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Obamamania and anti-Americanism

While George W. Bush was reviled the world over, Barack Obama is adored. Indeed, the contrast between the hatred for Bush and the admiration for Obama might lead to the impression that the recently prevalent negative attitudes towards America have miraculously morphed into a lovefest towards the United States on the part of the global public. In Western Europe, however, love for Obama and disdain for America are different empirical manifestations of a conceptually singular view of the United States. Far from being mutually exclusive, these two strains are highly congruent – even complementary and symbiotic.

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In his speech in Strasbourg in April 2009, President Barack Obama surprised his audiences on both sides of the Atlantic by being the very first American president to publicly address a European resentment with a long history: “In Europe, there is an anti-Americanism that is at once casual but also insidious. Instead of recognizing the good that America so often does in the world, there have been times when Europeans choose to blame America for much of what’s bad.”

To be sure, anti-Americanism – in Europe and worldwide – reached unprecedented proportions during the eight-year reign of the Bush administration. Especially in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the war against Iraq two years later, there emerged an unparalleled antipathy towards the US government and society that reached most social segments throughout

the world.¹ Ivan Krastev, observing this tendency in 2004, predicted that the twenty-first century may well become known as the “anti-American century”.² Andrei Markovits previously analyzed the pervasiveness and social acceptability of anti-Americanism in Europe as the continent’s de facto “lingua franca” – its most important inter- and intra-societal common discourse.³

The massively positive reaction to the appearance of Barack Obama on the international political stage, however, seems to run directly counter to these anti-American tendencies. Indeed, Obamamania – as enthusiasm for Obama has been aptly termed – spread rapidly through Europe and the world, seemingly negating the previously widely extant anti-Americanism. His being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize barely ten months into his tenure as president testifies to this man’s singular popularity all over the planet and, most notably, among Europe’s political and cultural elite. Crudely put, had Barack Obama been less beloved by Norwegian, Scandinavian and West European elites – and perhaps had George W. Bush been less reviled and disdained – Obama would never have won this award so early in his presidential incumbency.

Europeans love Obama with a fervor once reserved for John F. Kennedy. Indeed, it is not only the president himself that benefits from this Camelot analogy, but his entire family. After all, Michelle Obama is constantly compared to Jacqueline Kennedy in terms of her style, beauty, panache, and composure, and the two Obama girls round out this poster-perfect family just the way Caroline and John-John did almost fifty years ago.

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When Obama delivered a speech in Berlin in July 2008 – months before he was elected president – more than 200,000 people came to see him. In contrast, a visit to the same city by George W. Bush in May 2002 witnessed a demonstration by 20,000 people against his presence. And even that was a relatively small affair when compared to the more than 200,000 who turned out in often violent demonstrations against Ronald Reagan’s visits to Berlin throughout the 1980s, including the one in which he implored Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall.”

According to opinion polls, 82% of the German population, 74% of the British, and 72% of the Spanish have “confidence in Obama to do the right thing in world affairs.”⁴ Obama is often – though neither exclusively nor without reservation – perceived as a source of hope and inspiration, a protagonist of political change. At first glance, this seems to contradict the notion of widespread anti-Americanism, but this article questions such assumptions, presenting them as wishful thinking at best.

We argue that anti-Americanism in Europe has not been altered by political develop-

ments in the US, nor even by the changes wrought in virtually every aspect of Europe's existence thanks to the miraculous events of 1989, of which the fall of the Berlin Wall was merely one piece of the puzzle.

