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ANTI-AMERICANISM IN AMERICA

My task today is to interject a consideration of anti-Americanism in the United States, to present a general framework for thinking about how such discursive regimes operate within the political and cultural life of the nation. Whenever I've mentioned this colloque and my role within it to friends at home, the response has inevitably been, "That should be easy, there's so much of it."

Indeed, in the worlds I inhabit—that is to say, the worlds of universities, of intellectual life more broadly, and of literary and artistic expression—everyone is to some degree "anti-American." They—or should I say "we"—operate in a constant state of tension with our own country. This does not prevent American "progressives" from being "patriots" in many circumstances, or even a little chauvinist from time to time. Anti-Americanism has developed into a seldom reflected-upon and largely habitual existential state. An identity develops that is marked by struggle with all that is backward and inhibiting. One defends one's egoism with a reaction to what actually is that is simultaneously metaphysical, moral, and aesthetic, a reaction that establishes a preference for what "ought to be."

The subject is thus filled with traps for me for the subject involves a narcissism that often characterizes American thought and reinforces a sense of American exceptionalism. If we cannot be the best of all possible worlds, then we might still enjoy

the satisfaction of being the worst. Along with the heroism of being assigned by fate to overcome the forces that prevent humanity from progressing further.

The subject thus seems to me inextricably linked with the pervasive myth that the United States is a country engaged in a process of continuous reinvention. Since it is a powerful society, American reinvention has increasingly brought with it transformation of the rest of the world. Much like here in Europe, debate within the United States over America's role in the world delineates questions of what paths to follow for future reinventions. To pose the role of the hyperpower, as Hubert Vedrine has aptly termed the mythic America unfolding before our eyes, is to ask the question, Is this future that appears so inevitable one that we want?

The danger is that obsession with the equation of America, modernity, and a future that is an object equally of desire and loathing comes with a price that in the United States has been very heavy. It coincides with the failure of critics to pose credible alternatives. A constant, pervasive sense of impotency drives the anger and turns it to subjective separation from the nation within which one is a leader. Nevertheless, there is a consolation: out of confrontation with impotency might come new forms of power that slowly transform the agencies of government.

Anti-Americanism internal to the United States thus has been an essential part of the engine of progressive change that has led to the nation assuming its current position in the world. Rejection of the state and of the nation-building project arises as a response to problems created through persistent transformation. Though experienced subjectively as a separation from a thoroughly corrupt nation, anti-Americanism has developed as a discursive framework within various sites that has endured for nearly 200 years because

it has been a force in the construction of national power.

A definition is in order. American anti-Americanism is not simply opposition to policies that the national state has developed. Nor is it simply critique of American society. American anti-Americanism differs from criticism of or dissent from, however violent, the policies governments implement in that the conclusion requires a disavowal, a disempowering of the state. To take responsibility for it, or even to replace it, is impossible for that would involve surrender to the forces that one must combat vigilantly to the end of time. This gives anti-American critique within the United States a bitterness that equals and often exceeds foreign criticisms. Anti-American Americans seek out the most vitriolic diatribes articulated abroad. Every foreign attack confirms a fatalistic and often fantastic view that self-critical Americans have already developed of their own country as they separate themselves from a history that they feel as irredeemable.

When successful, however, critiques result in institutional transformations that strengthen society and a state that rests upon an increasingly diversified and multitiered articulation of power. Anti-Americanism works to relocate power into the fabric of everyday life. It asserts the primacy of imagination over that which merely is. In Habermasian terms, it generates expanded forms of civil society that are in opposition to the state as those forms are in a process of emerging.

I want now to present several landmarks in the history of American anti-Americanism. This all too brief sketch will suggest how religious, moral, and aesthetic intersected to contest the merely political, the purely economic.

As a historian I am fond of foundational moments, those nodal points when internal contradictions ripen and by demanding attention set into motion new historical

forces. I will begin my story in 1818 when the state of Connecticut after many years of debate voted to end mandatory tithing and the special privileges accorded Congregationalist churches. It was the last state in the union to disestablish religion and finally make effective the separation between church and state envisioned in the First Amendment. Congregationalist ministers were outraged, of course. A wayward republic had rebelled against divine authority. The republic's citizens worshipped money, they worshipped worldly success, but sooner or later, the unknowable will of a divine king would punish them for their insubordination and pride.

The most important critic of this development was Lyman Beecher, important in his own right, but currently better known through his influence on his daughter Catherine Beecher, one of the foundational figures of maternalist feminism, and his granddaughter, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Beecher addressed the perennial question of corruption in republics, which classic political theory had located in the accumulation of power, be it economic, political, or military. The ability of tyrants to emerge he argued in 1819 was a product of the deficient, corrupt nature of the citizenry itself. There was no refoundation that could escape this problem. Republican institutions such as developed in the United States might sink under the weight of ephemeral popular passions, but the problem was deeper than that. The republic foundered on the narrow interests of its citizens. Their pride and cunning, their desire to augment their self-display would always rise to the surface as they asserted their sovereignty. Republics were the highest form of worldly government, but when religion was replaced by the state, "Ahab was king in Israel" and the people would revel in ignoring the covenant God had established with them.

