Reflections on Anti-Americanism

Americans and others find that they cannot "love it or leave it"

In the course of the last quarter century or so the United States has become a nearly universal scapegoat symbol. The United States has been denounced and blamed in countless speeches and editorials, on posters, in radio broadcasts, and over television, as well as in private conversations, for the ills of the world, for the problems of particular societies, and even for the myriad unhappiness of individuals. No country has had more hostile demonstrations in front of its embassies around the world, or more of its libraries and cultural missions abroad ransacked, or more of its policies routinely denounced in the United Nations and other international organizations. More American flags have been burned, in and outside the United States, than the flags of any other country. More American diplomats and politicians traveling abroad have been subjected to abuse and violence. Jacques Barzun observed: "As a nation whose citizens seek popularity more than any other kind of success it is galling (and inexplicable) that we, the United States, are so extensively unpopular" ("The Man in the American Mask," Foreign Affairs, April, 1965).

Anti-Americanism is one of the most significant, widespread, and intellectually neglected cultural, political, and social-psychological phenomena of the last few decades.* Few parts of the world are free from it; it is found in countries officially friendly toward and allied with the United States as well as those officially hostile or neutral; in countries with social-political systems similar to the American as well as in those diametrically opposed; among both developed and underdeveloped nations and on all continents (Australia may be an exception).

Anti-Americanism is many things to many people. Its manifestations range from official policy to highly personal hatreds, from theoretical examination and indictment to "gut reactions," from mass hysteria to reasoned analysis. Moreover it is a global phenomenon, originating in diverse conditions, meeting different needs, and serving different political, economic, ideological, cultural, and psychological purposes. Anti-Americanism, I would suggest, has three major dimensions: the critique of the American political-economic system, of American culture, and of the American character.

In order to understand anti-Americanism one must try to classify its numerous types or varieties. To begin, three major sets of distinctions may be made: First, there is the anti-Americanism of non-Americans, as distinct from the anti-Americanism of Americans. Second, anti-Americanism may be official or unofficial; that is, anti-Americanism as a government policy and fostered by official propaganda (in the Soviet Union or Cuba), and anti-Americanism as a spontaneous impulse independent of governmental encouragement and propaganda. A third major distinction may be made between political and cultural anti-Americanism, which at times appear separately.

Further distinctions could be made between the anti-Americanism of intellectuals (American or other) and the anti-Americanism prevalent among other social strata; between the anti-Americanism of Western Euro-

*Anti-Americanism, as far as I know, has no historians; I cannot refer to any authoritative works on the subject. It is in itself interesting why so little has been written, in an analytical, explanatory vein about anti-Americanism, and why so few intellectuals and social scientists have been puzzled by it, and sought to account for it. Evidently Americans as well as non-Americans have come to take it for granted by now. This is all the more thought-provoking, since before the middle of this century and through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the global image of the United States (to the extent that such a thing existed) was rather positive.
Americanism in Our Times

by Paul Hollander

America. By any standard of international or historical comparison, more is known about the United States around the world than about any other country in our times or in the past. That much of this information is shallow or stereotyped contributes to the “image problem.” Thus a precondition of anti-Americanism is publicity: Certain things have to be widely known in order to be denounced and criticized. Even misperception and distortion require information. Unknown lands or social systems cannot be denounced or become targets of hostility. A combination of distance and misinformation or stereotyped information is an ideal blend to invite hostility toward a country or culture. For much of the world the United States is distant in reality but familiar in some of its characteristics because of the mass media and the penetration of some of the more questionable cultural products of American society into the cultural market places of many countries.

2. Affluence. The wealth of American society, in an exaggerated or realistic version, and the affluence of so many individual Americans is well known around the globe. It invites many negative responses, including simple envy, sour-grapes critiques of “soulless American materialism,” and cries of social injustice (in this perspective the United States becomes a symbol of global inequality, of the maldistribution of resources and material advantages). It is among the paradoxes of worldwide anti-Americanism, and obviously related to the appeal of American material comforts (so often denounced), that millions of people around the world try to get into the United States.