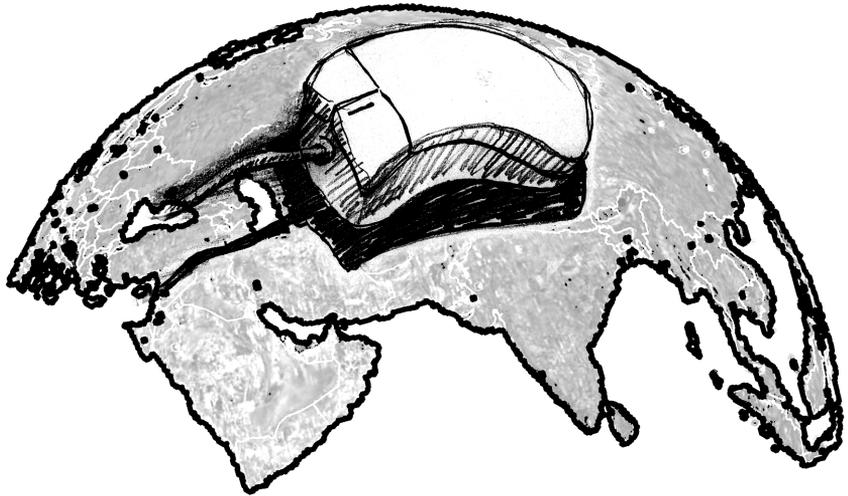
ANTI-AMERICANISM OR REASONABLE AND FAIR CRITICISM OF AMERICAN POLITICS? Since disagreement with Bush's policies represented a legitimate and fair opposition to the actions of the government of the United States, such sentiments might be considered simple, justified criticism. To be sure, Europeans have long distanced themselves from "anti-Americanism", claiming merely to be "anti-Bush". However, while they may preface their remarks with the disclaimer "I am not anti-American", Europeans often follow it up with an emphatic "but", which consists in an array of invectives against America and Americans that one has a hard time viewing as anything but profoundly anti-American.

168 In order to separate resentment towards American policy and attitudes towards America – in other words to separate government from people – we have sought to observe how Europeans react to American matters that are clearly non-political. This research shows that while criticism of the US government is directed against certain concrete political decisions, anti-Americanism is targeted against an imagined "American nature", and thus goes much deeper than a disagreement with a given political strategy. Indeed, anti-Americanism disapproves of who Americans are and not what they do.⁵ It centers on disdaining America's lifestyle, culture, habits and beliefs, and argues that America represents an evil, inferior force in the world while at the same time being omnipotent and omniscient. "Anti-Americanism rests on the notion that something associated with the United States, something at the core of American life, is deeply wrong and threatening to the rest of the world."⁶

Like all powerful prejudices, anti-Americanism too resists verification by empirical means. Prejudices, to those that hold them, are neither testable hypotheses, nor refutable by facts. America is at once too powerful, yet also too weak; its soldiers are too Rambo-esque, yet also cowardly; Americans are too religious, yet they are also too secular; their culture is pornographic, yet it is also prudish; their women are emasculating, yet they are also too domestic and traditional. America stands for unwanted and intrusive cosmopolitanism that destroys other cultures yet it also embodies an exclusive parochialism which is hostile to influences from abroad.

Bush's administration merely "catapulted global and Western European anti-Americanism into 'overdrive'"; legitimate antipathy towards a leader and his government's

policies conveniently bled into a much more general prejudice against America and Americans.⁷ After all, any prejudice can be displayed more openly when it is legitimized by its object, and Bush was an ideal target for the popular projection of all the negative characteristics attributed to America. However, as with any prejudice, anti-Americanism tends to tell more about the subject than the object of resentment. Jean-Paul Sartre put it correctly when he argued that anti-Semitism said little, if anything,



about Jews, but all the more about Christians, the bearers of such anti-Jewish prejudices. In anti-Americanism's case, too, we are likely to find its reasons and existence less in America's being and doing, but rather in this resentment's role and function in the subject societies – in this case, Europe.

OF PREJUDICE AND POWER. Using America as a scapegoat for global troubles, Europeans obscure their own responsibilities regarding the world's social, economic and political problems. They make America the sole culprit while establishing Europe's moral superiority. Anti-Americanism – like all prejudices – facilitates the substitution of a clear-cut explanation for a more nuanced understanding of the intricate structure of modern societies. By so doing, it offers a mindset leaving anti-American attitudes ever more resistant to rational arguments, differentiated interpretations, and empirical facts that point the opposite way.

Anti-Americanism, though a prejudice like any other in terms of its structural characteristics, differs markedly from “classical” prejudices such as anti-Semitism, ho-

mophobia, or racism, in that, in these latter cases, Jews, gays, and ethnic minorities rarely, if ever, have any actual power. The United States, on the other hand, most certainly does have power, and plenty of it. It is precisely because of this important (and quite unique) difference that anti-Americanism remains acceptable in societies that otherwise shun prejudice. Indeed, it has even become commendable in certain elite circles. Anti-Americanism, in opposing a truly powerful force in the world, has gained legitimacy. To most Europeans, Americans are tantamount to white, middle-class, heterosexual males who – as the all-powerful – are subject to attacks that, accorded to any other group, would rightly be judged sexist, racist, and discriminatory. A group's perceived power allows its opponents to rail against it in the most prejudicial manner without any worries of incurring costs in the form of moral sanctions or reprimands.

