

Anti-Americanism and Ambivalence: Remarks on an Ideology in Historical Transformation

Michael Werz

The European Reader grasps these tangible facts [of politics], and, judging them as though they existed under European conditions, draws from them conclusions disparaging to the country and the people. What he probably fails to do . . . is to realize the existence in the American people of a reserve of force and patriotism more than sufficient to sweep away all the evils that are now tolerated, and to make the politics worthy of its material grandeur and of the private virtues of its inhabitants. America excites an admiration which must be felt upon the spot to be understood.

— James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 1881

America is still admired, respected and emulated. But the keen interest in all things American today takes many different forms, including many that are negative and hateful. In truth, many of the most starkly opposed patterns of interpreting the US have something in common that points to more than the boosterism or rejection of the so-called “American life-style.” America, their object of desire or resentment, serves as an almost universal point of reference in regard to how the world perceives political conflict, economic modernization, and the very name itself can express both an engagement with and a reification of the complex cultural and social traditions that comprise modern life.¹

Anti-Americanism is often treated as if it was a uniform reaction toward some undefined but concrete experience. In reality the phenomenon is only understandable if analyzed against the background of the dual break in October 1989 and the attacks in 2001, two events which together

1. For recent discussion of anti-Americanism, see, among many others, Judy Colp Rubin and Barry Rubin, *Hating America: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Andy Markovits, *Amerika Dich haßt sich's besser* (Berlin: Konkret, 2004), Dan Diner, *Feindbild Amerika* (Munich: Propylaen, 2002).

mark the end of the short 20th century and the beginning of the present era. Furthermore, anti-Americanism must be developed as a concept which entails and necessitates social and historical particularity in order to be anything but a form of reaction. This is why the following essay mainly focuses on the German case. Here, an astonishing ambivalence toward the US developed in 2001 and 2002, which is as paradoxical as it is a decidedly new occurrence. The contradictory reactions of German society and its most transatlantic post-war government can only be fully understood if the September attacks in New York are connected to its corresponding German time stamp: 9/11 cannot be adequately grasped without 11/9 — with November 9, 1989, when the Berlin wall collapsed and a new era irrevocably began. Contemporary forms of anti-Americanism are not identical with older forms of anti-Americanism: though there are some continuities, they receive their energy from very different sources than the resentment towards the US that was prevalent in the Germany almost one hundred years ago.

Back then, the most intellectually pronounced of such debates were initiated during the first decade of the 20th century, after renowned European social scientists such as Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Joseph Schumpeter, following on the European encounter with America occasioned for many by the St. Louis World's Exposition in 1904, argued that the mode of modernization witnessed in America would soon be coming to Europe. Though these debates tended in many ways to underestimate the power of the tremendous social change then underway, they were absolutely correct in establishing the necessarily transatlantic character of modern social observation.²

The US itself had little to do with the resentment and rejection that it has generated on the European continent. Rather, America has repeatedly served as a metaphor of change and as an unacknowledged comparison case, through which Europeans interpret occurrences with no historical precedence. During the era of rapid industrialization, massively growing metropolitan cities, chauvinist nationalism, and politicized cultural differences among the European peoples, the gaze across the ocean was often the constitutive, if unacknowledged historical gesture. The US had recently appeared on the world stage as a serious actor, home of a rival, more advanced system of Western-style modernization. The future had already commenced on the other side of the ocean: Americans had abandoned the folkways, mores, and customs of traditional society, even as,

2. See Georg Kamphausen, *Die Erfindung Amerikas in der Kulturkritik der Generation von 1890* (Weilerswist: Velbrueck Wissenschaft, 2002).

paradoxically, first-generation American sociologists like William Graham Sumner turned to anthropological rather sociological terms to describe this change. The heterogeneous and unprecedented context in which a nation of nations had been established became the focus of distorted perceptions within the emerging mass societies of Western Europe.

The self-declared country of the free and the brave readily served as a projection screen upon which could be cast feelings of European shortcoming and fears of losing traditional benchmarks in a rapidly transforming society. European attempts to “reject” America’s path into the twentieth century can only poorly be understood in terms of the concept of divergent paths toward cultural modernity; far more commonly, it was merely a weak form of historical consciousness, a largely European impulse to recapture a vision of clarity, hierarchy, and cultural assuredness that the European past seemed to offer. Thus, anti-Americanism established itself as a negation of the idea of a New World that lacked aristocratic rituals and authoritarian rule; it was the attempt to repatriate modernity into a symbolic America, to map the ills of contemporary society onto an imagined geographic point of origin. Modernity of course has no national origin, it embodies, rather, an internationalized and displaced subjectivity in its historically revolutionary character. The power of the concept of modernity to symbolize this social abstraction meant that modernity in its anti-American form began to thrive during the first two decades of the 20th century, when modernization processes were being acutely felt in Europe. As a particularly modern ideology it was accomplishing sociological miracles, claiming to explain and translate experiences of increasingly abstract and alienated societies into concrete and local terms. Thanks to the appearance of a geographical locus to modernity, a surplus of anger and fear could be projected onto the US, the home of barbaric, uncultured capitalism. Five centuries of shared history were reified into an abstract rejection of the past: the Atlantic ocean came to symbolize the divide between a bad modernity and an idealized present. The philosopher Martin Heidegger reflected the depth of such distorted worldviews when he lamented, “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.’”³ For him and many others the development of modern mass culture on the West

3. Quoted in James W. Ceaser, “A Genealogy of Anti-Americanism,” in *Public Interest* 152 (July 2003), p. 14.

Coast of the US epitomized all that was wrong with modernity.

