

Western Europe's America Problem

By ANDREI S. MARKOVITS

When my father and I arrived in the United States as immigrants from Romania — by way of Vienna — in the summer of 1960, we spent a number of weeks living with American families in the greater New York area. Some were Jews, like us; most were not. But all spoke some German because our English was virtually nonexistent at the time. What impressed me no end, and will always remain with me, was how all those people adored my Viennese-accented German, how they reveled in it, found it elegant, charming, and above all oh-so-cultured. For business and family reasons, my father had to return to Vienna, where I attended the Theresianische Akademie, one of Austria's leading gymnasia. The welcome accorded to me in that environment was much colder and more distant than it had been in the United States, not by dint of my being a *Tschusch* and a *Zuagraster*, an interloper from the disdained eastern areas of Europe, but by virtue of having become a quasi American.

From the get-go until my graduation, many years later, I was always admonished by my English teachers, in their heavily accented, Viennese-inflected English, not to speak this abomination of an "American dialect" or "American slang," and never to use "American spelling," with its simplifications that testified prima facie to the uncultured and simpleton nature of Americans. Of course any of my transgressions, be it chatting in class or playing soccer in the hallways, was met with an admonition of, "Markovits, we are not in the Wild West, we are not in Texas. Behave yourself." Viennese-accented German, wonderful; American-accented English, awful. The pattern still pertains nearly 50 years later.

Any trip to Europe confirms what surveys have been finding: The aversion to America is becoming greater, louder, more determined. It is unifying Western Europeans more than any other political emotion — with the exception of a common hostility toward Israel. Indeed, the virulence in Western Europe's antipathy to Israel cannot be understood without the presence of anti-Americanism and hostility to the United States. Those two closely related resentments are now considered proper etiquette. They are present in polite company and acceptable in the discourse of the political classes. They constitute common fare not only among Western Europe's cultural and media elites, but also throughout society itself, from London to Athens and from Stockholm to Rome, even if European politicians visiting Washington or European professors at international conferences about anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism are adamant about denying or sugarcoating that reality.

There can be no doubt that many disastrous and irresponsible policies by members of the Bush administration, as well as their haughty demeanor and arrogant tone, have contributed massively to this unprecedented vocal animosity on the part of Europeans toward Americans and America. Indeed, they bear responsibility for having created a situation in which anti-Americanism has mutated into a sort of global antinomy, a mutually shared language of opposition to and resistance against the real and perceived ills of modernity that are now inextricably identified with America. I have been traveling back and forth with considerable frequency between the United States and Europe since

1960, and I cannot recall a time like the present, when such a vehement aversion to everything American has been articulated in Europe. No Western European country is exempt from this phenomenon — not a single social class, no age group or profession, nor either gender. But the aversion reaches much deeper and wider than the frequently evoked "anti-Bushism." I perceive this virulent, Europe-wide, and global "anti-Bushism" as the glaring tip of a massive anti-American iceberg.

Anti-Americanism has been promoted to the status of Western Europe's lingua franca. Even at the height of the Vietnam War, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and during the dispute over NATO's Dual Track decision (to station Pershing and cruise missiles primarily in Germany, but in other Western European countries as well, while negotiating with the Soviet Union over arms reduction), things were different. Each event met with a European public that was divided concerning its position toward America: In addition to those who reacted with opposition and protest, there were strong forces that expressed appreciation and understanding. In France, arguably Europe's leader over the past 15 years in most matters related to antipathy toward America, the prospect of stationing U.S. medium-range missiles, especially if they were on German soil, even met with the massive approval of the left in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

But as of October 2001, weeks after 9/11 and just before the U.S. war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, a massive Europe-wide resentment of America commenced that reached well beyond American policies, American politics, and the American government, proliferating in virtually all segments of Western European publics. From grandmothers who vote for the archconservative Bavarian Christian Social Union to 30-year-old socialist Pasok activists in Greece, from Finnish Social Democrats to French Gaullists, from globalization opponents to business managers — all are joining in the ever louder chorus of anti-Americanism.

