

INDUSTRIAL MODERNITY AND ITS ANTI-AMERICANISMS

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THE MANICHAEAN CLARITY OF THE COLD WAR HAS been sufficiently obscured by the rise of anti-Americanism to make it virtually impossible today to assume that all the then anti-communists are now staunch supporters of the United States, or to imagine that all those who regarded the Soviet Union as an inspiring portent of the future are now marching the streets of Paris, London, and Rome shouting obscenities against Mr. Bush. Gone are the days when French, Swedish, Portuguese, or Italian anti-Americanism was a mandatory, blue-collar, political by-product of the Cold War. It is now a commonplace that suspicion, if not outright dislike, of the United States and everything it represents derive disconcerting nourishment not only from the intelligentsia but from the higher reaches of some of the more prosperous and stable societies of the Western world. At the same time, the youth of the newly affluent working classes of these same countries—even when retaining faint memories of the compulsory anti-

Americanism of the Cold War years—succumb happily to the embrace of the cultural creations of the colossus of the New World.

Unlike those Muslim countries where religion and politics coalesce and a robust and undifferentiated hatred of the great Satan is shared by all ranks, the anti-Americanism of the more advanced Western nations is characteristically diversified. It has spawned at least one influential variant that appears to be class-specific and has regaled the Western cultural tradition with a breathtakingly original, latter-day extension of Tom Wolfe's seminal concept of "radical chic."¹

The operative word here is not "radical," but "chic." Just as it was considered wildly audacious to sip Martinis with leather-clad Black Panthers in the Manhattan penthouses of the 1960s, or exchange pleasantries with Symbionese Liberation Army volunteers while wondering how the kids were getting along with their Weathermen buddies, in today's fashionable quarters of Paris, Berlin, and Brussels, anti-Americanist chic is "in," and not just with the useful idiots of the Cold War years. Considerable numbers of otherwise sane and respectable people are pouring obloquy on the United States, casting doubts on the intellectual acumen of President Bush, dismissing Colin Powell as a kind of Uncle Tom and Condoleezza Rice as an apprentice to Mrs. Thatcher and a traitor to gender and race.²

Tom Wolfe observed that the great Leonard ("Lenny") Bernstein and his friends favored earthy, primitive, exotic, romantic, and preferably muscular radicalisms—qualities not readily associated with the American vanguard of industrial modernity, but dynamic Western society often takes astonishing turns, and this one certainly deserves to find its way into the history books under its proper name: "anti-American chic."

¹ Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (New York: Bantam, 1970).

² This unwelcome and disconcerting development has not remained unobserved. See Jean-François Revel, *L'Obsession Anti-Américaine* (Paris: Plon, 2002); and Philippe Roger, *L'Ennemi Américain. Généalogie de l'antiaméricanisme français* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

The swift rise of anti-American chic has brought about a surfeit of hand-wringing and teeth-gnashing explanations that, given the urgencies of the moment, have unfailingly attended to the contingent and the particular, such as the Kyoto episode, the retention of capital punishment, the International Criminal Court, American “unilateralism,” the legal status of the Guantánamo inmates, and, of course, envy of the prosperity and power of the United States, rather than to less publicized antecedents and long-term factors, some of which may deserve closer examination.

Such factors are mostly associated with the genesis and consequences, some quite unintended, of the English Industrial Revolution and the resulting cultural tidal-wave of industrial modernity, the swift progress of which is now popularly lampooned under the label of “globalization.” Less attention has been directed to the fact that the term refers to the virtual universalization of cultural artifacts and social habits that, almost without exception, carry an imprimatur of aggressive vulgarity consistent with the tastes and preferences of the first affluent working class in world history.³ It must be added that this notable social and economic achievement has not been at the expense of American excellence in the realm of “high culture.” This is confirmed by the many magnificent concert halls and opera companies; splendid museums and universities; and scientific and technological institutions that adorn a continuing industrial revolution tempered in its execution and results by remarkably successful *sui generis* democratic arrangements. These arrangements were bruised somewhat by a sanguinary civil war and are modified from time to time in response to contemporary usage and exigencies, but have certainly stood the test of time far better than those of every major nation outside the English-speaking world.

