

Anti-Americanisms in France

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France is undoubtedly the first response that comes to mind when asked which country in Europe is the most anti-American. Even before the days of De Gaulle and Chirac, it seems that France has always been at the forefront of anti-American animosity. Surprisingly, polling data reveals that France is not drastically more anti-American than other European countries – even less so on a variety of dimensions. The purpose of this brief essay is to understand the origins and forms of French anti-Americanism, as well as its roles and consequences on politics and policies. It draws on research that I have done for an ongoing collective project on understanding the causes and consequences of anti-Americanism organized by Peter Katzenstein and Robert Keohane.

Anti-Americanism can be defined as an unfavorable predisposition towards the United States, which leads individuals to interpret American actions through negative stereotypes. If we think of individual attitudes towards America as a continuum, anti-Americanism captures all the attitudes which are more unfavorable than favorable. However, this continuum itself needs to be disaggregated according to issue-area – whether we are talking about foreign policy, entertainment, or food, for instance. Consciously or unconsciously, individuals themselves often disaggregate “Americanism” (and thereby anti-Americanism) into three categories: 1) the Americans (as individuals); 2) America (as a society, economy and culture); and 3) the United States (as Washington, and especially its foreign policy dimension) (see Kuisel, 2004 for a similar distinction). Therefore anti-Americanism is a very heterogeneous phenomenon, which is difficult and not very useful to aggregate.

The image of the French being all anti-American is not supported by the data, since French attitudes towards the American

administration are consistently more negative than attitudes towards American society and people. Instead, the overall image is that the French like the Americans. In several surveys done in 2000-2004, about 70% of the French expressed favorable attitude towards Americans, about the same as did the Germans and Italians. Nevertheless, we should expect this gap in perceptions between view of Americans and views of America to close as a result of the 2004 presidential election, which showed to the world that a majority of Americans indeed approve of the foreign and domestic policies of the Bush administration.

France is the country with the deepest, most sedimented reservoir of anti-American arguments. Its long genealogy has been well documented over the years, most recently by Philippe Roger, who argues that French anti-Americanism is older than the United States (Roger 2002). French animosity and contempt towards America (where degenerate dogs supposedly did not bark) first built up in the 18th century during the time when France was an American power. In spite of the mythology of Lafayette, American passiveness during the French Revolution and the 1798-1800 “Quasi War” comforted this image of a self-serving, hypocritical American nation. The victory of the North in the Civil War and the end of France’s Mexican adventure contributed to the next layer of anti-Americanism, made of accusations of materialism and resentment for the nascent formidable power of the United States. A major layer of the French anti-American apparatus was added after World War I, in a period of disappointment in over postwar U.S. isolationism and perceived biased indifference to France in the matter of war debts and reparations, when French intellectuals first reported that America’s consumer and profit-oriented culture threatened to spread to France and affect its own traditions negatively. The word “anti-Americanism” entered the French language in

the late 1940s, when opposite sides of the political spectrum —Left Bank, communist intellectuals and General de Gaulle and his followers— focused on the need to counter the domineering presence of the United States. The Vietnam War further reinforced this image of the U.S. as an imperialistic, expansionist, out-of-control superpower representing a threat to world order. By the end of the Cold War, therefore, French rhetoric had accumulated a variety of anti-American arguments, ready to be dug up should the opportunity arise.

According to the extensive survey data recently examined by Kuisel, it appears that the deterioration of the image of the U.S. in France preceded the Franco-American clash over Iraq —even though it skyrocketed after 2002 (Kuisel 2004). Paradoxically, despite widespread demonstrations of anti-Americanism throughout Western Europe in the 1980s, the Reagan era represented a veritable peak in pro-Americanism in France, when more French than Germans or British declared themselves pro-American. In their majority, the French thought that America set a good example for political institutions, the media, and free enterprise.

A new cycle of anti-Americanism started in the early 1990s, however, and by the end of the Clinton administration, French confidence in the U.S. had already been seriously eroded. Domestically, French intellectuals denounced the contradictions between the values righteously defended by American politicians and the violent reality of American society — crime, guns, prison, racism, death penalty, lack of universal health care and basic public education. Internationally, the French anti-American critique that emerged during the 1990s focused on the increasingly unilateral actions of the American “hyperpower” — now behaving as a triumphant, self-centered, hegemonic superpower both in the domains of the economy (e.g. audio-visual products, hormone-treated beef) and foreign policy (e.g. NATO, the International Criminal Court, “rogue states”).

The growing French fears of American unilateralism were confirmed by the rejection of the Kyoto Treaty as soon as the Bush administration came into office. After the initial sympathy expressed to the American people after September 11 and the decision to support the U.S. in Afghanistan, France started to drift rapidly apart from the views of the American administration on Iraq, especially after the passage of UN resolution 1441 in November 2002, the collapse of French efforts to avoid the war in early 2003, and the simultaneous outpouring of Francophobia in the U.S. Since then, anti-Americanism in France has been steadily high and politically consensual, rooted once again not only in the facts of the moment but in the deep reservoir of anti-American arguments accumulated over three centuries.

The list of French grievances towards the US is long and varied, but these grievances are not simultaneously shared by all French men and women, thereby explaining some paradoxes —such as France being one of the countries where McDonald’s is most successful, while being the country which has made a McDonald’s basher into a national hero. Moreover, we need to remember that for all these manifestations of anti-Americanism, there are also countless manifestations of pro-Americanism. Using a typology inspired by the one recently developed by Katzenstein and Keohane, I distinguish among seven, non-mutually exclusive types of French anti-Americanism.