The Bush administration's policies have catapulted global and Western European anti-Americanism into overdrive. But to understand that overdrive, we need to analyze the conditions under which this kind of shift into high gear could occur. Western Europeans' unconditional rejection of and legitimate outrage over abusive and irresponsible American policies — not to mention massive human-rights violations à la Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, secret CIA cells — rest on a substantial sediment of hatred toward, disdain for, and resentment of America that has a long tradition in Europe and has flourished apart from those or any other policies.

Ambivalence, antipathy, and resentment toward and about the United States have made up an important component of European culture since the American Revolution, thus way before America became the world's "Mr. Big" — the proverbial 800-pound gorilla — and a credible rival to Europe's main powers, particularly Britain and France. In recent years, following the end of the cold war, and particularly after 9/11, ambivalence in some quarters has given way to unambiguous hostility. Animosity toward the United States has migrated from the periphery and become a respectable part of the European mainstream.

Negative sentiments and views have been driven not only — or even primarily — by what the United States *does*, but rather by an animus against what Europeans have believed that America is. While the politics, style, and discourse of the Bush terms — and of President Bush as a person — have undoubtedly exacerbated anti-American sentiment

among Europeans and fostered a heretofore unmatched degree of unity between elite and mass opinion in Europe, they are not anti-Americanism's cause. Indeed, a change to a center-left administration in Washington, led by a Democratic president, would not bring about its abatement, let alone its disappearance.

Anti-Americanism constitutes a particular prejudice that renders it not only acceptable but indeed commendable in the context of an otherwise welcome discourse that favors the weak. Just as in the case of any prejudice, anti-Americanism also says much more about those who hold it than about the object of its ire and contempt. But where it differs markedly from "classical" prejudices — such as anti-Semitism, homophobia, misogyny, and racism — is in the dimension of power. Jews, gays and lesbians, women, and ethnic minorities rarely if ever have any actual power in or over the majority populations or the dominant gender of most countries. However, the real, existing United States does have considerable power, which has increasingly assumed a global dimension since the end of the 19th century, and which has, according to many scholarly analyses, become unparalleled in human history.

While other public prejudices, particularly against the weak, have — in a fine testimony to progress and tolerance over the past 40 years — become largely illegitimate in the public discourse of most advanced industrial democracies (the massive change in the accepted language over the past three decades in those societies about women, gays, the physically challenged, minorities of all kinds, and animals, to name but a few, has been nothing short of fundamental), nothing of the sort pertains to the perceived and the actually strong. Thus anti-Americanism not only remains acceptable in many circles but has even become commendable, a badge of honor, and perhaps one of the most distinct icons of what it means to be a progressive these days.

So, too, with hostility to Israel. Because of its association with the United States, Israel is perceived by its European critics as powerful, with both countries seen as mere extensions of one another. To be sure, there is something else at work here as well, because America has many other powerful allies that never receive anywhere near the hostile scrutiny that Israel confronts on a daily basis. Clearly, the fact that Israel is primarily a Jewish state, combined with Europe's deeply problematic and unresolved history with Jews, plays a central role in European anti-Semitism. But today we are witnessing a "new" anti-Semitism that adds to traditional stereotypes: It is an epiphenomenon of anti-Americanism.

The Swiss legal theorist Gret Haller has written extensively to a very receptive and wide audience about America's being fundamentally — and irreconcilably — different from (and, of course, inferior to) Europe from the very founding of the American republic. To Haller, the manner in which the relationships among state, society, law, and religion were constructed and construed in America are so markedly contrary to its European counterpart that any bridge or reconciliation between those two profoundly different views of life is neither possible nor desirable. Hence Europe should draw a clear line that separates it decisively from America. In a discussion with panelists and audience members at a conference on European anti-Americanism at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, on April 29, 2005, at which I shared the podium with Haller, she explicitly and repeatedly emphasized that Britain had always belonged to Europe, and that the clear demarcation was never to run along the channel separating Britain from the European

continent, but across the ever-widening Atlantic that rightly divided a Britain-encompassing Europe from an America that from the start featured many more differences from than similarities to Europe. The past few years have merely served to render those differences clearer and to highlight their irreconcilable nature.