3. Pervasive global cultural presence. American movies, magazines, and TV programs reach not only into Canada, Mexico, and Western Europe but also into much of the Third World (unless Communist-controlled and therefore determined to stem the tide of subversive entertainment). Such cultural presence not only contributes to the global awareness of the United States and of American mass culture and its material products, it also offends the upholders of indigenous tradition and culture and the bearers of elite cultural values everywhere. Nor is the self-portrait projected by the American mass media particularly flattering. While the worldwide popularity of these American cultural offerings is undeniable, this very popularity generates further condemnation of the perniciousness of American mass culture by local intellectuals, opinion leaders, and guardians of indigenous traditions.

The global American cultural presence is supplemented by the physical presence and high visibility of Americans in many parts of the world. Probably no other country in history has sent forth as many travelers (mostly tourists) as the United States. Notwithstanding the economic benefits of such tourism, the large-scale physical presence of Americans in places like Western Europe, the Caribbean, and Latin America has not increased the fund of goodwill toward things American. The fault does not lie with the travelers. In few parts of

peans and of Latin Americans—two fairly distinct regional varieties—or, more generally, between those in industrially developed and underdeveloped countries. Looking to its ideological roots, one might also distinguish between anti-Americanism rooted in some version of Marxism-Leninism (which places the United States in the role of the archimperialist country and fountainhead of capitalism) and that which originates in some conservative or traditional belief that looks upon the United States and what it stands for as the most perniciously effective carrier of modernization and change. In the latter critique, Americanization brings in its wake the homogenization of cultural diversity, impoverishment in the spiritual realm, and the sundering of traditional social bonds.

Let me suggest five major attributes of the United States that attract worldwide animosity and make America the most likely candidate for becoming a near universal scapegoat symbol.

1. Too much is known about the United States. No society can escape criticism when there is as much information disseminated about it as there is about
the world, if any, do the “natives” like recurring invasions by well-heeled strangers. There are three major images of the traveling American, and none is calculated to win minds and hearts abroad: the American tourist of the conducted tours shepherded from bus to cathedral; the wealthier individual buying up antiques or real estate and driving up local prices; or the disheveled hippie invader bedding down in a sleeping bag near the old fountains in the center of town. These stereotypes of the traveling American tend to combine with those disseminated by American popular culture and mass media, thus intensifying the distaste for American culture and styles of life.

4. The anti-Americanism of Americans. Much of the global anti-Americanism feeds on and reflects the anti-Americanism of Americans. People do not think well of those who do not think well of themselves. A large proportion of American intellectuals and opinion leaders do not think well of their country, its social and political system or cultural values. Few foreigners fail to be impressed by the American propensity to guilt, self-criticism, and lack of collective self-confidence.

5. The combination of great power with the weakened will to use it. Until recently the United States was the unrivaled military superpower of the world. American science, technology, and industry created an awesome military machine, and yet all this power, all the nuclear submarines, missiles, and jet bombers, failed to achieve America’s political objectives. Soviet influence was not contained or the Iron Curtain rolled back or Cuba prevented from becoming a Soviet satellite (and an aspiring exporter of revolution in Latin America). Other Third World countries were not deterred from siding with the USSR (or China) in and outside the United Nations, nor was the global drift toward left-wing authoritarian and anti-American regimes halted. The list of unaccomplished American foreign policy goals could be extended. The most notable failure of military might was, of course, Indochina, with both Vietnam and Cambodia becoming Communist-dominated, despite the extended and profligate use of American military power. The image of the ineffectual bully emerged in the wake of the Vietnam fiasco. America appears as the big, over the efficiency of the System in forestalling beneficial social change. (The latter proposition was expounded at some length in Marcuse’s One Dimensional Man.) Mailer contrasted the crucial defects of American society with revolutionary Cuba:

In Cuba hatred runs over into the love of blood; in America all too few blows are struck into flesh. We kill the spirit here, we are experts at that. We use psychic bullets and kill each other cell by cell.

We live in a country very different from Cuba. We have had a tyranny here, but it did not have the features of Batista; it was a tyranny one breathed but could not define; it was felt as no more than a slow deadening of the best of our possibilities, a tension we could not name which was the sum of our frustrations. We all knew that the best of us used up our memories by-their idealism sank into apathy. By law we had a secret police, our corporations, our empty politicians, our clergyman, our editors, our cold frightened bewildered bullies who govern a machine made out of people they no longer understand, you were giving us new blows to fight our mass communications, our police, our secret police, our corporations, our empty politicians, our clergyman, our editors, our cold frightened bewildered bullies.