³ The negative impact of this vulgarity has not been attenuated by the silliness of American political correctness, whose intrusive prescriptions are greeted in Europe with mirth, derision, or contempt. How could one fault the French intelligentsia for objecting to the exclusion from some American academic programs of deceased white personages such as Voltaire, Ronsard, Diderot, Condorcet, Louis XIV, Talleyrand, Mazarin, Hugo, and Stendhal?

The problem is that good laws efficiently and fairly administered, successful voluntary organizations, clubs and neighborhood or national associations of patchwork quilters, skiers, anarchists, vintage car collectors, socialists, orchid growers, bungee-jumpers, ornithologists, mountain climbers, cake-decorators, and Esperanto speakers, as well as the immensely civilized civic and political ambit that enables all these diverse activities to prosper, are not readily exportable and certainly lack the visibility and undemanding acceptability of, say, blue jeans, rap, skate boards, baseball caps, exposed navels, poker, tattoos, soft drinks, hamburgers, Broadway musicals, jazz, chewing gum, breast implants, skyscrapers, basketball, hot dogs, and the Internet.

What our world has witnessed during the past half century is a process of elective affinities of global proportions that has irreversibly modified the cultural landscape. The manner of this transformation has by now become almost predictable, with the sons and daughters of the working classes of the more prosperous Western nations steadily and effortlessly moving away from hallowed traditional loyalties and habits of consumption and embracing instead the emphatically vulgar cultural artifacts and dispositions of their generational counterparts in Chicago, Liverpool, Los Angeles, and Cincinnati. The aggressiveness of this massive process of acculturation cannot be overlooked; but it is an aggressiveness consistent with the aplomb and creativity of the first truly prosperous working class, a free people as full of self-confidence as they are lacking in self-consciousness.

During the Cold War, the mostly inelegant excesses of Hollywood, Las Vegas, San Francisco, and Madison Avenue; the American military presence (over-paid, over-sexed, and over here); and the increasingly visible and very audible flood of American tourists, were condescendingly tolerated by the upper social strata of Brussels, Paris, Frankfurt, and Florence. Their displeasure was muffled by the keen awareness that putting up with these unfortunate imports—clear evidence of American industrial, cultural, and military vitality—was a reasonable price to pay for the security they enjoyed sheltered behind the only credible bulwark against international communism. With the end of the Cold War, the high tide of fear-induced harmony and good-fellowship has gradually receded exposing ragged peaks of cultural contempt.

On its own, this cultural contempt would probably have been ignored, either because of habit or good manners, but it has been transformed into vociferous anti-American chic because of a number of other contemporary developments, of which the most important is probably the emergence of an “Old Europe” leadership intent on transforming the European Union into a countervailing power that will bring the upstart Americans to heel. This influence of an EU led by France and Germany has attracted deserved attention and does not need reiteration.⁴ However, there are three additional factors that do justify consideration: the contrast between the appalling military record of the dominant European nations and the military might sustained by the most powerful economy in world history; the latent anti-Semitism of the upper reaches of European society; and the realization by the invariably left-leaning members of the intelligentsia that now they can, with impunity, place the blame for the eclipse of the joys of traditional *Gemeinschaft* community and the abuse of natural resources on the shoulders of the English-speaking vanguard of industrialism.

The first additional factor to be considered concerns military aspects of the current world order. The banal observation that great economic power can translate into formidable military clout does not tell the whole story. If this were the whole story, its importance would be both obvious and limited. The paradoxical military histories of the dominant Western European nations suggest that wounded pride can fester into unrelieved acrimony that makes an impression among the ruling groups of the political spectrum.