It is interesting that “Hollywood” is one of the touchstones for the expression of resentment vis à vis the US. But even in the early years of movie mass culture during the 1920s, the audience in the US was diverse enough to force editors, writers, and producers to invent cosmopolitan techniques for reaching out to the largest possible crowd of readers, listeners, and viewers. Hollywood was not at all an agency of worldwide manipulation, but rather the diverse American audience anticipating the global audience. Cultural commodities, which were successful in a country “where custom has had no time to solidify,”⁴ were also suited for the world beyond the two oceans. Many contemporary cultural products did not even originate in the US, but were only liberated from their national origin in Hollywood and broadcast back into the world’s regions in a generalized version. This holds true for the metamorphosis of European working class dishes into fast food as an expression of eternal time-compulsion; and it holds true for the case for Walt Disney, who found the example for his Anaheim Park in Copenhagen’s Tivoli. The same happened with Stravinsky’s polyrhythmic music, which was inspired by and in turn found its influence in the new rhythms of jazz, or the achievement of the Bauhaus architects, which could be realized in the US by means of advanced steel construction. In Hollywood this fusion was more intense than in other places; after all, Hollywood was itself a community of international émigrés, with Charlie Chaplin as its first superstar. Because it produced such universally palatable commodities, Hollywood remained the most important cipher for cultural modernization throughout the 20th century.

9/11 and the New Mental World Order

Today, modern mass culture has penetrated almost every society and has created a simultaneity of individual experiences. As a result, the cultural anti-Americanism of the 1920’s is quite distinct from contemporary ambivalence toward the US in Europe, and it should not be conflated with current nihilistic rebellions that qualify themselves as Muslim and anti-Western. These differences are important, for ambivalence toward the US is interwoven with justified criticism, and is not identical with the paranoid worldview that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer characterized as the “dark side of knowing and perception.” Only a few weeks after the

4. Donald Young, *American Minority Peoples* (New York, 1932), p. 55. Also see Richard Pells, *From Modernism to the Movies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, one could find on display the astonishing coldness of modern men and women. From Mexico to Europe to Asia, a widespread rationalization set in, mostly led by public and private intellectuals that was sometimes amplified into covert malicious joy. America, the source of violence and all ills, finally had received its comeuppance for its world historical power. Such authoritarian identifications were all too common; however, they represent only part of the story and thus have to be carefully deciphered.

The September 11 attacks and subsequent warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq only amplified and deepened a new ideological constellation that did not develop in a historical vacuum but was a knee-jerk reaction to the political and cultural disintegration of the Eastern hemisphere after 1990. With the end of the Soviet Union even the most unattractive alternative to Western-style modernization had disappeared. Not only did the USSR evaporate as a superpower, but the era of superpowers itself ended. The emerging political vacuum was filled with modern ideologies and distorted perceptions of a new world that had lost the stabilizing point of reference assured by the threat of mutual annihilation. And with no more points of orientation in sight, “America” became the cipher that granted sense (and power) to a senseless, unordered world. Although it does not make much sense to speak of the “sole remaining superpower,” the Cold War vocabulary seems to not allow a more differentiated expression, and the mindless notion of a new imperialism is even less adequate. Lonely superpowers are not as super as they themselves think they are, which is currently being proven in a number of places around the globe. The very concept of an all-encompassing power structure was inextricably tied to the nuclear confrontation of the bipolar age, and with the withering of that epoch the concept has lost its significance.

This does not imply that such notions cannot outlive their reality. After the fall of state socialism, the rhetoric of the American hyperpower multiplied, and all visions of power, authority, and control were projected onto the US. In the imagination of many people the year 1990 provided a *déjà vu* of the 1920’s and of 1945, when the historical and social divergence between a traditional and an advanced capitalist society “froze into geographic difference — between Europe and the United States.”⁵ Such a simple and apparently reassuring set of oppositions made as little sense in 1990 as they did earlier in the century or in the previous one. Again, it is

5. Detlev Claussen, “Die amerikanische Erfahrung der Kritischen Theoretiker,” in *Keine Kritische Theorie ohne Amerika* (Frankfurt/Main: Neue Kritik, 2000), p. 29.

the shared historical and geographical context that configures anti-Americanism: as a true modern ideology it changes constantly, and therefore cannot be analyzed statically. To understand such a complex phenomenon of contemporary consciousness, one must use the historical differences as a source of remembering. The asynchrony of economic and cultural developments within Western societies allows to interpret expressions of ambivalence, resentment, and hatred vis-à-vis “America” as indicators of social and political change. It also proves the continuing entanglement of the one world in which individuals use very common points of reference.

1989-90 as the Return of Uncertainty

The ongoing political impact of the changes that occurred after the historical disruption of 1990 is reflected in the fact that the image of the cold war superpower of the US became the cipher “America.” The latter inherited all the attributes of the former, but not nearly as much of its world structuring capacity. Without its necessary counterpart, the Soviet Empire, political orientation was lost, and the cemented convictions of the Cold War — East *versus* West, communist *versus* liberal — coalesced into something even more metaphysical. Since no one could be certain which principles would arrange the new, globalized world, it became a lot more important how people *imagined* it was structured.

