, or the grape that had been adopted in the hopes and
thoughts of our forefathers.

Following Nietzsche, Heidegger depicted America as
an invasive force taking over the soul of Europe, sapping
it of its depth and spirit: “The surrender of the German
essence to Americanism has already gone so far as on
occasion to produce the disastrous effect that Germany
actually feels herself ashamed that her people were once
considered to be ‘the people of poetry and thought.’” Eu-
rope was almost dead, but not quite. It might still put
itself in the position of being ready to receive what
Heidegger called “the Happening,” but only if it were
able to summon the interior strength to reject American-
ism and push it back to the other hemisphere.
Heidegger's political views are commonly deplored today because of his early and open support of Nazism, and many suppose that his influence on subsequent political thought in Europe has been meager. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Heidegger's major ideas were sufficiently protean that with a bit of tinkering they could easily be adopted by the Left. Following the war, Heidegger's thought, shorn of its national socialism but fortified in its anti-Americanism, was embraced by many on the left, often without attribution. Through the writings of thinkers like John-Paul Sartre, "Heideggerianism" was married to communism, and this odd coupling became the core of the intellectual Left in Europe for the next generation. Communist parties, for their own obvious purposes, seized on the weapon of anti-Americanism. They employed it with such frequency and efficacy that it widely came to be thought of as a creation of communism that would vanish if ever communism should cease. The collapse of communism has served, on the contrary, to reveal the true depth and strength of anti-Americanism. Uncoupled from communism, which gave it a certain strength but also placed limits on its appeal, anti-Americanism has worked its way more than ever before into the mainstream of European thought.

Only one claw of the infamous Heideggerian pincer now remains, one clear force threatening Europe. If Europe once found identity in being in "the middle" (or as a "third force"), many argue today that it must find its identity in becoming a "pole of opposition" to America (and the leader of a "second force"). Emmanuel Todd develops this logic in his book, arguing that Europe should put together a new "entente" with Russia and Japan that would serve as a counterforce to the American empire.

The real clash of civilizations?

There is a great need today for both Europeans and Americans to understand the career of this powerful doctrine of anti-Americanism. As long as its influence remains, rational discussion of the practical differences between America and Europe becomes more and more diffi-
between America and Europe becomes more and more difficult. No issue or question is addressed on its merits, and instead commentators tend to reason from conclusions to facts rather than from facts to conclusions. Arguments, no matter how reasonable they appear on the surface, are advanced to promote or confirm the pre-existing concept of America constructed by Heidegger and others. In the past, European political leaders had powerful reasons to resist this approach. Such practical concerns as alliances, the personal ties and contacts forged with American officials, commercial relations, and a fear of communism worked to dampen anti-Americanism. But of late, European leaders have been tempted to use anti-Americanism as an easy way to court favor with parts of the public, especially with intellectual and media elites. This has unfortunately added a new level of legitimacy to the anti-American mindset.

Not only does anti-Americanism make rational discussion impossible, it threatens the idea of a community of interests between Europe and America. Indeed, it threatens the idea of the West itself. According to the most developed views of anti-Americanism, there is no community of interests between the two sides of the Atlantic because America is a different and alien place. To “prove” this point without using such obvious, value-laden terms as “degeneracy” or the “site of catastrophe,” proponents invest differences that exist between Europe and America with a level of significance all out of proportion with their real weight. True, Europeans spend more on the welfare state than do Americans, and Europeans have eliminated capital punishment while many American states still employ it. But to listen to the way in which these facts are discussed, one would think that they add up to different civilizations. This kind of analysis goes so far as to place in question even the commonality of democracy. Since democracy is now unquestionably regarded as a good thing—never mind, of course, that such an attachment to democracy arguably constitutes the most fundamental instance of Americanization—America cannot be a real democracy. And so it is said that American
capitalism makes a mockery of the idea of equality, or that low rates of voting participation disqualify America from being in the camp of democratic states.

**Repairing the breach**

Hardly any reasonable person today would dismiss the seriousness of many of the challenges that have been raised against "modernity." Nor would any reasonable person deny that America, as one of the most modern and the most powerful of nations, has been the effective source of many of the trends of modernity, which therefore inevitably take on an American cast. But it is possible to acknowledge all of this without identifying modernity with a single people or place, as if the problems of modernity were purely American in origin or as if only Europeans, and not Americans, have been struggling with the question of how to deal with them. Anti-Americanism has become the lazy person's way of treating these issues. It allows those using this label to avoid confronting some of the hard questions that their own analysis demands be asked. To provide just one striking example, America is regularly criticized for being too modern (it has, for example, developed "fast food"), except when it is criticized for not being modern enough (a large portion of the population is still religious).

A genuine dialogue between America and Europe will become possible only when Europeans start the long and arduous process of freeing themselves from the grip of anti-Americanism—a process, fortunately, that several courageous European intellectuals have already launched. But it is also important for Americans not to fall into the error of using anti-Americanism as an excuse to ignore all criticisms made of their country. This temptation is to be found far more among conservative intellectuals than among liberals, who have traditionally paid great respect to the arguments of anti-American thinkers. Much recent conservative commentary has been too quick to dismiss challenges to current American strategic thinking and immediately to attribute
them, without sufficient analysis, to the worst elements found in the historical sack of anti-Americanism, from anti-technologism to anti-Semitism. It would be more than ironic—it would be tragic—if in combating anti-Americanism, we were to embrace an ideology of anti-Europeanism.