Let us examine first the anti-Americanism of Americans. In many ways the anti-Americanism of Americans is the prototype and fountainhead of all other forms of anti-Americanism. From American anti-Americanism others can borrow themes, arguments, or illustrative material for any particular criticism or attack on the American political-economic system, culture, and personality. Needless to say, the anti-Americanism of Americans, like anti-Americanism in general, is not a systematic ideology or clearly elaborated social criticism. It does partake of the latter, but even more it is an impulse, an emotion, a set of beliefs. In particular the anti-Americanism of Americans—articulated by estranged intellectuals and segments of the upper and middle classes—rests on the agonized belief that contemporary American society is possibly the most evil society ever known in history—a belief highly congenial with the unfamiliarity with the major facts of history that comes so naturally to Americans of all persuasions.

The conviction about the exceptionally unjust and peculiarly oppressive nature of the United States has been held and elaborated by people like Herbert Marcuse, Noam Chomsky, Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, Daniel Berrigan, William Kunstler, and many others in the last two decades. The perceptions of the most vocal and well-known American critics of American society have much in common. A few examples make the point.

For Mailer, as for many other critics, the uniquely deadening qualities of American life were the most hateful, a viewpoint that resembles Marcuse’s despair over the efficiency of the System in forestalling beneficial social change. (The latter proposition was expounded at some length in Marcuse’s One Dimensional Man.) Mailer contrasted the crucial defects of American society with revolutionary Cuba:

A somewhat similar vision informs the dark observations of anthropologist Jules Henry about American culture, suggestively entitled Culture Against Man (1965): “...when fear penetrates all aspects of culture and becomes a dominant driving force, the culture freezes in fixed attitudes of attack and defense, all cultural life suffers, and the Self nearly dies in the cold.”

Most American critics of American life and culture had no difficulty linking inauthenticity, depersonalization, and anxiety (to name only a few ills of American society) with technology. In fact, the frequent associa-
tion of the United States with inhuman, wasteful, or outright destructive technology has been a potent source of anti-Americanism among Americans more than non-Americans. This has been the case particularly in the contexts of the Vietnam war, the assault on the physical environment, and profligate domestic consumption patterns.

Marcuse considered technology so deeply implicated even in domestic repression that he felt that automobiles too served subtle repressive functions by allowing workers submerged in debilitating drudgery to sublimate their aggression by getting behind the wheel: "If this aggressiveness were not sublimated in the speed and power of the automobile it might be directed against the dominant powers" ("Marcuse Defines His New Left Line," *New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 1968).

What seemed to enrage the most embittered American critics of the United States—and gave their critiques the quality we are trying to convey here—was what they perceived to be the peculiarly insidious combination of repression, injustice, and corruption, on the one hand, with a certain flexibility, benevolence, and tolerance on the other. Several widely used concepts introduced by the critics—such as "welfare-warfare state" (Chomsky), or "repressive tolerance" (Marcuse), "corporate liberalism" (?)—reflect this combination of something desirable with something abhorrent. Hence the critics' alarm over the possibility that this system remains capable of legitimating itself and their apprehension that its vices are not sufficiently apparent to the masses wallowing in false consciousness or to the technocrats who are bought off by shares of power and prestige. (It was precisely such concerns on the part of the System would be provoked into becoming more intolantly repressive.)