The lack of stability and clarity after 1990 led to the simultaneous emergence of a new, distinctly modern piety in many parts of the world. This encompasses not only radical Islam, but Protestant fundamentalism in the US; renewed Orthodoxy and Catholicism in Eastern Europe, which is often combined with ethnic identifications; Hindu radicalism in India; or the Falun Gong in China. In Western Europe the new consciousness was less often expressed in overt religious but in cultural and nationalist forms. Seemingly old national stereotypes were revived, often in negative reference to the US, which as a unique nation of nations and locus of successful diversity served as an ideological antipode.

After 1990, in many political discussions about the future of modern societies people referred to pre-modern forms of community as if all the answers lay in the past. The US, the only society that could not provide for an illusion of a past based on visions of ethnic tradition or on homogeneous self-certainty, became the natural cipher of negative self-definition: it was easy to invent meaning in times of disorientation by defining one’s own national aspirations against the experience of modernity; “America” was the cipher, the US the real existing power against which

such identifications could easily be projected.

Emmanuel Todd's reckless statement that "a single threat to global instability weights on the world today: America, which from a protector has become a predator,"⁶ proves that confusion is reigning even in academic debates. So often, the all-important distinction between traditional society and religion is utterly effaced. Modern social organization really does mitigate against traditional structures of authority, while simultaneously pushing human beings toward forms of legitimation that take the shape of imagined communities, invented traditions, or increasingly extreme fundamentalisms. Such modern ideologies only pretend to be remnants of something old, in truth they are more constitutive for social reality than their 19th century predecessors. It is because religious and cultural traditions are lost — not because they have been conserved and prorogued — that they have their appeal. One can understand them as an ideological upgrade, as an ideological intensification of a personal psychology of social adaptation that keeps the balance with reality by intoning the significance of cultural affiliations and heritage, transforming them into insignia of difference in an increasingly uniform society. These modern forms of consciousness have no ties whatsoever to the traditional ensemble to which it refers arbitrarily. Secularization in this sense also means that the individual mind is interwoven with reality. This process, situated at the core of the short 20th century, has been reflected in the paradigmatic shift from the analysis of society to that of memory in the social sciences. Though one cannot live without either, the imbalance produced by making one the substitute for the other, rather than its dialogue partner, is dangerous. Such a stance points to a period of "decaying memory" induced from the enforced "loss of conscious, historical continuity."⁷ This process has once again intensified with the dismantling of the Cold War world view and its mooring points which left a vacuum into which religious and ethnic modes of neo-traditionalism have rushed. The spent formulae of past centuries returned as fictions of present past.

Such reinscription of religious dogma into the canons of national belief is nothing new; it was analyzed in the 1940s when the displacement of collective religious faith paved the way for authoritarian consciousness. In a renowned study, Adorno argued that belief was disintegrating

6. Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

7. Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction to Durkheim," in *Soziologie und Philosophie* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 48f.

into mere opinion when he wrote, “formerly the idea of belief was emphatically related to the religious dogma. Today it is applied to practically everything which a subject feels the right to have as his own, as his ‘opinion,’ without subjecting it to any criteria of objective truth. The secularization of ‘believing’ is accompanied by arbitrariness of that which one believes: it is molded after the preferences for one or the other commodity and has little relation to the idea of truth.”⁸

The German Case

It was an impressive sight when 250,000 Berliners gathered only a couple of days after the September 11 attacks in front of the Brandenburg Gate and all along the city’s main avenue, 17th of June, to show their affection and solidarity with the people of the US. They saw almost the entire German administration on the makeshift stage, heard mournful Blues songs and listened to the US ambassador. The most emotional moment occurred when many in the crowd started applauding before his remarks could be consecutively translated. Daniel Coats, the former Senator from Indiana, who had started his German tenure only a few days earlier, was at first puzzled by this behavior. After a short time he realized that the audience, many young people among them, wanted to prove how much of a success story the re-education project had been in Germany, and show their own familiarity with the English language. Soon Chancellor Schroeder’s promise of “unconditional solidarity” followed, and only a few weeks later the red-green government went through a narrow vote of confidence in order to send German troops to Afghanistan

Such bold statements were quickly overshadowed and the positions they represented eventually reversed. Johannes Rau, one of the speakers at the Berlin demonstration, was the first to murmur the undertones of American “self-victimization,” and he was quick to express his concern about possible American overreactions, almost as if America represented Polyphemus just released from his cave. Rau was swiftly joined by a number of church representatives, as well as such conservatives as former deputy Defense Secretary Willy Wimmer and Norbert Bluem, ex-minister and the icon of Rhineland style social-Catholicism. After the beginning of the war in Afghanistan the murmur turned louder and more pronounced, especially among the Hitler youth generation who crossed old political lines to express their concern about the US. The increasing opposition