The solution was to turn to those excluded from citizenship but who were nonetheless Christian. To organize those who were not corrupted by the desire for worldly power that the republic stimulated into effective counterweights of a corrupt public order. The congregation, meekly subservient to the all-powerful will of God, would rebuke the pride of the citizens. In practical terms, his vision of an eternal conflict between republic and congregation meant organizing the women who formed the core of most Protestant churches into missionary societies that could proselytize the faith, succor the weak, and admonish the sins of the powerful in the United States. Beecher was an effective ideologue and a competent fund-raiser and administrator. In the following decade, societies for the propagation of the faith emerged in every part of the country to act with increasing effectiveness as an alternative source of power to republican institutions.

Beecher's rejection of the republic involved both an expansive vision of the public and a negation of secular power. Christians stand outside the state to criticize those whose power rests on worldly authority alone rather than on a quest for spiritual ascension. This is a religious doctrine, and a conservative one, but it was a historically situated response to the waning authority of the church. Its success rested upon the mobilization of forces within society that republican institutions marginalized. It offered an alternative to a static republic and widened possibilities for self-critique within society.

This early, religious-based anti-Americanism was fundamentally suspicious of and antagonistic to the state and to the market. Conflict between the church militant and the state was fundamental to the religious wars of early modern Europe, but Beecher's

reformulation was different in that the theocratic option was ruled out. The congregation could never replace the state without itself becoming corrupt. The congregation stands in perpetual vigilance, creating new avenues for personal witness and bringing into social action the very people deliberately excluded from the republic but whose moral excellence is evidence that republican virtue by definition is deficient.

Organized Christian women posed the first challenge to republican presumption, but African-American churches provided another source of spiritual power untainted by contact with a godless state. Beecher directed financial resources to supporting black churches and their ability to project onto the national stage their particular moral claims.

What emerged from the rapid growth of religious militancy will be fundamentalism (though the name comes only a century later), but also a host of radical reform movements that emerged between the 1820s and the 1850s. Abolitionism, the campaign to end slavery, was most prominent, but it was spearhead of a broader campaign to bring into reality human relations based on love rather than fear. All those whose souls were bruised by contact with American reality would find a home in moral communities whose members, provided that they were willing to "come out of evil," would demonstrate the failures of politics and business and usual.

Abolition of slavery was tied to ending capital punishment, effecting universal disarmament and the outlawing of all organized military force, women's rights, protection of the environment, animal welfare, vegetarianism, and free thought. For how could free men and women, submissive to the divine will, live and work together in harmony if they were constrained by doctrinal conformity?

Slavery was the key metaphor applicable to every campaign. What better

symbolized the presumption and pride of the modern republic that the holding of men as property to be bought and sold. Slavery revealed with acid clarity the basic failure at the heart of American society. The republic was stained at its birth by the refusal to abolish slavery and extend the rights to liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness to all. Abolitionists accepted American revolutionary aspirations as legitimate but unattainable within *political* forms of organization. The goals of the revolution would be realized through the moral interaction of individuals demanding of each other that they act both justly and honestly.

Despite the emphasis within radical moral reform on free thought, its critiques of American life fit into what historians, invoking a genre of Calvinist sermon, have called the jeremiad tradition in American thought. Speakers, both lay and religious, described America as successor to Babylon and called upon their audiences to "come out of evil." Like Daniel, they stood in the furnace, but the hand of God would once again reveal the impotence of kings. The tradition required individual rejection of a corrupt society, but proof of genuine separation from the crimes that had overtaken the commonwealth required bearing public witness. Expressions of declension and doom facilitated political organization and led to legal changes in the service of a redeemed future, which nonetheless remains always an unattainable absolute. Whatever has actually been accomplished is tenuous and deficient in comparison to the ideal, so even in success, the appropriate response is humble awareness of one's inadequacies and the pervasive hold of sin in every aspect of the country's life. Continued dedication to the ideal requires that crimes marking the country's history do not vanish. They live on as persistent accusations that spur further movement towards a concept of rectification in which it is

impossible to separate the personal from the social.

Recently, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has asked why the United States is the only country in the New World that attempts to explain present-day social problems by constant reference to its history of slavery. Nearly 135 years have passed since the end of the Civil War, and yet the actions of increasingly distant ancestors substitute for an all-too-contemporary lack of will to redress racially based inequalities.

An answer to Trouillot's question might be found in a jeremiad delivered by the abolitionist agitator Frederick Douglass in 1852, when he was asked to address an Independence Day rally. "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?" Frederick Douglass demanded of his audience, knowing that to pose the question was to shame his largely sympathetic listeners. White Americans rejoiced with praises of the Revolution of 1776 as a proud step towards the liberation of humanity, he reminded them, but for slaves independence resulted only in a strengthening and expansion of the slave system. To a person of color, such as himself, the holiday was an example of the fundamental hypocrisy that poisoned everything in American life. The Fourth of July should be a matter of humiliation to anyone who reflected on the freedoms that independence had failed to secure.

