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Posthumous America

Benjamin Hoffmann, Alan J. Singerman

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CONCLUSION

America, a Mobile Sign

America is seen as the purest embodiment of the future because,
lacking the entrenched past that impedes the coming of
modernity in Europe, America is deemed to be modernity incarnate.
—Levine, “The Idea of America”

A Shifting Significance

America is a mobile sign. The meaning assigned to it at the turn of the eighteenth century was evolving, moving from a critical philo-Americanism to a systematic anti-Americanism,¹ from a fascination with the past to an expression of concern for the future. Accordingly, the statement by Levine at the start of this conclusion does not provide a definition of what America has always been but the meaning that it holds today, at the end of an evolution described in the following manner by Craiutu and Isaac: “America has moved from representing a pastoral Arcadia and Europe’s past to symbolizing Europe’s future and the land of incessant change, mobility, impersonality, and progress—in short, the apotheosis of modern society.”² The first meaning historically conferred on the sign “America” may be summarized by the idea of a Golden Age prior to the civilization in which the Europeans recognized the contemporary resurgence of a mythical past. The works analyzed in this study participated broadly in the creation of this definition of America by durably associating the latter to the idea of a distant past that has finally returned, whether it be by describing a pastoral Golden Age, as Crèvecoeur does, by resuscitating in the western part of the United States an ideal moment in the history of France as Lezay-Marnésia does, or by seeking for the vestiges of an America unchanged

by the European presence, as Chateaubriand does. They are privileged spaces in which to observe both the zenith and the beginning of the decline of the enthusiasm for America in the French mind, since they were produced at the turn of a century that marks the redefinition of America and the progressive obfuscation of the meaning with which it is endowed. Indeed, the meaning of a sign is always capable of evolving, and the connotations gravitating around it, like electrons around the nucleus of an atom, can be replaced progressively by new associations of ideas, more or less flattering, depending on historical events that may lead us to consider it differently or on the propagation of a discourse that attempts to reconceptualize it on new bases. This study will be brought to a close by asking why the redefinition of America in French thought began with the French Revolution and how the hyperbolic philo-Americanism at the end of the eighteenth century became the fierce anti-Americanism of the nineteenth century.

The classic work by Echeverria, *Mirage in the West*, provides the beginning of a response to this question. If the “American Dream” disappears, it is, according to him, because it no longer has any reason to exist after the Revolution: “[The dream] died because it became unnecessary. It had been created, deliberately or not, as a device to prove that certain ideals were universally true and universally practical, that any democratic constitutional republic founded on the principles of political and civil liberty, popular sovereignty, the rights of man, and the enlightenment of the people would produce moral salvation and social and material progress.”³

Once the French Revolution had begun, the enthusiasm for the American model became useless, since its primary function was to show the viability of political reforms to be implemented in France, while embellishing its model at the expense of the truth. “The moment the first stone was wrenched from the Bastille, the American example became superfluous,” observes Echeverria, before adding, “Those who continued to believe in the Revolutionary creed had no longer any need to look across the Atlantic to find justification for their ideals and their actions.”⁴ However, if this hypothesis explains the decline of the philo-American discourse, it does not help us understand the rise of anti-Americanism in French opinion, since the disappearance of the “American Dream” would not lead automatically to the development of a discourse condemning the imminent spread of American values throughout the world.

America: Figure of Alterity

To explain fully the intensification of French anti-Americanism during the nineteenth century, it is necessary to add that America, after 1794, did not only lose

the role of model that it had formerly played; it became a figure of otherness to which France could only relate by noting their differences.⁵ Both the mobile and polysemous characteristics of the sign “America” explain this change in status.