8. Theodor W. Adorno *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 742.

against the Afghanistan invasion encompassed a broad number of public figures, such as *Spiegel* editor Rudolf Augstein, ex-Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and Lothar de Maiziere, a moderate conservative and the last Minister President of East Germany. Erhard Eppler, the old-style social democratic mentor suggested that Europe might offer lessons to the US in how to deal with conflicts in a peaceful way. Liberal historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler, during an Afghanistan-roundtable in Berlin, started talking about Palestine as a bloody wound kept open by Israel, a thesis which he fluidly ran together with his suggestion that ‘once again’ the Air Force Generals were in charge in world history, a thesis for which he supplied a litany of disasters for which he offered no historical differentiation: Dresden, Vietnam, Serbia, and Afghanistan. Klaus Zwickel, then chief executive of Germany’s largest and most influential labor union, demanded the US to “stop the bombardment of Afghanistan immediately,” which was at a time when on a rough average fifteen fighter planes were operating over a territory the size of France. Günter Gaus, former member of the late Willy Brandt’s government, made remarks about the “unscrupulousness of carpet bombing and the use of cluster bombs.” Whereas Green Party Vice-President of the German parliament Antje Vollmer worried that the US was prepared to “convert the war against the Taliban into a worldwide campaign against an unlimited number of private fiefdoms,” controversial right wing author Martin Walser said that Europe was obliged to “tell the friend that historical failures and aberrations cannot be corrected through war but solely through peace.”⁹

A few months later, when it became clear that a more extensive and more challenging Iraq campaign was inevitable, the rhetoric hardly changed. Ulrich Wickert, a prominent German television anchor, suggested that George Bush and Osama bin Laden share similar “patterns of thinking,” while the German fashion designer Joop accused the US of committing atrocities in Afghanistan. In the run-up to the war, legitimate criticism became increasingly difficult to distinguish from resentment against America, as political arguments were often prefaced by simplistic conspiracy theories. This confusion continued and culminated during a tightly-contested German election campaign in 2002, when the sitting Chancellor sought domestic advantage by categorically rejecting German participation in any future American “adventure” in Iraq. This may have emboldened a leading parliamentarian of the Social Democratic Party to

9. All previous quotes in *Stern* 47 (Hamburg 2001), p. 54.

declare that George Bush behaved “as if he were Preceptor Cesar Augustus.” As if this blurring of lines was not enough, the Minister of Justice obliged stupidity by providing the seemingly obligatory Hitler-comparison, a remark for which she was dismissed after the ensuing public protest.

Even if some of these expressions were perhaps driven to extreme by the desire to provide a response to the Bush Administration’s frequent rhetorical drubbings of Europe, they are on the whole worse than saying nothing; they lack substantive engagement with the US or its actions. Nevertheless, such emotional expressions neither reveal a German predisposition toward hatred of the US, nor indeed can they be said to represent an overarching national attitude. Though these were extreme ways to voice opposition to any particular policy, they for some reason made sense to those who intoned them.

Modern societies are complex and consist of a multitude of different layers. As has been argued with regard to France, heterogeneous European countries are “made up of countless different groups, every one of which has its ‘own’ image of America, which frequently changes in the light of circumstances or political events. However, it sometimes happens that this multitude of contradictory perceptions coalesces into a major trend of opinion and for a while the attitudes of the country as a whole become lop-sided, standing excessively positive or negative in the face of American realities.”¹⁰ Public opinion is a strange organism; it easily takes on a life of its own when cut loose from the checks and balances of reality, particularly in times of transformation. After the end of the Cold War, when convictions thought to be unshakable were shattered within a few months, individuals felt not only “the right to have. . . his ‘opinion’ . . . without subjecting it to any criteria of objective truth,” as Adorno had it, but people were compelled to develop new opinions about a world order which was itself extremely resistant to being brought under a concept. The only remaining standard to which one could relate, positively or negatively, was that of the one society seemingly untouched by the upheavals of the late 20th century: the US. When people in Germany and other parts of the globe try to define their understanding of the world by distancing themselves from “America,” this does not prove alienation and detachment, but its opposite. To define a society as strange and different it has to be “beyond far and near,” to use Georg Simmel’s words. The fact that

10. Denis Lacorne and Jacques Rupnik, “France Bewitched by America,” in Denis Lacorne *et al.*, *The Rise and Fall of Anti-Americanism. A Century of French Perception* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 2.

everybody who has seen a Hollywood movie or visited a Starbucks coffee shop feels entitled to have an opinion about the US, its policies, and its cultural whereabouts only proves the illusion of closeness and transparency. Yet, this is more than just an illusion: it converges with real life experiences, since the US, “is indeed an open society. News and information circulate freely, American media organizations dot the globe, European journalists encounter no special obstacles when they work in the United States, and the number of Europeans traveling to America rises from year to year. However, behind this apparent transparency the real workings of American society are far from obvious. We believe we know a great deal about America, but in fact we know very little.”¹¹

This unique context provides for the intensity with which people around the world refer to the US, observe and misconstrue its internal workings, and desperately try to develop from it a metric through which the world can be understood. Emphasizing differences is hence a function of closeness among modern societies that share so much with each other. “Strangeness is not due to different and incomprehensible matters,” as Simmel observed during the last *fin-de-siècle*, but “it is rather caused by the fact that similarity, harmony, and nearness are accompanied by the feeling that they are not really the unique property of this particular relationship: they are something more general, something which potentially prevails between the partners and an indeterminate number of others, and therefore gives the relation, which alone was realized, no inner and exclusive necessity.”¹²

In a global public sphere characterized by this identity and difference, expressions of opinion have to be interpreted. For example, the oft-heard charge that “America lacks history” should not be reflexively labeled a Heideggerian and Germanic attack, or taken as proof that German “cultural pessimism” and anti-Americanism live on as pure continuations of the tradition of their 19th and 20th century counterparts. Rather, the attempt to conjoin America, history, and contemporary problems should be read within the framework of European history throughout the short century, contaminated by violence and genocide. There are of course good reasons why people *imagine* the US as having a disproportionate effect on world history. When the forty-year era of unprecedented stability, peace, and economic growth ended in 1990, the disintegration of the bipolar order resulted in the loss of

11. Denis Lacorne, “Anti-Americanism and Americanophobia: A French Perspective,” in Tony Judt and Denis Lacorne, eds., *With Us or Against Us. Studies in Global Anti-Americanism* (London: Palgrave, 2005).

12. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 402-408.

power not only for the Soviet Union but also for the US. Since there is less order in the world, more possibilities of revolutionary change and instability, ideologies become more independent of reality as well.¹³ Thus, a broader understanding of the present historical situation must be developed before one has anything approaching a reasonable assessment of the anti-Americanism presently observable not only in Germany, but in many other countries as well.

When one takes a step back, it is clear that two years after the initial outburst of German anti-war sentiment and in light of the increasing complications in Iraq, anecdotal observation and a number of opinion polls agree not only that anti-American feelings are on the rise in Europe, but that European societies are themselves only part of a global trend toward resentful estrangement from the US. However, neither common sense nor polling numbers with their seductive aura of precision provide a complete answer to the question. Anti-Americanism cannot be adequately grasped if the ideological expressions of its actors are taken at face value. The complexity of both modern anti-Americanism and current transformations in Germany society reach beyond empirical processing and statistical tabulations.

Although German ambivalence toward the US certainly participates in the same resentment and distorted representations that feed the more uncompromising and violent forms of anti-Americanism, the two varieties are only partly comparable. Moving from relatively mild antipathy to stronger forms of the “Yankee go home—and take me with you” style to the often absurdly radical and violent postures of distinct segments of the intelligentsia of the Arab world, there are major differences as well as similarities. In the absence of real empires or world order in the classical sense, anti-Americanism fulfills multiple functions for those who (reasonably or not) wish to see themselves in national or subjective opposition to a global force. It is a form of communicative bonding and smallest common denominator uniting of those who otherwise might have little other means to associate with each other: a universal symbol that prepackages the world and makes it readily understandable. There is of course a desperate need for such understanding, after the end of era of confrontation between superpowers and power-blocks, and the leveling power of Americanism in its pro- and contra-forms, helps to simplify reality by ridding it of the non-compatible, refractory dissonance. Since it helps interpret a modern society it is mostly a middle-class phenomenon, a

13. See Gerrit-Jan Berendse, “German anti-Americanism in context,” in *Journal of European Studies* 33 (3/4) (2003), p. 334.

convenient ideology for people with a certain amount of education, ambition, and self-confidence to construe the world in bold terms. For its constituency, the discourse of anti-Americanism condenses overarching and sometimes overwhelming economic and cultural developments into a simplistic worldview. Such false abstractions are quotidian practices in many societies, and “America” is the cipher and the canvas for these projections. Yet, it is important to recognize that these ideas and opinions, although wrong and charged with resentment, do not easily translate into action. Only a very specific set of circumstances is capable of transforming felt ambivalence into a violent rebellion—a rule that applies toward attitudes toward the US as much as any other perceived power.

The current ambivalence toward the US is rooted in contemporary experience. Germany is no exception, and thus the changing public atmosphere should not be obscured by analogies to earlier epochs. Many current interpretations fall victim to the same eternal logic of invariability and de-historicization that they rightly criticize. History does not repeat itself, nor do forms of consciousness. Genuine ambivalence towards the US does not “promote or confirm the pre-existing concepts of America constructed by Heidegger and others,” as has been argued.¹⁴ Some have gone so far as to see in this a revival of a long-standing German obsession with American power, which had separate efflorescences at the dawn of the twentieth century, during the interwar period, throughout the 1950s, and in the era of nuclear missile debate and discord during the 1980s. Alas, the notion that “anti-American discourse has not changed much” is equally flawed.¹⁵

Anti-Americanism in Europe and Beyond

Once one recognizes how “America” can serve as cipher in a given society’s integration of itself to the idea of the West, one can begin to see how not all forms of this mystification are the same; each society, even as it forms its relation to America, retains elements of its own traditional — religious or non-religious — identifications. These traces are indeed sociologically legible. Whenever a community undergoes full-scale modernization and undergoes reorganization around the principle of economic competition, the self-perception of every individual undergoes a transformation. Following the breakdown of traditional religious orientations and