Elitist anti-Americanism: The oldest and most visible form of anti-Americanism in France has been a patronizing elitist critique of America —a rhetoric often used to positively construct French identity. The feeling of French superiority over the United States is well engrained, even by those who have wholeheartedly adopted American popular culture.

Nostalgic anti-Americanism: Individuals from all walks of life share negative sentiments about American culture and society, believing that France used to be a better place before the United States (and its

figleaf, globalization) transformed it, dehumanized it, and cut it off from its traditional roots –whether cafés, wines, or the French language. This is a defensive anti-Americanism calling for protectionist actions.

Social anti-Americanism: When denouncing America, many in France focus on the social order and on the values prevalent in the United States: a society that is fundamentally unequal, violent, hypocritical, and excessively religious. Interestingly, all of these social indictments of America come more from an idealized vision of what France should be (just, equal, caring, prejudice-free) than from what it really is.

Legacy anti-Americanism: A different type of anti-Americanism comes from the legacy of a sometimes tense Franco-American history (such as the late involvement of the US in World War II, Dien Bien Phu, Suez, etc.). These suggest that the U.S. is a partner that cannot be trusted and, thus, that France needs to take its national security into its own hands instead of being at the mercy of the vagaries of American foreign policy.

“Sovereignist” anti-Americanism: Anti-Americanism in France is also associated with Gaullism and “sovereignism” (a French term to designate those concerned with the primacy of national sovereignty). The foreign policy of General de Gaulle made a lasting impression on France, and on the right as on the left, many politicians insist on the importance of not losing control over the country’s sovereignty and destiny. The result is a series of foreign policy actions designed to quell the excessive power of the U.S.

Liberal anti-Americanism: The French also offer a “liberal” critique of America as not living up to its ideals. This charge of hypocrisy is supported by evidence in the fields of trade, environment, development aid, human rights, and foreign policy (especially in the Middle East). In short, if the U.S. does not do what it preaches, then it should either be held accountable, or else not be trusted. Note that this is the anti-American critique that

leads many American observers to judge France as an incorrigible anti-Semitic country.

Radical Muslim anti-Americanism: Finally, the most recent type of anti-Americanism comes from some religiously radicalized French Muslims who partake in the “clash of civilizations” idea and believe that the U.S. is involved in a crusade against Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. Of all the anti-Americanisms found in France, this is the only one that calls for actual violence against the United States and the American people.

Anti-Americanism has perdured and often seems hyperinflated in France because it performs several roles in French politics and society. Indeed, French anti-Americanism has often been as much about France as it has been about America. First, anti-Americanism is used as a reflection against which to define French identity. For instance, the French critique of the failures and hypocrisies of American multiculturalism reflect back on the idealized French republican model based on assimilation, integration, and equality. Moreover, anti-Americanism can be mobilized by political entrepreneurs to legitimize certain policies, especially status quo policies. For instance, when politicians discuss implementing affirmative action, opponents of the reform immediately invoke the American model to ensure rejection of the new policy. Similarly, Jean-Francois Revel, one of the few anti-anti-American intellectuals in France, has argued that “the principal function of anti-Americanism has always been, and still is, to discredit liberalism by discrediting its supreme incarnation” (Revel 2003). Finally, a well-timed, well-delivered anti-American critique can serve to rally support for one’s own agenda. It can also be used to unite the French. Because of its consensual nature, however, it is difficult for political leaders exploit popular concerns about America for domestic political gain relatively to their opponents. Moreover, these anti-Americanisms are too heteroclitite to coalesce into a coherent political force. They represent neither a consistent ideology, nor a divisive cleavage around which ideological

forces can be ordered. Therefore, their effects on domestic politics remain limited. This does not mean, however, that their impact on policy is similarly limited.

Indeed, French anti-Americanism is more than a gratuitous discourse, and in some cases it directly impacts policy-making. For instance, anti-Americanism has distracted the French from making policy changes and adapting to globalization –which the French often conflate with Americanization. Paradoxically, anti-Americanism was also used as a rallying cry to mask the reality of a France adapting to the requirements of a globalized world economy (Gordon and Meunier 2001). The various French anti-Americanisms can also influence the process of European integration, primarily by striving to build a stronger Europe able to counter the overwhelming domination of the American ally (from the Euro to foreign policy). One can also reflect upon the implications of current French anti-Americanism and resentment of American pressures on the adhesion of Turkey to the European Union.

Finally, the ambient anti-Americanism(s) can have consequences on French foreign policy, which has long been guided by a steadfast desire to retain a role as a major international actor. Its privileged position as one of the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council gives France a disproportionate power of nuisance in this respect, even though anti-Americanism seems to be secondary to self-interest when guiding French foreign policy. In the economic realm, anti-Americanism may, consciously or not, affect consumption patterns, and recent data suggests that many consumers in the Western world are indeed slowly shifting their purchasing habits to avoid American products due to frustration and anger over an American foreign policy guided by “self interests” and “empire building.”

France and the United States are bound by thick ties, political as well as economic. Indeed, France is the world’s fourth largest investor in the U.S. and cooperates thoroughly with the U.S in matters of

counterterrorism. Moreover, on many dimensions such as the environment and social policy, the French are not the sharpest European critics of America. Yet it remains that France always appears as the leader of anti-Americanism in the Western world. What distinguishes French perceptions are the deep reservoir of its anti-American arguments accumulated over the centuries, the coexistence of a multitude of anti-Americanisms (though not held simultaneously by the same individuals), and the loudness with which its public intellectuals are ready to make these anti-American arguments. But French anti-Americanism should be kept in perspective as it does not entail, in its large majority, violent actions against Americans, unlike the anti-Americanism existing in other parts of the world.

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