Contrary to the linguistic sign whose meaning is determined by convention within a community of speakers, a political sign is endowed with contradictory meanings depending on the person who uses it, since it plays the role of an argument among opposing theses that manipulate it with little regard for its referent. In the eyes of the opponents of 1789, America appeared as the fatal instigator of the Revolution and the noxious justification of those who chose to sever their allegiance to their legitimate sovereign. As for its partisans, they saw America as a cumbersome precedent, given that it minimized the historical uniqueness of the French Revolution and contradicted its pretention to alone carry aloft the torch of universal values. Although the real influence of America on the French Revolution was diversely appreciated by the partisans and adversaries of 1789, they all regarded it as the cradle of a civilization that was radically different from French civilization. If France was regenerated by the Revolution, it was at the same time definitively distinguished from America; and if “true” France was really what it was before 1789, America was still its antithesis. In both cases, America was no longer the double of France but rather a nation that exhibited a conflicting spirit, culture, and values. This is, paradoxically, how the polysemous character of the sign “America” developed into an exclusively condemnatory discourse.

The revolutionary break thus led to a reevaluation of the symbolic function that America was capable of fulfilling in relation to France. Unable to play anything other than the role of a foil, the sign “America” was no longer employed in a discourse attempting to imagine France in comparison to Washington’s Republic, to find across the Atlantic the justification for political reforms; it designated an “other” against which the French identity was defined in a critical spirit. This radical change in the meaning bestowed on America, itself inseparable from the development of anti-Americanism in the nineteenth century, was accompanied by a reversal of the respective positions of France and the United States on an imaginary temporal axis. Whereas America was identified by the philo-American discourse with the resurgence of a mythical past, the anti-American discourse emphasized the alterity that it represented, seeing it as what it was not yet but threatened to become, that is to say, the foreshadowing of a disquieting future.

A Paradoxical Philo-Americanism

In fact, what characterizes philo-Americanism is not only the promotion of a eulogistic discourse on the New World but also the postulate of a similarity between

America and France that rested on the principle of anteriority of the former in relation to the latter. The study of the works of Crèvecoeur, Lezay-Marnésia, and Chateaubriand has revealed that these authors reinvented America's past in order to imagine the means to a possible regeneration of France. The myth of the Golden Age, whose resurrection in the New World stirred the imagination of Crèvecoeur and Lezay-Marnésia, was constructed like a model that was to inspire the French to adapt it to the specific character of their society by promoting reforms such as the return of the aristocracy to the countryside, the limiting of the power of the monarchy, the creation of elites playing the role of intermediaries between the people and the king, as well as the establishment of festivities nurturing affective bonds between the dominant and dominated social classes. In the literal sense, Lezay-Marnésia was calling for the rebirth of a defunct France in the United States, where it would finally discover the circumstances conducive to the implementation of the political and social program of the *Monarchiens* that the Revolution seemed to favor for a moment before crushing it. Likewise, the elegiac portrayal of an extinct New World in *Atala* conceals a pragmatic hidden agenda: Chateaubriand hoped that his description of New France would turn out to be useful, if ever his country decided to reconstitute its lost colonial empire.⁶ In the final analysis, philo-Americanism reconstructed America's past in order to conduct experiments there for a possible future for France.

Conversely, anti-Americanism displaces the United States on the temporal axis by reconceptualizing it as a foreshadowing of an undesirable future. It views America as an image of the country that France could become if its inhabitants were not careful. This perspective is adopted notably by Baudelaire, who associated the verbal expression he invented, "to become Americanized" [*s'américaniser*], with the imminence of an apocalyptic future in which the French, like the other peoples on earth, will have become American on the moral plane: "Mechanics will have so Americanized us, progress will have so completely atrophied our spiritual side, that nothing in the murderous, sacrilegious, or unnatural dreams of the utopians could be compared to its results."⁷ By describing an ongoing process, the expression "to become Americanized" summarizes by itself the fear at the root of French hostility toward the United States as it developed in the nineteenth century: that France would adopt the values of American civilization and eventually resemble it like a certified copy, a fear whose expression is still found today in the criticism of a supposed "Americanization" of cultural, gastronomic, and fashion norms in France. The title of Georges Duhamel's work *Scènes de la vie future* (*Scenes of Future Life*, 1930) is symptomatic of this representation, both prophetic and reprobative, of the United States.⁸ In this text, whose influence was considerable on the intellectuals of its time, Duhamel adopts the position of a Cassandra warning the Old

World of the dangers that the barbaric Americans pose for the great European civilization:

No nation has yet, more deliberately than the United States of America, abandoned itself to the excesses of the industrial civilization. . . . There can no longer be any doubt that this civilization is capable of, and indeed is in the process of, conquering the Old World. This America thus represents, for us, the Future. Let each of us Occidentals immediately denounce loyally whatever is American in his house, in his manner of dress, in his soul. Our future! Inside twenty years, we will be able to find all of the stigmata of this voracious civilization on the limbs of Europe.⁹

Associated with the memory of the invasions that brought Rome down, the growing cultural domination of America was also compared to a silent epidemic whose inexorable character threatened the very spirit of European civilization, without any apparent recourse capable of confronting the inexorable advance, the devious and corruptive intrusion deep inside people: “There is, on our continent, in France as everywhere else, broad spaces that the spirit of Old Europe has already deserted. The American genius is colonizing, little by little, a given province, city, home, or soul.”¹⁰

The elements that constitute American society, such as they are described by its denigrators, will eventually prevail, they are persuaded, beyond its borders: puritanism, the lure of profits, publicity, mass production and consumption, the paradoxical assertion of the value of the individual associated with a permanent surveillance of each by the others in order to guarantee social conformity. All of these American traits—if we are to believe its detractors—are rapidly proliferating by means of globalization, since this insures the triumphant circulation of material goods that characterizes the economic success of the United States, just as it insures the dissemination of cultural goods promoting the ideals at their base. While philo-Americanism invented a fantasized image of America in order to utilize it in a political debate over the future of France, anti-Americanism redefines it as a radical otherness threatening the specificity of the French identity, a specificity that is itself problematical and that uses hostility toward the United States in its effort to define itself: France is a country whose lifestyle, health system, and social services in general, among many other things, are considered as models to the extent that they differentiate themselves from their equivalents across the Atlantic. In the final analysis, the fundamental nature of anti-Americanism is to see in the United States not only a country but especially an idea, through a process of abstraction that usually is employed by its partisans rather than its detractors. But this idea, as defined by the latter, cannot be summarized as an ideal of equality that the heroes of the American Revolution

supposedly announced for the first time in the history of the world—this equality that, according to Tocqueville, is, far more than liberty, the true base on which American civilization resides. On the contrary, this idea is summarized rather by a simpleminded form of hedonism that many observers foresee spreading across the planet. What Régis Debray called, significantly, “the exported America” and others have called “the American cancer” is the “American Way of Life” caricatured as a negation of critical reflection and the expression of a desire for instant and crude gratification, with an underlying darker purpose: an appetite for domination that is now playing out in the political domain after having restricted itself earlier to that of culture and morality.¹¹

All the same, philo-Americanism and anti-Americanism are not antithetical discourses, the one opposing systematically the positions of the other, because the paradoxical nature of the first prevents us from viewing it as the strict opposite of the second. Indeed, philo-Americanism reserves its admiration for what no longer exists and, still better, for a largely fictionalized representation of America and not for a real period in its history. By idealizing the past, this current only succeeds in better emphasizing the extent to which the present is inferior to it: French admiration for America undermines its own foundation by recognizing that it can only be provoked by a defunct object. In this respect, the growing pessimism of Chateaubriand regarding the United States is a phenomenon symptomatic of an evolution under way in his time: “Circa 1830, it really was ‘in’ in Europe to sneer at America,” observes Roger in his seminal study on French anti-Americanism.¹²

In a complementary manner, the circulation of the philo-American discourse by Crèvecoeur, Lezay-Marnésia, and Chateaubriand prepared the disappointment of travelers who would visit this country hidden behind the ocean and a mountain of books. It was, in fact, when the fictitious past of America was compared with its present state by the people who had traveled there that the philo-American sentiment tended to wane. The French officers, for example, filled with enthusiasm by the myth of the rebirth of the Golden Age in America, went there to defend the cause of the insurgents only to discover a less idyllic reality than they had expected; many were transformed into denigrators of the model that had given rise to their premature admiration.¹³ Likewise, the emigrants who took refuge in the United States during the French Revolution, seeking an unadulterated state of nature in which they could reconstruct their country, returned home at the first opportunity.¹⁴ In short, America only ever aroused the enthusiasm of the French if it was first subjected to a reinvention: it could only be loved when it was already lost.