It is the firm belief in the uniquely evil (or distasteful) character of American society and culture that distinguishes the American critic of American society from the native critics of other Western societies, of which more below. The anti-Americanism of Americans may be considered a partially diffuse, intense, and embittered form of alienation, often suffused with a sense of personal injury, shame, and despair. It differs significantly from the attitudes of the social critics of other nations, with the possible exception of the guilt feelings of many post World War II Germans.* Nobody calls an alienated Frenchman anti-French (or Italians anti-Italian or Britons anti-British). Estrangement and social criticism in these and other societies do not carry the same flavor as they do in the United States. For one thing, the alienated Frenchman rarely leaves France, either on vacation, in self-exile, or as an emigrant. Nor will he despise French food, or movies, or the design of French cars, or the manners of his fellow countrymen. In short, his estrangement is more limited, more specific, and less of a cultural and personal affair. One cannot detect in the alienated Frenchman (or Italian or Briton) the uncertainties, the unease, the guilt-ridden qualities discernible in so many alienated Americans.** The anti-American Americans often insist that there is something uniquely and basically wrong, not only with the American social-political system, but also with the American people, with their tastes, values, habits, consumption patterns, and ways of life. To the extent that the anti-Americanism of Americans is primarily an attribute of American intellectuals, these attitudes may reflect the long-standing problems of American intellectuals in a business society, the traditions of their relative social isolation, and their elitist condescension toward those more brutally immersed in the "cash nexus" of daily life. There may also be a cultural lag that explains the lingering resentments of intellectuals about their limited recognition in society at large—a state of affairs that no longer exists. Certainly there are some uniquely American social and historical conditions that predispose the American intellectual to the attitudes sketched here.

Consider the confessions of a singularly estranged and critical group of Americans, admirers of Castro's Cuba, the members of the Venceremos Brigade who volunteered to cut sugar cane in Cuba:***

White people [i.e., most members of the Venceremos brigade]... came to Cuba with only the most fragile sense of themselves as people... they were often paralyzed with shame and despair over the values which a competitive, individualistic and racist middle class culture had instilled in them.

Or

Amerika [sic] does a lot of ugly things to people. It puts walls between them.... Amerika tries to make pieces of everything.... Not long ago I was in pieces. All the experiences of my life had conspired to fragment my understanding.... I suffered from the prime American problem: middle class consciousness, the inability to feel.

Or

I can fight the system because I truly hate it. I hate how it has warped the people of our country. How it tries to warp me and everyone it can. It lives off the weakness that all people have and perpetuates those

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*However such feelings of guilt had far less abundant public expression than the anti-Americanism of Americans.

**Or equivalents of such sentiments: "...We, the American people—We: affluent, corrupt, dehumanized, brutalized, chauvinistic, racist, white America—we share the guilt for U.S. policy and for the atrocities...." (Advertisement in the *New York Times* News of the Week, November 30, 1969). Along these lines it may not be farfetched to suggest that if the white race is the cancer of mankind, as Susan Sontag suggested in her oft-cited statement, she would presumably regard the United States the cancer of the white race.

***Members of the Venceremos Brigade are not exactly intellectuals, although they partake of certain values and attitudes that define intellectuals, namely, the propensity to social criticism and a concern with ideas and social justice. They were mostly college or graduate school students or dropouts from academia and may best be considered aspiring or marginal intellectuals. I would guess that a large portion of them have since completed their studies and pursue today some professional or middle-class occupation.
weaknesses. Amerika will rip you up—tear your guts apart from the inside....

What is one to make of such hatred especially on the part of people—young, white, middle and upper middle-class college students or drop-outs—who, in no objective, perceptible sense have been deprived, disadvantaged, or victimized by the system? This of course is the familiar problem of the upper-class rebel, except that in contemporary America there has been a striking and highly standardized expansion of the rebellious, alienated stance. It may be more than conjecture to suggest that there is a great deal of personal unhappiness and anguish behind such strident and sweeping rejections of America.

How is one to account for the savage hostility of such a gentle servant of God as Daniel Berrigan (no inexperienced youth), who calls Americans “savages of the West,” “joyless” inhabitants of a “prison society”? Berrigan was convinced of the “genocidal intent and execution...beyond any reasonable doubt” of the bombings in Vietnam and considered “the American ghetto and the Hanoi ‘operation’...a single enterprise...total war in both cases” (Night Flight to Hanoi, 1968). To be sure, some of this bitterness was the product of the Vietnam war and of the methods used by the American forces. Yet his other claims and linkages—of genocide and domestic racial discrimination and the Vietnam war, of “...disease and malnutrition [being] a systematic method of destruction of minority peoples in our ghettos,” “bespeak an implacable hatred of American society. It reflects the constant search for human ill-will and malevolence without which the passionate rejection of any social-political system is incomplete. In the minds of such American anti-Americans everything that is bad has to be systematic, deliberate, and interconnected. Vietnam, race relations, poverty, environmental problems, bad TV programs, fins on the cars, plastic on the kitchen table—all add up to a subtly repressive (or “repressively tolerant”) conspiracy of nameless, faceless, joyless, death-dealing men at the top, members of the Establishment, of the monopoly-capitalist, liberal-fascist-corporate system.