That widely voiced indictment accuses America of being retrograde on three levels: moral (America's being the purveyor of the death penalty and of religious fundamentalism, as opposed to Europe's having abolished the death penalty and adhering to an enlightened secularism); social (America's being the bastion of unbridled "predatory capitalism," to use the words of former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and of punishment, as opposed to Europe as the home of the considerate welfare state and of rehabilitation); and cultural (America the commodified, Europe the refined; America the prudish and prurient, Europe the savvy and wise).

Indeed, in an interesting debate in Germany about so-called defective democracies, the United States seems to lead the way. Without a substantial "social" component, a democracy's defects are so severe that one might as well consider labeling such a system nondemocratic, or at best defectively democratic. To be sure, no serious observer of the United States would dispute the considerable defectiveness of its political system. But what matters in this context is not so much the often appropriate indictment of American democracy, but the total silence about the defects of German and (Western) European democracy. As Klaus Faber, one of this argument's major progressive critics, has correctly countered, surely most segregated and alienated immigrants in the suburbs of Paris or the dreary streets of Berlin would be less likely than America's critics to extol German and French democracies as free of any defects. Indeed, if one extends the "social" dimension to include the successful integration of immigrants, surely America's democracy would emerge as much less defective than the alleged models of Western Europe.

Many of the components of European anti-Americanism have been alive and well in Europe's intellectual discourse since the late 18th century. The tropes about Americans' alleged venality, mediocrity, uncouthness, lack of culture, and above all inauthenticity have been integral and ubiquitous to European elite opinion for well over 200 years. But a bevy of examples from all walks of life highlights how pervasive and quotidian anti-Americanism has become. I have collected my examples from outside of what one would conventionally associate with politics *precisely* to demonstrate that the European animus against things American has little to do with the policies of the Bush administration — or any other administration, for that matter — and is alive and well in realms that have few connections to politics.

Let us turn to language: In German, the terms "*Amerikanisierung*" (Americanization) and "*amerikanische Verhältnisse*" or "*amerikanische Bedingungen*" (American conditions) almost invariably refer to something at once negative and threatening — something to be avoided. Thus, for example, the Junge Union (the youth branch of the conservative Christian Democratic Union) derided the Social Democratic Party's attempts to introduce primaries on the American model, insisting that German politics needed democratization, not Americanization. The union equated the former with competence in problem solving, the latter with blowing bubbles in the air. For its part, the left has made "Americanization" a pejorative staple of its vocabulary. In Britain, "Americanisation" and

"American-style" also have an almost exclusively negative connotation — often with the adjective "creeping" as a telling modifier in front: the creeping Americanization of the car's feel for the road, the cult of guns fueled by creeping Americanization through violent films, the creeping Americanization of the growing girth of British novels, the creeping Americanization of British sport.

Indeed, it seems as if the British find every aspect of the sporting world's Americanization fearful. Thus, for example, *The Guardian* reported complaints in 1995 that British stadiums have increasingly come to resemble those in America and are now equipped with good seats, restaurants, and even dance floors: Abolishing those infamous standing-room sections, or "terraces," where nearly 100 people lost their lives in riots at Hillsborough in Sheffield, has made the sport too "nice." In 1998 *The Independent* intoned: "The creeping Americanisation of British sports, in terms of ubiquitous coverage and potential for earning, means that niceness is at a higher premium than ever before." Americanization has also been blamed for taming fans, who previously cared passionately about whatever game they were watching; now they allegedly attend events primarily to see and be seen.

The world of soccer offers a fine example of my point because, whatever one wants to argue about this sport and its culture, it is clear that the United States was at best an also-ran in it throughout the 20th century. America simply did not matter — and still matters very little — in the world of soccer. It was never a threat to Europe; or, to put the point in the right style, America was never a "player." Nevertheless, the discourse about this game on the European side has always had a cynical, aggressive, irritating, and above all condescending tone.