170 ANTI-AMERICANISM DESPITE OBAMAMANIA. If anti-Americanism derives primarily from a prejudiced worldview instead of a reasoned criticism of policy – if it remains anchored primarily in what Americans are rather than what their government does, as we have argued – it is less likely that anti-Americanism will vanish in the context of the Obama presidency.

To assess whether anti-Americanism prevails under the new president, two questions have to be asked. First, does America remain the recipient of negative attitudes and feelings despite the overwhelming enthusiasm directed towards its president? And second, how can the positive identification with Obama in Europe remain congruent with our arguments about anti-Americanism's continued existence in Western Europe?

Europeans surely believe that things are bound to improve thanks to the Obama administration. However, this does not mean that they will now come to see the United States as a positive force for them, overall.

In a June 2009 *Wall Street Journal* survey containing data on German views of American cultural influence, the negative not only exceeds the positive but also remains steady and unchanged from the pre-Obama days. Thus, 36% view America's cultural influence as negative, and only 16% as positive. Europeans have an abysmally low regard for American high-brow culture (such as art, architecture and literature), indicating yet again that there exists little, if any, knowledge of, let alone respect for, American culture beyond its mass aspects which, though disdained and hated by Europeans, remains avidly consumed by them.⁸

This patent contradiction, even hypocrisy, has never stopped Europeans from expressing negative attitudes about America and things American without shame, nor

will it do so during Obama's incumbency. While this survey demonstrates some changes in public opinion resulting from Obama's election, it also reveals the unabated perpetuation of traditional anti-American stereotypes.

THE BAD GUY. As the American stock market crashed in September 2008, the severity of the financial crisis became obvious. Soon, there commenced the inevitable search for a culprit. And, sure enough, the European media found one with alacrity and certainty: Wall Street. As *Die Zeit* put it, "The acquisitiveness of the Wall-Street banker pulls down the financial markets at a pace that is making us dizzy."⁹ The bankers – now considered "hoodlums" and "criminals" – were striving voraciously and ruthlessly for selfish profit maximization. But the bankers were soon joined by the American people as the major culprits of this financial crisis: it was they, with their "American way", that led them to live beyond their means and pursue their happiness with loans they could not pay back. There then occurred a demonization of the "American" economic system.

This corresponds solidly with the much older stereotypes of Americans' "materialist nature", their "egotism", their overvalued notion of the "individual". By neglecting the collective good, and with their inherent profligacy, the Americans did not only inflict disaster upon themselves but also upon innocent others, like the Europeans. Germany's leading intellectual weekly *Die Zeit* expressed the notion in a particularly graphic illustration on October 1: the American eagle, in free fall, clutches tightly with one claw to the European flag, taking it down with it into the abyss. To be sure, when the crisis persisted, many voices arose across Europe to denounce each nation's economically irresponsible behavior, initiating a process of reflection about the capitalist system as a whole; nevertheless, even during this more sophisticated phase of analysis, the United States remained the major culprit by dint of its being the foremost of all capitalist countries.

DOING IT THEIR WAY. Under the Bush presidency, one of Europeans' most vehemently repeated reproaches of the United States was America's alleged unilateralism in global politics. As Federico Romero argues in regard to the disagreements over the "war on terror": "Western Europeans by and large did not dispute the strategic or moral implications of the 'war on terror' [...] but rather its unilateral management by the Americans, the lack of consultation with European governments, and the fact that Washington did not perceive cooperation as a two-way street."¹⁰

The allegedly arrogant tone of the American *modus operandi* was, if anything, an even greater irritant to the Europeans than its content, and nothing has filled the Europeans with greater hopes regarding the Obama presidency than his administration's drastic change in tone. But the requisite skepticisms on the European side have accompanied these high hopes from the very beginning. The danger now perceived by Europeans is that this president's charm and charisma will become irresistible, thus potentially undermining European strategic interests and policy independence.

