

Paul Hollander

MY WORK ON ANTI-AMERICANISM  
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I greatly regret that an earlier commitment prevents me from participating in this meeting. But my absence should not prevent me from thanking Bill Campbell for the idea of this session (and his willingness to read these remarks). I also thank Lee Edwards, John Haynes and Paul Kengor for their generous and insightful comments about of my work on anti-Americanism (AA below) and Lee Edwards for chairing this session.

This is a good opportunity to rethink my own work on this subject, how I got interested in it and what my major conclusions have been. I should also point out at the outset that my notions of AA are closely connected to concepts such as the adversary culture, alienation, multiculturalism and political correctness – all of which I have also written.

You don't have to be a sociologist of knowledge (that is, people interested in the connections between one's ideas and life, or social background) to come to the conclusions that the circumstances of my life had much to do with my interest in AA. Perhaps the most important has been that I am not a native born American and I grew up in a country which at a time was as

rather difficult place to live in. It is an interesting question whether or not this makes more or less objective about the nature of American society, more or less judgmental? I suppose immigrants tend to be more favorably disposed toward the country they chose to live in. But it does not follow that I have been uncritical of every aspect of American society and culture, or U.S. foreign policy as I will also make clear below.

I came here at the age of 27 on a student visa from England to begin my graduate studies. (I got my BA at LSE, after my arrival to London from Hungary following the 1956 Revolution). I was quite happy with my life in England and intended to return after getting a PhD in the U.S. For various personal and professional reasons I stayed here and never regretted it, although I have retained what might be considered a politically incorrect Eurocentric orientation that is both cultural and touristic.

Still, the circumstances of my life in this country may lead to the suspicion that my interest in, and critiques of AA were motivated by feeling that the U.S. is a decent enough country which allowed me to attain a modest degree of personal success and a reasonably comfortable way of life and therefore I had little sympathy with or understanding of AA attitudes and denigrations of this society. But this would be at best a partial explanation of the evolution of my professional

attitudes and interests, including that in AA. [It may be noted here that I changed the title of my first book on AA from "AA: critiques at home and abroad" to "AA: irrational and rational" suggesting that not all critiques of the U.S. are irrational. Changing the title was also prompted by the realization that AA is not just a "critique" of the U.S.

My interest in AA was a by product of my interest in the political attitudes and beliefs of Western intellectuals, mostly academic. This interest was initially stimulated by encountering (in the various academic settings) what struck me as astonishing levels of ignorance about and misconceptions of communist countries, one of which I left. Hence to begin with my professional interests and work were motivated by the desire to contribute to the enlightenment of Western audiences about communist systems such as the Soviet. Thus I became a Sovietologist [My PhD thesis was entitled "The New Man and His Enemies: A Study of the Stalinist Conceptions of Good and Evil Personified." (1963). I have also written *Soviet and American Society: A Comparison* (1973); and *Political Will and Personal Belief: The Decline and Fall of Soviet Communism* (1999) as well as other books which focused on the Soviet system.] But all along I remained morbidly fascinated by the political attitudes of my fellow intellectuals in the West, and this led to *Political Pilgrims* [PP below].

PP was the direct precursor of my work on AA since AA was among the predispositions, or components of attitudes which led many Western intellectuals [int below] to their sympathetic interest in communist systems. These components include a strong critical disposition towards their own (Western) society, anti-capitalism, various degrees of idealism and an attendant unease with the social role and position of being an int and especially the concern that int-s only talk and do little to improve their society (the latter might be called a fear of inauthenticity).

The anti-capitalism of the admirers of communist systems entailed ambivalence about, or aversion toward modernity and I believe that this aversion or ambivalence is the core component of AA. On closer inspection many critiques of capitalism turn out to be critiques of modernity; in turn modernity has been pioneered and spread by the U.S. (A process sometimes called Americanization).

American int-s who visited the various communist states were for the most part very unhappy with their own society as were the European int-s who undertook similar journeys. Not surprisingly the major waves of these visits chronicled in PP took place in the 1930s and 1960s and early 70s - at times when Western societies experienced various kinds of crises and difficulties, when idealistic int-s were particularly receptive to alternative models of social systems, and esp. those which

supposedly rectified the defects of their own society.

Why were (and are) int-s the most vocal critics, indeed, denouncers, of America? Attempting to answer this question leads unavoidably to at least a brief discussion of who are the int-s? I always argued that the best way to define them is not by occupation or education but by certain attitudes which lead some people to gravitate to the role of int. Most important:

- 1) Idealism, high expectations, preoccupation with the divergence between ideal and actual, appearance and reality, theory and practice; [or a secular religious disposition, sometimes culminating in their becoming true believers, at least temporarily]
- 2) Closely related to above: a capacity for discontent, a critical disposition - although the latter often becomes highly selective, shaped (and sometimes deformed) by expectations, by certain values, political attitudes and objectives [this was a major preoccupation in PP: how did supposedly critical int-s become true believers, deluded pilgrims or credulous political tourists?]