It is astonishing that the two great nations of the West with the nicest military uniforms, the shiniest boots, the best martial music and parades, the most elegant headgear, and the most moving chronicles of battles fought are also encumbered with the least impressive record in military matters. When did Germany last win a war? In 1870, Germany defeated France when, after Sedan, large numbers of mules, horses,

⁴ See The Right Hon Lord Lamont of Lerwick, *The European Union and the United States: The Coming Confrontation* (Boston: The University Professors, Boston University, 2001).

guns, soldiers, officers, generals, and one emperor fell into the hands of Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm I.⁵ This momentous victory invited a repetition that has proved as costly as it has been elusive. As for France, unless the inglorious impasse at the Crimea or the pathetic retreat from Mexico (where much of the fighting was left to the Foreign Legion) are declared victories, Wagram, in 1809, appears to be the last battle clearly won by the French (albeit under Corsican leadership). As for their last victory in a fully-fledged war waged without assistance from loyal and powerful allies, we must go back to the high school version of the 1679 Peace of Nijmegen, with Louis XIV emerging on top, though the French victory in the Dutch Wars is questionable.⁶ This means that the Germans have been denied military victories for 133 years, while the hapless French have endured 324 years of defeats. The usual apologies apply, of course, but the phrase “punch-drunk” comes to mind to describe societies so painfully bereft of the one kind of glory that they appear sincerely to value.

To be trounced at war is not a trivial matter, and regardless of how courageously a nation endures the unendurable, a succession of defeats, in addition to widows and orphans, must have emotional consequences (ranging from feelings of inadequacy to outright resentment) that probably offend the collective conscience in ways as difficult to gauge as they are to overcome. Such feelings are unlikely to vanish when crumbling French armies are rescued by large numbers of English-speaking

⁵ It was the Prussians who brought down the Second Empire, but as Sedan also opened the gates for the formal proclamation of the German Empire, I think that it would be petty to deny Germany the credit for that particular campaign. The value accorded by the French to military deeds, whether successful or not, is perhaps well exemplified by the fact that the Arc de Triomphe, which dominates one of the great thoroughfares of the Western world, was inaugurated in 1836, 21 years after Napoleon’s crushing defeat at Waterloo, which would be akin to the Japanese government erecting a triumphal arch in Tokyo, in 1966, to commemorate the defeat of China and the fall of Singapore.

⁶ Another result of the three Dutch Wars was the emergence of England as the world’s dominant sea power, an outcome not quite consistent with an unqualified French victory, but crucial to understanding what occurred in the wars of the Grand Alliance (1686–1697) and the Spanish Succession (1701–1712). Both were started with some successes for the French, but not for long, as evidenced by the decisive encounters at La Hogue, Blenheim, Ramillies, and Malplaquet.

soldiers, not once, but twice in a few decades. Even less so when the economic chaos left by the most recent and massive defeat, in the Second World War, is also put right by generous handouts from the same English-speaking source.⁷ Finally, if this insulting generosity, piled on top of the original battlefield humiliation, was not enough, the subsequent disinclination or inability, or both, of these countries to provide for their own defense has made it necessary, and largely at their own request, for many thousands of English-speaking soldiers to remain in Europe for more than half a century. For nations so eager to glorify a sobering military past, circumstances such as these can be trying, especially among those upper-class circles whose appreciation of military prowess seems to be more earnest than, say, that normally found among coal miners, peasants, and stevedores.

The second additional factor to be considered is anti-Semitism. There is little doubt that anti-Semitism, latent or otherwise, has found in anti-American chic a most convenient ally for the trek back into social respectability. This is at least in part because it is possible to interpret the crisis in the Middle East as one pitting the United States and Israel against countries and forces associated directly or indirectly with terrorist activities. There is no need to invoke the Dreyfus episode, the policies of the Vichy regime, the Cremieux Crisis, or the contemporary German attempts to address their own “Jewish question,” to conjecture that the anti-Semitism now reappearing in the upper reaches of French and German societies was dormant there all the time. It is not difficult to understand why, during the Cold War, it was considered offensive, impolite, or inopportune to air such views, since the business at hand was to keep the Soviet threat within bounds with the help of decisively anti-communist and well-armed countries such as the United States and Israel. At present, however, the revived anti-Semitism is acquiring an odd kind of acceptance by hanging on to the coat-tails of