In the context of the G20 and NATO summits in London and Strasbourg in April 2009, Obama received a great deal of positive press for his attentive listening, his general openness and his respect for European heads of state and government. But Obama's behavior also received negative marks, mainly for his being manipulative – for using his charm and seeming empathy to exact concessions from the Europeans. For example, by saying in Strasbourg that America could not shoulder the problem of terrorism on its own, Obama implicitly demanded greater contributions from its European allies in Afghanistan without ever actually explicitly requesting additional help. Sure enough, some interpreted Obama's behavior as “pressure through charm”: “Without

172 mentioning specific numbers or even uttering the word ‘troops’, [Obama] embellished his words so beautifully that Merkel could do nothing but smile. Obama's quiet tones are part of a strategy to which Europe can hardly deny any cooperation.”¹¹

In this way, Obama's multilateralism becomes not a positive quality and a welcome change to the arrogant unilateralism of the two Bush terms, but rather a new, and somewhat devious method to bamboozle the Europeans and get them to do just what the Americans want.

Again contradictions abound: by asking for more European support, Obama is seen as pressuring his allies; then, given that the Europeans show little interest in increasing their efforts, Obama is blamed for monopolizing the mission. Once more, it is a case of “damned if you, damned if you don't.” It is an example of how new forms of anti-Americanism in European discourse adapt to the new circumstances in American politics. The Europeans remain victims of America's dominant position which, in this case, is exercised by a popular president's charisma rather than by a hated president's brutishness. The results, however, appear to vary very little.

THE UN-AMERICAN. To many Europeans, Obama's election served as the first gambit in America's re-entry into the league of “civilized nations”. The war against Iraq, the “war on terror”, Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, the refusal to sign the Kyoto Pro-

tocol, and many other American deeds and policies proved to many Europeans that Americans were inherently brutal and most assuredly different from Europeans, if not downright inferior. Therefore, as Obama's election was celebrated far and wide among Europe's chattering classes as the first American step in the country's long road towards civilization, Obama himself began to be considered an "honorary European".¹² In a distinctly anti-American world view, many of Obama's positive characteristics were attributed to his genuinely "European nature".

Seeing Obama as a *de facto* European constitutes one of the main reasons for his immense popularity throughout the continent. "Many in Europe wish for nothing more eagerly than to have a European America. In all countries in which public servants define the tone and content of political discourse, a former social worker from Chicago seems to fit the bill perfectly. This is the modern America we wish for: black, social and gentle."¹³ In a 2009 *Transatlantic Trends* survey, in which Europeans expressed an overwhelmingly favorable view of Obama, "more European in his sensibilities and policies" constituted the primary explanation for the remarkable difference to their assessment of Bush a year earlier.

The idea of Obama as "European" is ubiquitous in the European media, both print and electronic. It is interesting in this context to analyze what attributes are regularly assigned to Europe and which ones to America. To wit: "Despite his skin color, Obama seems less alien. You might say he appears so nicely European: not a cowboy from Texas, but a Harvard graduate with an urban background; instead of being a 'straight shooter', he relies on dialogue and mutual understanding."¹⁴

Americans are considered uneducated, aggressive, uncouth, belligerent, and striving for global domination, while Europeans are educated, polite, cultured, and have a multilateral approach to conflicts. Europeans now perceive Obama to share the latter qualities, which render him a virtual European. Thus, in truth, the European love for Obama easily fits – indeed corroborates – the conventional anti-Americanism so widely shared as a European lingua franca.

What makes the construct of Obama's "Europeanness" truly confounding is the crucial fact that nobody vaguely similar to Obama in terms of skin color, name, personal history, family background, achievement, optimism, vivaciousness, and verve could come close to being elected to a mid-level position in European regional politics, let alone to head of state and government. European hypocrisy on this issue appears to be boundless. Europeans usurp Obama's progressiveness and his very being to create an idealized European in pronounced contrast to a continued denigration of the "re-

al” America, which remains as uncouth as it has ever been, despite having elected Obama. Far from lifting Europe’s antipathy towards America, European Obamamania reinforces a dichotomous view of the world in which “Europe” represents a morally better place than “America”.

THE POST-AMERICAN ERA. Many among West Europe’s chattering classes delight in what they perceive to be a loss in America’s global power. As the United States’ reach in the economy, culture, politics and even military affairs weakens, Obama assumes a particularly attractive position in overseeing the empire’s evident decline.