Tom Wolfe’s parody of the social criticism of American intellectuals captures many of the main themes and emotional tones of the phenomenon:

“A small group of nameless, faceless men”...now dominates American life. In America a man’s home is not his castle but merely “a gigantic listening device with a mortgage”—a reference to eavesdropping by the FBI and CIA. America’s foreign policy has been and continues to be based upon war, assassination, bribery, genocide, and the sabotage of democratic governments. “The new McCarthyism”...is already upon us. Following a brief charade of free speech the “gagging of the press” has resumed. Racism in America has not diminished; it is merely more subtle now. The gulf between rich and poor widens daily, creating “permanent ghetto-colonial populations.” The decline in economic growth is causing a crisis of capitalism, which will lead shortly to authoritarian rule and to a new America in which everyone waits, in horror, for the knock on the door in the dead of the night, the descent of the knout on the nape of the neck [Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Wine, 1976].

The centerpiece of American anti-Americanism in our times is not the detailed, specific social criticism (such as one might have encountered among the alienated in the 1930’s) but the more general claim that the social system, besides being unjust, exploitative, oppressive, fascistic, etc., deforms and cripples the individual personality. It prevents people from experiencing authentic feelings, joy, spontaneity, good human fellowship. To be sure, this basic charge is associated with the by now familiar reproaches against American society: that it is overcommercialized, materialistic, inauthentic, leveling/homogenizing (but, for other critics, also elitist), wasteful, overly individualistic, overbureaucratized; that it misuses technology, drives wedges between people, polices the whole world, mistreats the poor, ransacks the Third World, and of course is racist to the core. In short, in the old New Left parlance, the United States is “the belly of the monster” (of world capitalism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and racism).

Anti-Americanism in the Third World is another major species of the phenomenon. In many instances—for example, in India and some African countries—it is more a matter of official, or semi-official policy, or an attitude of élite groups, than a widespread, mass phenomenon. Latin America may be a special case in the Third World, since it has been most exposed to American economic, political, and cultural influences, and consequently anti-American resentment may go beyond the ranks of intellectuals and other élites. In general, the United States stands accused in the Third World of economic domination or of neglect and indifference, or of support for the neocolonialism of European powers. Also the view has gained ground in Third World countries that the Western world, the United States in particular, is morally bound to provide reparation or restitution for the ills of colonialism and past exploitation, that an international redistribution of wealth is necessary, and the wealth of the United States (and other Western countries) is illegitimate. Hence American aid is both demanded and resented. As the richest of the “have” nations, there is little hope for the United States to overcome this type of hostility, which is intensified by well-known examples of American wastefulness and depletion of environmental resources. Hostility toward the United States also feeds on a somewhat outdated conception of race relations in the United States and an even more archaic image of the alignment of the countries of the world. In this perspective the protagonists are frozen into old roles: The United States and its antagonists are frozen into old roles: The United States and the oil-rich Arab countries retain their places in the impoverished Third World as far as their ideological-political alignments and continued modest contributions to the U.N. budget are concerned.

Poor countries, more than rich ones, need scapegoats to account for their unhappy situation. If the former
colonial powers become less and less plausible targets of blame with the passage of time—though a good try is still being made from time to time—the United States, because it is the richest, most powerful white nation (often allied with the former colonial powers), irresistibly becomes the prime candidate for scapegoating.

Anti-Americanism in Western Europe is more cultural than political. Although it rests on the pervasive American cultural and physical presence, most Western Europeans have no serious objections to American troops or political ties. Here too anti-Americanism is preeminent among intellectuals and other élite groups, both Marxist and conservative, who fear the erosion of local cultural values and standards (or business interests). Marxist intellectuals all over the world are anti-American for obvious reasons: The United States is the keystone of what is left of the worldwide system of capitalism. The anti-Americanism of some European intellectuals, such as the late Bertrand Russell or J.P. Sartre, has been just as intense and obsessive as that of their American counterparts. Insofar as there is anti-Americanism in Eastern Europe, it is due to a sense of let down: The United States did not live up to the political hopes and expectations of East European nations, either on a global scale or in relation to their particular political fates.