⁷ If even a sliver of truth can be assigned to the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s concept of collective conscience, it is difficult to avoid conjecturing that it would be this entity, in France as well as in Germany, that would emerge most sorely bruised by such reiterated military setbacks. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (New York: Free, 1933) 79.

anti-American chic. This is especially true of the upper layers of French and German society where forceful reservations about Israel's policies, approval of the Palestinian position, and doubts about the unhappy consequences—they include September 11th among these—of American support for Israel have become the flavor of the season.⁸

The third factor that invites consideration is the transition from *Gemeinschaft* (or communal) to *Gesellschaft* (or associational) social arrangements, arguably the most challenging and irreversible consequence of the advance of industrial modernity. This was first observed and given system and nomenclature by the founding fathers of the modern study of society. From Comte, Marx, and Durkheim, to Weber, Le Play, and Tonnies, these thinkers helped to establish the idea of community, and especially of community lost, as an indispensable component of any attempt to understand the complexities of the social impact of the English Industrial Revolution.⁹ The argument is both simple and compelling. At the heart of the continuing Industrial Revolution, and the resulting culture of industrial modernity, is a process of change driven forward relentlessly by the technological applications and concomitant economic and social adjustments of an expanding frontier of scientific knowledge. This need not be a prescription for historical determinism, but can be simply a complex, interactive, and obviously indeterminate fact with each of these changes demanding recombinations of land, capital, and labor—the three classical factors of

⁸ The emergence of anti-Semitism as an influential factor in France is undeniable, and it may have spread more widely than is supposed if the alarm expressed by the French Minister of Education, M. Luc Ferry, is to be taken seriously. Early in March of 2003, M. Ferry described the situation as a "trivialization of anti-Semitism" that amounted to a "true danger," with record numbers of racist and anti-Semitic incidents recorded in the 2002 fall term. This coincides with what Jeffrey Mehlman has written about, albeit from a more scholarly vantage point. See Jeffrey Mehlman, "Sad News from France: L'anti-semitisme nouveau est arrivé..." *Contemporary French Civilization* 27 (2003): 2.

⁹ The typology that has attained deserved universality belongs uniquely to the seminal work by Ferdinand Tonnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1887) but the concept itself has many fathers. For a helpful explanation, see Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic, 1966) Part Two, chapter 3, "Community."

production—and thereby impressing on each a necessary and unprecedented social and spatial mobility. This brings about a generalized substitution of rational, elective, and mostly ephemeral *Gesellschaft*, or associational arrangements, for the traditionally tightly structured pre-industrial *Gemeinschaft* community.

This is Sociology 101 stuff that, interpreted by Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, brought death to many millions of human beings and became an integral item of the ideological baggage of the left-wing intelligentsia until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Marx saw with lethal clarity that traditional *Gemeinschaft* community stood everywhere and in every conceivable way as an obstacle to what he believed to be the inevitable progress towards a communist society of equals. Decisively distancing himself from Oliver Goldsmith's idyllic vision in his poem "The Deserted Village," he wrenched traditional community away from the cloying sentimentality of the romantics and defined it anew as the exemplary symbol of the oppressive darkness of irrational loyalties and affections, tradition, and superstition. Writing about social change in India, he explained that "we must not forget that these idyllic village communities...restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unrelenting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules."¹⁰ And applauding the bourgeois revolution that transformed European society since the sixteenth century, he stated that "it set free the political spirit which had, so to speak, been dissolved, fragmented, and lost in the various *cul de sacs* of feudal society."¹¹ These blind alleys that impeded the march of history included the family, all forms of local and regional allegiance, vocational or hereditary loyalty to occupation, guild affiliations, and, of course, the claims of religion. Such a robust rejection of every kind of customary human arrangement supplied the firm theoretical foundation for his approval of the "giant broom" of a French Revolution that had swept all the communal rubbish into the proverbial dustbin of history.

¹⁰ Lewis C. Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor, 1959) 480.

¹¹ Karl Marx, "The Jewish Question," *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, ed. T.B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964) 28 ff.