Clearly, the constellation of global power structures changes constantly. The complex interplay of forces such as China, India, Brazil, Russia, Japan, and the European Union add hitherto unparalleled and incalculable dimensions. But the summary way in which European pundits blithely dismiss American power seems to be more the consequence of a wishful *schadenfreude* than of sober reasoning and the weighing of evidence. Indeed, these pundits tend to attribute inevitable transformations in global power constellations precisely to those political decisions which have been the major

174 target of European criticism over the past ten years (namely the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, Guantánamo and the financial crisis). Even Andrew J. Bacevich, the noted American foreign policy expert at Boston University, has supported this theory: “As far as the art of governance is concerned, the Bush era teaches us basically three lessons: overbearing arrogance has shown the limits of American global leadership; carelessness and dilettantism revealed the limits of its military strength; and the foolish and immoderate refusal of the Americans not to live beyond their means has demonstrated the limits of American prosperity.”¹⁵

Obamamania has no bearing at all on such views. Accordingly, the role that Europeans consider appropriate for the United States in the future is no longer “to lead the world” – as Obama himself has repeatedly claimed – but to assume a more humble position, perhaps as “world moderator”. European Obamamania might indeed diminish in the course of Obama’s actual presidency if the latter’s deeds do not conform to European preferences and expectations.

THE WAY IT IS. Despite enthusiasm for the new president’s clear rejection of his predecessor’s despised ways and means, the Europeans’ basic disdain for America as the bastion of consumerism, violence, selfishness, and general lack of authenticity remains intact. Furthermore, by making Obama an “honorary European”, Europeans

feel free to maintain negative views on America. Thus, Obamamania offers no evidence of a changing European perception of the United States; it merely provides a new veneer of respectability for otherwise prominent anti-Americanism.

The fall of the Berlin Wall twenty years ago, and the subsequent geopolitical earthquake – that altered virtually everything in Europe – seems not to have diminished the historically extant salience of anti-Americanism. If anything, its potency and immediacy attained a hitherto unknown dimension – that of enhancing Europe’s very own identity.

¹ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *What the world thinks in 2002: how global publics view their lives, their countries, the world, America*; Pew Global Attitudes Project, *America’s image slips, but allies share US concerns over Iran, Hamas*, 2006; Transatlantic Trends, *Obama’s transatlantic impact*, 2009; Russell A. Berman, *Anti-Americanism in Europe: a cultural problem*, Stanford University Press, 2004; Andrei S. Markovits, *Uncouth nation: why Europe dislikes America*, Princeton University Press, 2007; Brendon O’Connor and Martin Griffiths (eds.), *Anti-Americanism: history, causes, and themes*, 4 volumes, Oxford University Press, 2007; Federico Romero, “The twilight of American cultural hegemony: a historical perspective on Western Europe’s distancing from America,” in David Farber (ed.), *What they think of us: international perceptions of the United States since 9/11*, Princeton University Press, 2007, pp. 153-175.

² Ivan Krastev, “The Anti-American century?” *Journal of Democracy*, 15, no. 2, 2004.

³ Andrei S. Markovits, *Amerika*, Hamburg, 2004.

⁴ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obamamania abroad: the candidate can expect a warm welcome in Europe, not so in the Middle East*, July 16, 2008.

⁵ See Paul Hollander, *Anti-Americanism: critiques at home and abroad 1965-1990*, Oxford University Press, 1992; Markovits (see note 3); Barry Rubin and Judith Rubin Colp, *Hating America: a history*, Oxford University Press, 2004; Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane, (eds.), *Anti-Americanisms in world politics*, Cornell University Press, 2007.

⁶ James W. Ceaser, “A genealogy of anti-Americanism,” *The Public Interest*, n. 152, 2003.

⁷ Markovits (see note 3).

⁸ Adam Cohen, “How Europe views America,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2009.

⁹ Matthias Nass, “Verrat am amerikanischen Traum,” *Die Zeit*, October 1, 2009.

¹⁰ Federico Romero, “The twilight of American cultural hegemony: a historical perspective on Western Europe’s distancing from America,” in David Farber, (ed.), *What they think of us: international perceptions of the United States since 9/11*, ed. Princeton University Press, /New York: Princeton University Press 2007, p. 157.

¹¹ Matthias Gebauer, “Obama charmiert Europa in die Enge.,” *Spiegel Online*, April 3, 2009.

¹² Andrei S. Markovits and Jeff Weintraub, “Some blind spots and hypocrisies of European Obamamania,” *The Huffington Post*, June 10, 2008.

¹³ Gabor Steingart, “Das Ende der Obama Revolution,” *Spiegel Online*, January 21, 2008.

¹⁴ Ralf Beste, et al., “Obama für Deutschland,” *Der Spiegel*, July 21, 2008.

¹⁵ Andrew J. Bacevich: “Was kommt nach Amerika. Das Ende der Arroganz,” *Zeit Online*, February 6, 2009.