When the United States was chosen as host of the World Cup for the summer of 1994, many of the European news and entertainment media were appalled. Instead of rejoicing that the last important terra incognita for soccer was about to be conquered by the "beautiful game," Europeans loudly voiced the usual objections to American crassness, vulgarity, commercialism, and ignorance. They argued that giving the tournament to the Americans was tantamount to degrading the game and its tradition. Awarding Americans the World Cup was like holding a world championship in skiing in a country in the Sahara or playing a major golf tournament in Greenland — an anomaly bordering on impudence, cheekiness, and inauthenticity, since, in the European view, the environment wasn't suited to the sport. The facilities were denigrated, the organization ridiculed, the whole endeavor treated with derision. When the stadiums were filled like in no other World Cup tournament before or since, when the level of violence and arrests was far and away the lowest at any event that size, the European media chalked it up to the stupidity and ignorance of Americans. Of course Americans came to the games because they like events and pageantry, but did they really enjoy and understand the sport?

The concept "Americanization" also connotes, to give another example, every kind of deterioration in the European world of work — stress through job insecurity, disqualification through work intensification, "flexibility," "mobility" — and is a synonym for all things negative in the very complex entity of a rapidly changing capitalism. People criticize an alleged decline in workmanship and quality of European products, for which they blame the increased competition that Americanization exacts. And the quantity of work is constantly expanding, particularly for managers and others in

leading positions. The oxymoron "working vacation" has entered the European vernacular, which again testifies to an Americanization of Europe's work life. Yet rarely, if ever, have I read anything about a purported "Japanization" or — of increasing relevance — "Chinazation" of European work life.

Or consider European discussions of higher education. When, in an article about the American higher-education system that I wrote for the magazine *Spiegel Spezial*, I praised the seriousness with which teaching is viewed in America and also (in contrast to the situation in Germany) evaluated by students, I received numerous letters of protest from my German colleagues. "We are not, thank God, in America, where universities are just upgraded [secondary] schools," wrote one furious correspondent. That students might be allowed to evaluate their professors' teaching was rejected by almost all of my German colleagues as a bad American habit that commercialized the university and damaged professorial and scholarly autonomy. The late conservative Cologne sociologist Erwin K. Scheuch, spokesman for the equally conservative *Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft* (Federation for Academic Freedom, founded in 1970), had been warning against Americanization in German universities for some time. In a 2002 lecture, "Model America," he argued that only some 50 institutions of higher education in America deserve the term "university." He went on to call for blocking any attempt to introduce American course credits to German institutions, and decried the introduction of performance-oriented salaries, which he said would destroy Germany's "collegial structures."

Across the Channel, in a 1994 article in *The Guardian*, the journalist Peter Kingston wrote, "Bubblegum University's funny ways are becoming familiar in colleges over here. The huge range and exotic combinations of courses, the spoon-feeding mode of classroom teaching, the obsession with grades, the general acceptance that many students have to take jobs through college," he wrote, "these have become standard features of universitas Britannica." Note: Bubblegum University goes with the purported lowering of traditional standards. It can hardly get more stigmatizing than that.

It is only to be expected that European conservatives would make fun of American feminism, multiculturalism, affirmative action, and the related reform movements that are allegedly ruling the best universities in the United States. There is a bevy of material that mocks such reforms under the rubric of "political correctness." Damned if you do, damned if you don't. While Europeans, as a rule, have complained about the arrogance and elitism of American universities, now they are reproaching them for the exact opposite: that their achievements are being destroyed by the unqualified in the name of political correctness. However, Europe's left-wing liberals have just as much trouble tolerating the themes that are part of that complex. While the thrust of their criticism is different, the tenor is surprisingly similar. During the Clinton-Lewinsky crisis, many European leftists regarded the critical position of some American feminists toward Clinton as laughable. Of course puritanism was (again) to blame.