14. Ceaser, “A Genealogy of Anti-Americanism,” *op. cit.*, p. 16.

15. Ivan Krastev, “The Anti-American Century?” in *Journal of Democracy*, 15/2 (April 2004), p. 6.

behavioral models, “religion does not play such a decisive role within the frame of mind of most people as it once did; only rarely does it seem to account for their social attitudes and opinions.”¹⁶ However, secularization is rarely complete and the bipolarity of the faithful and the non-believer persists in modernized forms. With regard to this transformation, Western and Arab societies underwent similar experiences during the first few decades of the twentieth century, when conventional ideologies and belief systems collapsed under the weight of the new. The circumstances and consequences of modern Turkey’s founding in 1923 following WWI and the breakup of the last Islamic empire under the Ottomans can be reasonably compared to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian domain a few years prior. In both cases the empires were destroyed from within when new forms of national and nationalistic identification became more powerful. As was the case in Europe, in many parts of the Arab world, the first two decades of the 20th century were experienced as times of overwhelming modernization and cultural uncertainties. It seemed, as if individuals were thrown back onto themselves. The subsequent emergence of national independence and more radicalized local and regional groups, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, were the direct result of this ideological individualization. The fact, that traditional religion was cut loose from its dissolved communal ties and privatized in more radical forms is indicative of a crisis, not the strength religion.¹⁷ Very similar to parallel developments in Europe, where the US served as the place holder for modernity, in many decolonizing societies “America” was construed as the icon of “the West”, and thus the colonial interference, the source of continued dependence. Religious fundamentalism and unreflective, de-historicizing nationalism go hand-in-hand; anti-Americanism outside of America and the Nativism of the 1920’s within America take on a religious character because they see it as a way to avoid coming to terms with the connection between enlightenment and social modernization.

For the Arab world, historian Dan Diner describes this pattern of negative identification as an odd but logical reversal: “Instead of engaging with the philosophical, social, and civilizatory requirements of enlightenment . . . a substitute for these requirements is found in and sustained by a fundamentalist belief in God — a belief imposed on every aspect of society

16. Adorno *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality*, *op. cit.*, p. 727.

17. See Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001) and *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

with a elevated religious zeal that cannot be explained through any reference to the narcissistic response of a subaltern culture in the face of a dominant West. Under such a perceptual horizon, the only appropriate attitude toward the West is to seek to over-trump its hegemony, which is imaginable only by adopting an ever-increasing rigidity and radicalism in adopting Islam's religious guidelines."¹⁸ In this sense, anti-American ethno-religious and nationalist ideologies are the constant companion of anti-Americanism. As a habit of thought, they can serve to separate individuals from their own intellectual autonomy and help to legitimize authoritarian rule or nihilistic rebellion. Such fantasies of rebellion against an almost imaginary nation undermine whatever legitimacy they might otherwise have by rendering inchoate and pseudo-concrete what is, as a rebellion against the increasing complexity and uncertainty of modern society, by no means easy to articulate. Recognizing this allows one to see how even the legitimation of secular Baathism in modern Iraq often followed in its stance toward America the same logic pursued by modes of religious fundamentalism.¹⁹

The experience of alienation is, in other words, easily translatable into the terms of religious or cultural-nationalist self-justification; and once so formulated, it cries out for substantive analysis and historical interpretation. Just as reification can come from any corner of world society, so can the false historical glosses on it. The much bandied-about and largely Western notions of "the clash of civilizations" or of world-historical "cultural conflict" typify the kind of catch-phrase which, in its ignorance and in its categorical misrepresentations, might be transformed into a critical concept, if and only if its emptiness were developed in historical, social, and political terms. Even though these days it may seem as if "culture determines consciousness," in the real world, consciousness must constantly readjust itself to reality, but it cannot create it. The new cultural and ethnic collectivities, spanning from radical Islam to ethnic nationalism on the Balkans to milder forms in German, Italian, or Turkish society, which are shaped contrary to the cipher "America," are based not upon knowledge, but upon amnesia. Forgetting constitutes the core of their epistemology and helped to unleash modern fantasies of political unification and cultural homogeneity that appear on the stage of world history cloaked in ancient garb.

18. Diner, *Feindbild Amerika*, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

19. Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), part two, "The Legitimation of Ba'thism."

Anti-Americanism in Historical Transformation

Conflating very different phenomena by diagnosing an all-encompassing anti-Americanism destroys indispensable distinctions. It is crucial not to underestimate the genesis of modern consciousness, for ideologies also have a history and undergo transformations, not only in the Arab world, but also in Western societies. For example, during the turn of the century's Romantic revivalism, Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the cultural struggle was widely misunderstood and misused for mythologically-inspired aesthetic and political illusions. This distorted version of Nietzsche's notion of culture was combined with fantastic speculation regarding a future German world power and served to constitute the famous "*Kultur*" versus "Civilization" debate. This distinction, in turn, came to be imposed upon the US, which by 1912-13 had become the world's biggest economic entity, and which therefore appeared as a true imperial rival to a German bourgeoisie that was anti-modern and anti-socialist to the point of self-destruction.

This transatlantic opposition had other historical antecedents as well. Germany was a belated nation, and the hostile feelings towards the US also mirrored the democratic failures of the Wilhelmine state. Anti-Americanism then migrated into the core of German elite self-perception, became an integral part of the nationalistic folklore and its anger against the real-world power shared by many intellectuals. A second important ingredient was the emergence of modern mass cultures in the period before WWI and in the Weimar period, which further enhanced these modes of consciousness. It was an era for which Karl Kraus, looking to Chicago and Detroit, invented the beautiful term "*Fordschritt*" instead of the German "*Fortschritt*" for progress. Cultural and political anti-Americanism merged in the hatred of Woodrow Wilson's internationalism, and against the League of Nations, which anticipated the National-Socialist imperialism of the have-nots. The image of a hypocritical Wilsonsonianism and of the treacherous peace of Versailles became indeed "Siamese twins," as Ernst Fraenkel termed them. And indeed, the prejudice hardened during the following years when the Nazi agitators combined this revanchism with their anti-Semitic rhetoric of German superiority, denouncing "Uncle Sam as Uncle Shylock."

