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Anti-Americanism and Ambivalence in the New Germany

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Two years after the bitter U.S.-German divide over Iraq, a number of opinion polls suggest that anti-American feelings are growing worldwide. European societies are one locus of a swell in resentment against the United States. In Germany, the increase in anti-Americanism has often been seen as a revival of the recurrent German obsession with American power that has surged many times in recent history, such as at the turn of the 20th century, during the interwar period, throughout the 1950s, and in the era of testy debates over nuclear missile deployment in the 1980s. However, neither anecdotal observation nor polling data, with their seductive appearance of precision, provide a complete picture of either the state or causes of anti-Americanism in Germany. The phenomenon can not be adequately grasped if the ideological expressions of its actors are taken at face value. The complexity of modern anti-Americanism and the current transformations in German society defy simple empirical observation or broad statistical data.

Consider the rapid change in public debate in the months following the September 11 attacks. Immediately after the attacks, over 250,000 Berliners gathered in front of the Brandenburg Gate to show their affection and solidarity with the people of the United States. During that event, almost the entire German government listened to American blues songs and to a speech by the U.S. ambassador. The most emotional moment occurred when many people started applauding before the Ambassador's remarks could be translated. Soon Chancellor Schroeder's promise of "unconditional solidarity" followed, and only a few weeks later the Social-Democrat/Green party coalition government narrowly survived a vote of confidence in order to send German troops to Afghanistan. Germany had once again proven itself a reliable ally.

But such bold statements were quickly overshadowed by opposing positions. Then President Johannes Rau, one of the speakers at the Berlin demonstration, was the first to express his concern about possible American overreactions to the terrorist attacks. He was swiftly joined by a number of church representatives and conservatives, such as former Deputy Defense Minister Willy Wimmer and Norbert Blum, a former government minister and the icon of Rhineland-style social Catholicism. After the war in Afghanistan began in October 2001, these murmurs became louder and more pronounced, especially among the generation that had grown up under fascism. Thus, the opposition against the Afghanistan invasion began to encompass a broad number of public figures, such as *Spiegel* editor Rudolf Augstein, ex-chancellor Helmut Schmidt and Lothar de Maiziere, the head of the post-1990 GDR government. Prominent Social

Democrats and labor union leaders asked the United States government to “immediately stop the bombardment of Afghanistan.” Gunter Gauss, a former member of the late Willy Brandt’s government, denounced the “unscrupulousness of carpet bombing and the use of cluster bombs.” Finally, the Vice-President of the German parliament, Antje Vollmer, expressed concern that the U.S. was prepared to “convert the war against the Taliban into a world-wide campaign against an unlimited number of potential fallback territories.”

German ambivalence towards the United States has some commonalities with other more uncompromising and violent forms of anti-Americanism, though there remain some major differences. This anti-Americanism ranges from relatively mild antipathy, to stronger forms of the “Yankee go home” genre, to the fervent radicalism of the intelligentsia that can be seen in parts of the Arab world. But ideas do not equate to actions, and referring to Anti-Americanism without distinguishing between rhetorical and violent forms obscures the distinct ways in which they have to be addressed analytically and politically.

Today Anti-Americanism fulfills multiple functions: as a simple vocabulary to convey complex ideas; as a point of agreement for those who otherwise would not have much to do with each other; and as a comprehensible framework for world politics after the Cold War. In its everyday expression, anti-Americanism helps to accomplish a sociological miracle: it ties the abstract and concrete together. Overarching (and sometimes overwhelming) economic and cultural developments are condensed into a simplistic worldview. Such false abstractions are daily practice in many societies and “America” is the canvas for these projections. The United States serves this purpose not so much because of its foreign policy, but because the United States is the only remaining point of reference in a world with no order.

Not Your Father’s Anti-Americanism

Analogies to earlier epochs of Anti-Americanism only tend to obscure the degree to which current German ambivalence is rooted in such contemporary issues. Pre-1914 anti-Americanism was linked to ideas about a possible German world power, and the potential conflict of such a power with the United States, which by 1900 had become the world’s biggest economic entity. There was a real sense of imperial competition that emanated from a thoroughly anti-modern and anti-socialist bourgeoisie. Anti-Americanism then migrated into the core of German elite self perception and became an integral part of German nationalistic folklore. After World War I, cultural and political anti-Americanism merged into a hatred of Woodrow Wilson’s internationalism, and, ironically, the League of Nations, which anticipated the national socialist imperialism of the have-not nations. This prejudice hardened in the following years when the Nazi agitators combined it with their anti-Semitic rhetoric of racial superiority, denouncing Uncle Sam as “Uncle Shylock.” In the postwar period, the consumer society that had existed in the United States for a generation became the universal standard in the Western world. Again, it looked as if the world was being Americanized. From the European perspective, America was the territorial exemplar of what the future would bring.