The Americanization of many aspects of the legal worlds and the administration of justice in Europe also raises anxiety. At an informal meeting with trade unionists in 2002, Germany's former Justice Minister Hertha Däubler-Gmelin claimed that America has a *lausiges* or "lousy" legal system. That view is widely shared in European intellectual circles. There is also a disparaging of America's "claims mentality" and the rapacious

litigiousness thought to accompany it. The possibility of introducing courtroom television broadcasts into Germany is seen as succumbing to "American conditions." In Britain, the perceived menace is wide-ranging: ever-larger law firms, higher fees for top-flight attorneys, an epidemic of lawsuits, the proliferation of special courts as part of a doubtful "therapeutic justice" all are creeping and creepy.

European holidays are allegedly increasingly Americanized, with Santa Claus displacing the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus at Christmas, with the semi-pagan Halloween becoming more prominent, and with birthday celebrations supplanting "name day" ceremonies of yore. Even the wildlife is said to be succumbing to America's influence: In Hamburg and Vienna, there is a growing resentment that predatory black squirrels, brought to Europe from America, are displacing their indigenous, more peaceful cousins.

All of these "Americanizations" bemoan an alleged loss of purity and authenticity for Europeans at the hands of a threatening and unwelcome intruder who — to make matters worse — exhibits a flaring cultural inferiority. America is resented for everything and its opposite: It is at once too prurient and too puritanical; too elitist, yet also too egalitarian; too chaotic, but also too rigid; too secular and too religious; too radical and too conservative. Again, damned if you do, damned if you don't.

The future of anti-Americanism in Europe's public discourse will remain deeply tied to the fate of Europe's unification process, one of the most ambitious political projects anywhere in the world. Fundamentally, the European views about America have little to do with the real America but much to do with Europe. Europe's anti-Americanism has become an essential ingredient in — perhaps even a key mobilizing agent for — the inevitable formation of a common European identity, which I have always longed for and continue to support vigorously, although I would have preferred to witness a different agency in its creation. Anti-Americanism has already commenced to forge a concrete, emotionally experienced — as opposed to intellectually constructed — European identity, in which Swedes and Greeks, Finns and Italians are helped to experience their still-frail emotive commonality not as "anti-Americans" but as Europeans, which at this stage constitutes one sole thing: that they are "non-Americans."

Anti-Americanism will serve as a useful mobilizing agent to create awareness in Europe for that continent's new role as a growing power bloc in explicit contrast to and keen competition with the United States, not only among Europeans but also around the globe. Anti-Americanism has already begun to help create a unified European voice in global politics and will continue to be of fine service to Europe's growing power in a new global constellation of forces, in which an increasingly assertive Europe will join an equally assertive China to challenge the United States on every issue that it possibly can.

For the time being, there seem to be no visible incentives for Europeans to desist from anti-Americanism. Its tone is popular among European publics. Far from harming Europe and its interests, anti-Americanism has helped Europeans gain respect, affection, and — most important — political clout in the rest of the world. Anti-Americanism has become a European currency whose value fluctuates greatly, but whose existence does represent a chip that Europe will cash in with increasing gusto. By cultivating an anti-American position, Europe feigns membership in a global opposition of the downtrodden by America.

It is completely unclear which direction and what kind of political and symbolic content this waving of the European flag will assume: a negative, exclusionary, and therefore arrogant identity formation that Hannah Arendt labeled "Europeanism," or a positive and universalistic ideology that builds on the commonalities of Western values and then forms the basis for further European state and nation building. But there can be no doubt about one thing: Outfitted with a mass base and a congruence between elite and mass opinion, anti-Americanism could, for the first time in its long European history, become a powerful political force going well beyond the ambivalences, antipathies, and resentments that have continuously shaped the intellectual life of Europe since July 5, 1776.

Andrei S. Markovits is a professor of comparative politics and German studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. This essay is adapted from his book Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America, to be published this month by Princeton University Press.

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 53, Issue 20, Page B6