In the postwar period, economic modernization produced *déjà vu* as past experiences appeared under new circumstances. The increasing strength and social mobility of a broad middle class, a reality which had

already existed in the US a generation earlier, became the universal standard in the Western world. Uneven developments thus led to the perception that the world was being Americanized. From the European perspective, the future was already present in the US, and “America” became the territorial insignia of what was to come. From the post-1945 perspective, there was a further reason for envy: America seemed to be the only industrialized society which had survived two devastating wars without major internal changes.

Although de-Nazification and re-education were relatively successful in Germany, nationalist attitudes did not die out immediately after 1945. However, since the imposition and subsequent myth of the “Zero Hour,” this start from scratch idea became an important ideological feature of the new *Bundesrepublik*, and outspoken nationalism was impossible for many years to come. During most of the *Bundesrepublik*’s years one could relate to national traditions in exclusively negative terms. In retrospect it is fascinating and astounding to see that well into the postwar era, when Assistant Secretary McCloy was effectively running Germany, nationalist attitudes of victimization were reinvented by suggesting that Germans had been collectively persecuted by American and allied tribunals and the de-Nazification programs. Still, in February 1953, a *Commentary* Essay on “German Anti-Americanism” documented how long these sentiments would endure before their eclipse. Hence, ambivalence toward the US was a crucial ingredient of German politics during the 1950s and 1960s, and it cut across party lines. Konrad Adenauer, the four-term postwar chancellor, made it quite clear that he did not fully accept the new constitution, the German constitutional law, because it had been foisted upon the Germans by America and France. Furthermore, the standard-issue social criticism in the Adenauer-era referenced the “superficial culture” of the US, an easy strategy to highlight European and German cultural profundity while avoiding violating the anti-nationalist taboo or the invocation of the distinctly National Socialist polemic against America’s “degenerated modernity.”²⁰

This attitude was secularized only in the late 1960s, when the student rebellion transformed the public and academic sphere. With the elections in 1972, the agonizing Adenauer-era and the following grand coalition finally ended. The student rebellion, with its American protest forms of sit-ins and teach-ins, demonstrations and public debates proved crucial for this first true and substantial democratization of postwar German society.

20. See Dan Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

The legitimate criticism of the Vietnam War, shared by many Americans, should not be misinterpreted as the mere persistence of old mentalities as some have persistently suggested. However, the war in South-East Asia, with more than two million Vietnamese victims, led to a shift of political identifications from West to South among left-leaning Germans. The protest against the US combined with widespread enthusiasm and engagement for Third-World causes, and it did much to foster democratic customs in the *Bundesrepublik*. Since liberal students could not affirmatively refer to national traditions, it was often done negatively, against the US. This mechanism helps to explain the revival of anti-imperialist rhetoric during the 1970s.

The fact that Germany's new place in the world developed along lines that appear almost pre-political in nature was due to a unique quality of the *Bundesrepublik*. A good part of its success story had to do with it being a society without a nation, an economic power without national interests, and a global player with almost no foreign policy responsibilities — Germany was indeed at the center of world politics for several decades without seriously participating. This extraordinary situation prolonged the attitude of “determined neutrality” that Hannah Arendt had already observed during her first visit to the country in 1950, when she had the impression that people thought that it was “as absurd to take sides in the [Cold War] conflict as it would be to take sides in an earthquake.”²¹ In addition, an attitude of provincial realism developed, since violence and war had never played a progressive or liberating role in German history. This is one of the reasons the current challenges produce so much perplexity at a multitude of intellectual and emotional levels. It is not “fear of losing cultural identity” that is expressed in the anti-American cultural stance, but a collective and individual readjustment to massive social and political changes that cannot be grasped in abstract terms encompassed by a phrase like the “search for cultural self-awareness,” nor in the academic jargon that writes it off as confusion induced by imbibing too many “second-hand notions of the Frankfurt School's critique of civilization.”²²

It is this constellation of fading neutrality and prevailing provincialism which not only fuels current ambivalence toward the US and results in a simplistic critique of American unilateralism, but which also covers up one's own inability and unwillingness to act. As difficult as it may be to

21. Hannah Arendt, “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: A Report from Germany,” in *Commentary* 10/4 (October, 1950), p. 343.

22. Berendse, “German anti-Americanism in context,” *op. cit.*, pp. 335 and 344.

accept, the neutrality tradition of the old *Bundesrepublik* was an important ingredient in democratizing German society. It was the most radical negation of Nazi partisanship. The politics of the will have been replaced by the politics of unwillingness, one could say. This did not change with the unification of the two German societies in 1990, which was blindly termed re-unification as if something old had been reborn. As a matter of fact, the Eastward enlargement of the *Bundesrepublik* helped to sustain Cold War mentalities for another inward-oriented decade.

Carte Blanche: The New Germany

Such inward orientation was irrevocably challenged by the experience of September 11, 2001, which highlighted the dramatic changes that had transpired silently and were only partly and belatedly addressed with the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo. It meant that a Cold War style of international political abstinence was untimely, and the need to act differently in a world of new threats was palpable. In Germany this implied a tremendous change of political and public conventions; an era of democratic foreign policy had begun for the first time in German history.