It should not be thought that anti-Americanism is a totally irrational phenomenon, a form of scapegoating or prejudice without any foundation. However, most of the American vices, whether in foreign policy, in the national character, or in cultural orientation, are neither so serious nor so unique as to provide the kind of condemnation and revulsion we have witnessed.

Consider the following inventory of unattractive American traits as seen by foreigners, according to an American social critic of impeccable credentials, Dwight MacDonald:

Americans appear to other nations to be at once gross and sentimental, immature and tough, uncultivated and hypocritical, shrewd about small things and stupid about big things. In these antimonies fatally appears our lack of style [Discriminations, 1974].

While the charge of "lack of style" has haunted generations of American intellectuals (and all social classes above the lower ones), it is obviously not a charge to warrant murderous indignation. But there is more to this criticism than meets the eye. The lack of style is not merely a matter of taste, or a problem of diminished aesthetic sensibilities. The lack of style, a surface phenomenon, points to deeper connections: to the lack of values, or the confusion of values. I suspect that what many foreigners despise and dislike about American society, or about individual Americans, is the confused groping for a style or, in between, for values and standards. The American spectacle of a moral and aesthetic free-for-all, of the astonishing ups and downs of moral (and philosophical-ideological) fashions, the rapid switches from Leninism to vegetarianism, from thoughtless wastefulness to obsessive conservation, from preoccupation with issues of foreign policy to fixation on the domestic, from singing the praise of monogamy to acclaiming open marriage—the American "openness to change"—is what often disturbs, shocks, or antagonizes the outside observer most. It is not self-evident why this should be the case, since openness to change is associated with flexibility, innovation, initiative, an open mind, and many other good things. Yet there is a thin line between "openness to change," on the one hand, and suggestibility, inner uncertainty, inability to discriminate, and moral confusion, on the other.

I believe this moral-ethical (and aesthetic) confusion is the attribute of Americans that, in the final analysis, may provoke the greatest hostility, or at least ambivalence, everywhere. This is so, I believe, because in a sense these attitudes are the shape of things to come. If one can speak of "Americanization" in various parts of the world, it is, among other things, the export of confusion, of high and easily frustrated expectations, ethical relativism, nonmaterial insecurity, forms of spiritual malaise. All these factors are associated with secularization and the decline of any form of traditional values and social organization. In this field, as in many others, the United States has the unquestioned lead.

The "First New Nation" image (the title of S.M. Lipset's book published in 1963) continues to haunt Americans and non-Americans alike. This "first new nation" was founded—and continued to live on and off—what Daniel Boorstin called "extravagant expectations." In few countries of the world is there a comparable awareness of social ideals, or of ceremonial values, as in the United States. Eighteenth-century values and ideals survive with amazing vitality in the minds of many Americans, who keep judging their society (and perhaps their personal selves as well) in the light of such values. In few parts of the world, and rarely in history, has there been such a keen awareness of and concern with the gaps between ideal and actual, theory and practice, collective aspirations and their realization. This may account for the peculiarly bitter and self-hating quality of the anti-Americanism of Americans, and especially of American intellectuals. However, not even the most bitter critics of the United States consider American culture and society a total, unmitigated failure.* Even the Marxist critics must and do admit that American capitalism created the most productive economic machine that has ever existed. Perhaps it is this curious mixture of success and failure, of partially realized high ideals, that affronts and enrages—and unites—the anti-Americans of the world. You cannot completely write off the United States, or give up on it, but neither can you endorse it wholeheartedly. Emotionally speaking, the admonition to "love it or leave it" poses an impossible choice.

*For some of its critics America redeems itself, in part, by allowing a small élite of aesthetes and intellectuals the gratifications of the spirit. Susan Sontag has written: "I live in an unethical society that coagens the sensibilities and thwarts the capacities for goodness of most people but makes available for minority consumption an astonishing array of intellectual and aesthetic pleasures" (Trip to Hanoi, 1968).