As to who and why become int-s, that is, gravitate to the role of int-s that it difficult to determine but some contributing factors may be proposed:

- a) Higher education in humanities and social sciences;
- b) Some kind of marginality, belonging to some persecuted

- minority (e.g. Jews);
- c) Belonging to some supportive subculture (bohemian, campus, academic)
  - d) A sense of personal victimization (the connection between the personal and political); e.g. having been a rape victim, familial deprivations, unique personal experiences, intangibles).

I started seriously thinking and researching the topic of AA in the middle of the 1980s and published my first book on it in 1992. Important to note that I have been interested in the AA of *both* foreigners and Americans; in fact I found the latter more interesting and harder to explain. People usually think of AA as something directed at the U.S. from abroad but in fact much of it is homegrown and the two varieties fortify and legitimate one another. Those of you who looked at this book may have noticed that much of it is taken up with AA within the United States, with the severe criticism and bitter rejection of American society by Americans in various institutional settings. Given my background I wondered how could highly educated and relatively privileged people consider the U.S. the most repressive and unjust society ever known in history, often comparing it to Nazi Germany?

In discussing AA it is important to insist that it

must not be confused with being critical of specific aspects or attributes of American society, culture or American foreign policy.

How to separate the just, well founded critiques from the unfair, irrational ones and how to avoid designating all critiques of American society as anti-American? I did not (and dont) equate all critiques of this country with hostility toward the United States, nor did I intend to discredit or dismiss all such critiques by considering them a reflection of "anti-Americanism." Rather, I used the concept of AA to denote a particular mindset, an attitude of distaste, aversion, or intense hostility, the roots of which may be found in matters unrelated to the actual qualities or attributes of American society or the foreign policies of the United States. In short, I used AA to refer to a negative predisposition, a type of bias which is to varying degrees groundless, an attitude similar to its far more thoroughly explored counterparts - hostile predispositions such as racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism.

The deepest and broadest source of AA and one that unites its varieties abroad and within the United States is an aversion to (or, at best, ambivalence about) modernity, which the United States most strikingly represents. For those abroad, modernization, Westernization, and Americanization are

inseparable; for those at home, the critical terminology directed at the bitter fruits of modernity is different, but many basic apprehensions are similar.

AA abroad and the reflexive disparagement of American society at home have much in common and nurture one another, even when they spring from different sources. At least one important difference may be noted here. AA abroad tends to concentrate, more often than not, on tangible, specific and widely shared grievances such as American economic policies, unfair trade practices, overbearing political dominance, American military presence, insults to national pride, the subversion of cultural traditions by American mass entertainments, rapacious energy policies, and so forth. By contrast, rejection and hostility at home have a more elusive, subjective, or personal quality associated with what Robert Hughes has called "the culture of complaint" (the title of his 1993 book). The latter reflects the inclination, if not determination, to hold the social order responsible for a wide range of personal discontents and problems.

Last but not least I have to say something about my own critiques of American society which do NOT make me AA. These critiques are primarily cultural directed at popular, or mass culture, advertising, the pervasive entertainment orientation,



the celebrity cult, dumbing down of higher education. I also find the extreme income inequalities unjustified either by economic or moral considerations.

There is much in American culture I to find uncongenial or outright dismaying, some of it closely linked to its idealism, which regrettably, also entails the profoundly mistaken belief that all good things, or all things highly valued, are compatible. They are not. Love of the environment and self-sufficiency in energy are not compatible with gas-guzzling SUVs. Belief in the rights and autonomy of individuals is not compatible with identity politics, with mandated racial preferences and the encouragement of group pride (not of all groups). Aspiring to limitless self-realization and fulfillment is not compatible with harmonious life in a closely-knit community. The freedom to move around endlessly is not compatible with being rooted in a sustaining community. There is endless tension between freedom and security, security and adventure, equality and excellence, the mandates of egalitarianism and achievement orientation. We cannot admire excellence and disparage "elitism," encourage gifted children and abolish "tracking" as discriminatory.

Daniel Boorstin's remarks about the expectations of Americans, made half a century ago, remain all too well

founded and help to understand the disappointments which often are the breeding ground of domestic AA:

We expect too much of the world... We expect our two-week vacation to be romantic, exotic, cheap, and effortless. We expect a faraway atmosphere if we go to a nearby place; and we expect everything to be relaxing, sanitary, and Americanized if we go to a faraway place... We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious; luxury cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive... We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly...

Let me conclude by suggesting that AA -foreign or domestic - may arise out of a multitude of circumstances: aggrieved nationalism, embittered anti-capitalism, offended group interests, the loss of traditional values and communities, the vulgarities of mass culture, the overwhelming global presence of the United States and the numerous by products of modernity.

It is not likely that AA will disappear in the foreseeable future as long as the US remains the only super power, people continue to be unhappy with the side effects of modernization and human beings find satisfaction in holding responsible social, political or economic forces or entities for their many problems and frustrations.

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