Throughout the somber years of the Cold War, this principal theoretical instruction was followed to the letter. The onerous task of conserving traditional values and institutions was left exclusively to conservatives, who found few allies among the ranks of revolutionary workers, peasants, and soldiers—let alone among an intelligentsia that was loudly advancing the creation of day-care centers as a substitute for the outmoded comforts and affections of family life, and the international solidarity of the proletariat as an adequate antidote for the rising tide of twentieth-century regionalisms and nationalisms.¹²

Things have changed mightily since the crumbling of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of its theoretical and conceptual scaffolding. These momentous events have in turn resulted in some astonishing reconsiderations and realignments under new battle flags. But none are as bizarre as the one that has led to the intimate cohabitation of the European left-wing intelligentsia with the traditionalist, conservative, anti-American chic devotees of Western Europe. The cement that now binds together such seemingly incompatible partners is their visceral hatred of the United States—in one, the shop-soiled remnant of the best years of the Cold War; in the other, the fiery passion rightly reserved for those emerging from closets or perceiving the light *en route* to Damascus. Only a few years ago, Marxist intellectuals were lustily defending Mao's cultural revolution, justifying the pitiless obliteration of village traditions, the re-education of Cambodian deviationists, and the robust rejection of reactionary sentimental flotsam, such as conjugal love, friendship, and national loyalty. The very same intellectuals are now rediscovering the therapeutic charms of unhurried village life; the creative pleasures of arts and crafts; the joys of tree-hugging holidays

¹² Unjustly ignored by today's anti-globalization marchers is the telling fact that the original battle hymn of their revolutionary precursors was aptly called "The International," and if left in the hands of an uninspired committee could easily have been called "The Globalist." The title reflects the earnest wish of those early pioneering marchers to erase all differences, homogenize everything, and move everyone screaming, shouting, and wearing Mao suits into the kind of future the thought of which left Sydney and Beatrice Webb, Anna Louise Strong, and Harold Laski dewy-eyed, and moved Lincoln Steffens, on his return from the Soviet Union in 1919, to utter his justly famous "I have seen the future, and it works." See Justin Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975) chapter 3, ii.

and country cooking; and the satisfaction of counting M. Chirac as their very own comrade in arms.¹³ As can be imagined, their upper-class bedfellows are as impressed by the heart-warming devotion of the intellectual leaders of the proletariat to decaying manor houses, herbaraceous borders, ancient music, and private schools as they are by the unhesitant and generous way in which their new friends have understood, indeed applauded, their own reservations about Israel and the mysterious activities of the Zionists, their steadfast defense of national honor and the purity of the language against American inroads, their qualified admiration for Fidel Castro and Colonel Gaddafi, and their staunch rejection of Colonel Sanders fried chicken, the Internet, MacDonald's hamburgers, Disney theme parks, Hollywood films, baseball caps worn backwards, and the invasion of Iraq.

However, the true shock of revelation came when in due course their shared enjoyment of anti-American chic gave birth to the realization that the heartless homogenization of everything; the sartorial imperialism; the unregulated distribution of immoral, violent, and wildly popular films; the irresponsible scientific advances and technological applications; the continuing recombinations of the forces of production; the plague of consumerism shamelessly encouraged by indiscriminate affluence, social mobility, and air-conditioned shopping malls; the obliteration of *Gemeinschaft* community; and, most importantly, a corrupting globalization that threatens fatally to divert the March of History, are all creatures of the English-speaking vanguard of industrial modernity—especially of the United States. It became clear across the Western European political spectrum that anti-American chic was vastly more than an aesthetic rejection of dry sandwiches and bad music. It has now been embraced as a hallowed duty—the only morally progressive response to the anguished appeals of Clio herself, abused, aggrieved, and badly let down by Russian ineptitude, to help defend her European homeland against the advancing gender-neutral, jogging, blue-jeaned, foul-mouthed, T-shirted, and hip hopping hungarian hordes.

¹³ Politically savvy Hillary R. Clinton wasted no time to climb on the bandwagon and penned, *It Takes a Village: and Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).