Although de-Nazification was fairly successful in Germany, nationalist attitudes did not die out immediately after 1945. Direct nationalist rhetoric was impossible for much of the post-war

period. The legend of “Zero Hour”—the start from scratch—became an important ideological feature of the new Federal Republic of Germany and, until recently, one could only mention previous national traditions in negative terms. But even in the 1950s and 1960s, ambivalence towards the United States was a crucial ingredient of German politics and was widespread across party lines. Konrad Adenauer, the four-time postwar chancellor, made it quite clear that he did not fully accept the new constitution because it had been foisted upon the Germans by America and France. As a traditional German conservative growing up in the First Empire, he was also a shrewd politician who used Anti-American sentiments for domestic gain. By criticizing the “superficial culture” of the United States, one could easily highlight European and German cultural profundity without stumbling into the taboo subject of German nationalism.

The student rebellion in the late 1960s, with its American style protests that included sit-ins, teach-ins, demonstrations and public debates, was crucial for the first substantial democratization of postwar German society. That movement’s legitimate criticism of the Vietnam War, shared by many Americans, should not be interpreted as proof of the persistence of pre-WWII anti-Americanism. The war in South-East Asia and the protests against the United States, however, did lead to a shift in German political identification from West to South. Since these protests could not refer positively to German national traditions, the re-creation of German identity had to proceed negatively against the United States, which explains the revival of anti-imperialist rhetoric during the 1970s and the frequent comparison of U.S. economic orthodoxy with Nazi economics.

This perception of the United States also derived from a unique feature of the Federal Republic. A good part of post-war Germany’s success story had to do with it being a society without a nation, an economic power without national interests, and a global player with almost no foreign policy responsibilities. Germany was at the center of world politics for several decades without seriously participating in them. This extraordinary situation reinforced the “resolute neutrality” that Hannah Arendt had already observed during her first visit to the country in 1950. As misplaced as it has sometimes appeared, resolute neutrality has been an important ingredient in democratizing post-war German society. It is the most radical possible negation of Nazi ideology, through which the Nazi politics of will have been replaced by the politics of unwillingness. This essentially self-absorbed policy orientation did not change with the unification of the two Germanies in 1990. In fact, the headlong eastward expansion of the Federal Republic focused attention on domestic issues and served, paradoxically, to solidify Cold War mentalities for yet another decade.

However, two important challenges to this attitude have occurred within the last few years. First, in September 1998, the federal elections completed an overdue generational change by bringing the post-war group of the 1960s to power. With these faces came new ideas of Germany’s role on the world stage. Second, after the deployment of German troops in the Balkans and in Afghanistan after the attacks of September 11, 2001, it became obvious that Germany could not maintain its position of resolute neutrality. But even with new personnel and new circumstances, changing that position was not an easy task. Old political and social traditions were disappearing without being replaced by new ones. The resulting vacuum could not be filled with positive references to democratic national traditions in Germany, because few had ever existed.

In this situation, a sort of mild anti-Americanism has helped to establish new political and foreign policy traditions in Germany. This has been accomplished negatively, in the style of the early post-war Federal Republic. Chancellor Schroeder clumsily distanced himself from the United States because he thought this would help him win re-election in 2002. Even though his halfhearted anti-Americanism did not turn out to be the decisive factor in his victory against his conservative challenger, Edmund Stoiber, it still contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of distrust of the United States. In civil society, fierce criticism and anti-Americanism persists on many German TV talk shows, in literary supplements, and in academic debates. Thus, for example, Nobel literature laureate Guenther Grass refused on the NTV news network to talk about the suffering in New York, but rather accused the CIA of “terrorist activities,” and political scientist Otto Czempel at Frankfurt University insinuated that 9/11 was an instance of “globalization striking back.”

Anti-Americanism Begins at Home

These attitudes have often served to cover up Germany’s own inability and unwillingness to act. Over time, however, the mixture of military responsibility, new democratic policies, and stubborn resentment that currently characterizes society and politics are helping to free the new Germany from the practices and rhetoric of a neutrality-based exceptionalism.

German society began to undergo dramatic changes in the second half of the Cold War and after the election of social-democratic chancellor Willy Brandt in 1969. Its modernization happened American-style, when the middle classes came to power and replaced the reactionary bourgeoisie. This occurred primarily as increasing prosperity created a stable and relatively democratic middle class society. This transformation also influenced the new style of anti-American resentment, because today nobody wants to be seen either as anti-modern or as anti-American.

In his book *Aspekte der Alltagsreligio*, sociologist Detlev Claussen called it the “yes but” style of ambivalence towards the United States, which undermines traditional anti-Americanism but still preserves considerable resentment. It is, as Claussen argues, “the brand of anti-Americanism, to which intellectuals subscribe, which spans generations and stirs up resentment against any exercise of power.” It is expressed in ambivalent forms, such as harboring a dislike for George W. Bush, but not being anti-American, or as regarding U.S. foreign policy as imperialist and barbaric, but not being against America as a society.

These forms of ambivalence differ from hardened prejudice and they demonstrate once more how the United States serves as the antithetical standard by which European self-definition takes place. If this ambivalence were thoughtfully considered rather than used for short-term political gain, the reconstruction of the West could finally begin. Such a reconstruction can only be achieved if one reaches beyond questions of current domestic and foreign policy. Rather, it will require the conscious effort to redefine “the West” not in territorial terms but as a political entity that transcends national stereotypes.