Two important challenges of these outmoded attitudes occurred within the expanse of three short years. First, in the fall of 1998 the federal elections completed an overdue generational change by bringing the Americanized cohort of the 1960s to power and ended a prolonged continuation of the *Bundesrepublik*. Second, with the deployment of German troops in the Balkans and the attacks of 9/11 in 2001 it became obvious that Germany's role in future world politics had to be redefined. But that was not an easy task, as old political and social traditions were suddenly gone without having new replacements. When the vacuum had to be filled, it could still not be done with positive references to democratic national tradition in Germany, because close to none exist. In this situation, an astonishing mixture of various but mild forms of anti-Americanism helped to establish new political and foreign policy traditions in the new German nation. It had to be done negatively, the old-fashioned *Bundesrepublik* way.

In Germany, perhaps more than in other societies, September 11 served as yet another reminder that the epoch of foreign policy neutrality had ended and the new country had become a real nation again. But for the time being, a reversal of prior achievements dominated. Before 9/11 the new Germany had indeed become a relatively steadfast and reliable partner for US global policies on the Balkans, in Eastern Europe, and the Near East. This is true despite of fierce Bundesrepublikan criticism and

despite some of the glimmers of the old Germanic anti-Americanism that appeared in many talk shows, literary supplements, and academic debates. There were classic examples of denial, such as when literary Nobel laureate Günther Grass refused on the NTV live news channel to talk about the hardship in New York, but rather accused the CIA of “terrorist activities,” or when political scientist Otto Czempel at Frankfurt University insinuated that 9/11 meant that “globalization had struck back.”

Still, the German middle classes have undergone an Atlantic transition during the 1950s and 60s and experienced a true modernization process. The newly-educated communities have replaced the older German bourgeoisie, and which are separated from previous anti-American ideologies by half a century and two global wars. The difference is partly reflected in the fact that today nobody wants to be seen as truly anti-modern or anti-American. Ambivalence toward the US persists because opinion leaders and other members of the educated new middle classes have not yet found their role in a society in which modernization is still perceived as Americanization, but at the same time have not pursued a more independent path towards inventing new political traditions. Neutrality was not only an important part of the post-fascist legacy, it was central to the establishment of a domestic democratic tradition; and one might well ask whether it does not now appear as an artificial limitation that prevents the society from establishing a democratic foreign policy tradition capable of overturning Germany’s considerable deficit in this regard. German foreign policy, that plaything of Bismarck and the Prussian aristocracy was always the most undemocratic feature of Germany’s constitutional monarchy, and in many ways the vision of an resurgent empire, itself the quintessence of an anti-democratic definition foreign policy, was crucial to Hitler’s political rise. Indeed this knowledge plays a role in the formation of the taboo against having a foreign policy—a taboo that continues to hobble even as it moderates and informs German attempts to engage positively vis-à-vis the country that dominates international policy, the US.

The current blend of military responsibility, new democratic policies, and stubborn resentment that characterizes German society and politics these days is helping to free the new Germany from the practices and rhetoric of neutrality-exceptionalism. This is why anti-Americanism should not be equated with either its predecessors of the 1920s or with the radicalized versions of fundamentalist militancy. Today’s anti-Americanism is a different phenomenon, more ambivalent than *anti*. German society has undergone dramatic changes in the second half of the Cold War and

was part of the Atlantic revolution. Its modernization happened American style when the middle class replaced the reactionary Bourgeoisie. This transformation also codifies the new anti-American resentment of not wanting to be seen as either anti-modern nor as anti-American. The ambivalence proves once more in how many ways the US is the antithetical standard for self-definition in Europe. If this dialectic is appreciated instead of used for shortsighted political gain, the reconstruction of the West could finally begin. If it is perceived as identical with the many other expressions of resentment toward the US all over the world, anti-Americanism will be no more than a catchword, following the logic of a bipolar time long gone.

Criteria for the Reconstruction of the West

A well-formulated critique of modern anti-Americanism can help in laying out the criteria for reconstruction of the West. It can also contribute to differentiating between shopworn and undefined political concepts such as “terror,” which increasingly become operational equivalents of modern ideologies and contribute to further de-differentiation of social and political analysis by “extending the range of conventional meaning of terrorism to cover every act of violence, insurrection, rebellion, civil war, armed resistance.”²³ Such simplifications are part of the political problem, not part of their solution.

In the 21st century, which is to say after the end of history’s unique bipolar era, remainders of past historical experiences of violent secularization, nationalism, and bureaucratic socialism have alloyed to form new amalgams of ignorance and isolation. In addition, modern ethnic and religious ideologies differ from their nationalist ancestors of the nineteenth century, as they are not bound to statehood and its institutions. New ideologies are restricted and boundless at the same time; they usually refer to straightforward communities but hold the potential for global expansion. History, indeed, seems to result from ideas and contemporary ideologies that operate as blinders while appearing to their users as a *passé-partout*. Everything incompatible is omitted from the horizon; those who wear ideological blinders are not appalled by them, but always believe themselves to move forward freely, with purpose and principle. These distortions define the future field of critical analysis.

23. Sadik Al-Azm, “Islam, Terrorism, and the West Today,” in *Praemium Erasmi-anium Essay* (November 2004), p. 15.