Had he stopped there, Douglass's appeal might not have become a classic of national literature, but its conclusions would have been no less valid. After concluding his indictment, he appealed to the sentiments of his listeners by offering a path to redemption. "Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work," he insisted. "You live and must die, and you must do your work." The children have no right to the glories they claim for their fathers unless they are prepared to address the problems of their day.

They must be prepared to risk their lives, as their ancestors did, to show their uncompromising pursuit of freedom for all. The Revolution is hypocritical only if Americans accept it as completed. It reassumes its providential character whenever Americans address the injustices that they may deplore but would otherwise ignore in the press of everyday life.

In this logic, the abolition of slavery practically achieved by force of arms in 1865 and legally guaranteed by constitutional amendment can never come to completion. Historians may trace how systems of racial segregation and discrimination replaced slavery in the course of violent struggles to reorganize political structures, property relations, and labor markets in post-emancipation America. In the realm of the ideal that the jeremiad invokes, however, the replacement of segregation for slavery underscored the moral failure that permeated every aspect of national history and poisoned even the sweetest victories.

Douglass's tactic of inverting patriotic discourse to challenge the presumption of American arrogance has its counterparts with every national myth. Discovery was also conquest, and the breadbasket of the world rose upon the funeral pyre of the country's indigenous peoples. Technological prowess generates poverty and environmental disaster. The arsenal of democracy defeated the Nazis but Americans emulated if not equaled their enemies' war crimes by dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and launching the cold war arms race. On a more intimate level, the GI's who returned as heroes also pushed women out of the jobs they filled during the war and encouraged their return to the kitchen and nursery. Or the power of the father rests upon his capacity in inflict violence, even unto rape, on those that he claims to defend.

This genre of criticism has led to the recurrent extensions of citizenship rights that underlie the puzzling strength that the nation persists in demonstrating despite its many, longstanding and much discussed fractures. The jeremiad articulates a successful long-term strategy for reversing exclusion and thus helps integrate alienated social groups into national mythologies, while providing a distinct position for arguing their claims for justice. As Douglass well knew, a negative national mythology had the potential to generate positive corrective efforts, but patriotic appeals bred only complacency and acceptance of the status quo. With every crisis of self-confidence, the United States faces anew its ugly realities, reinvents itself, and paradoxically reaffirms its position as the world's most successful revolutionary society to date.

American radicals have been a necessary, irreplaceable presence in American life, but they are doomed to occupy the liminal zone dividing the actual from the absolute. Those who initiate a process of criticism and self-criticism speak as outsiders who have successfully separated from the evil that they predict will destroy the nation. To go beyond bearing witness and acceding to responsible power is to abandon the role of the prophet and assume the risks of the prince. To coalesce into a political force that could move beyond protest to vying for governmental authority is to surrender the credibility that provides an audience ready to listen and thus to lose an ability to influence the future.

After the Civil War, Frederick Douglass experienced the limitations of the statesman. Having won the fight for the constitutional amendments that extended citizenship to the freed slaves and secured them suffrage, he served in the administrations of four presidents. As the most prominent African-American in government, he defended policies that he knew fell short of full equality but which nonetheless seemed necessary

political compromises. Instead of chastising white Americans for abandoning the fight for the nation's ideals, he lectured black Americans on the need to educate themselves and become enterprising, self-made men. Eventually, he promised, wealth and property would guarantee their fair share of political power.

In the late 1880s, he traveled through the South for the first time since the end of the Civil War and saw firsthand the desperate conditions under which the ex-slaves lived. He understood finally what acquaintances in the South had long been telling him. Lynching instituted an extralegal regime that effectively deprived blacks of their constitutional rights. When he returned to Washington, he learned how powerless he truly was within the post-Civil War political structures he had helped build. The balance of power prevented action. Only moral outrage could disrupt the inertia of American politics, which on its own, like American business, could never ask any other question besides, Does it pay? Douglass resumed the voice of the prophet excoriating the nation for its failures and calling upon blacks to resist by insisting upon the rule of law against the rule of profit and prejudice. He endures as a national hero because his condemnations affirm a progressive, dynamic view of America that must be earned by each generation anew.

It is a view with tremendous social force operating across generations, but its power rests on a fundamental antagonism to the institutions that can most efficiently address social problems. Douglass demanded that the federal government exercise its force as it had during the Civil War to impose justice where rule of law failed. The tradition of national criticism within which he worked, however, strove to undercut central authority and replace it with a diffused, dispersed web of power in which each

person could be a dynamo for change. Every voice speaking truth to power reshapes the social realm, if only because it changes what people talk about and how they evaluate the world around them.

In addition to religious critique of republican institutions and radical moral reform, a third strand of anti-Americanism developed in cultural life. One classic example is Henry Miller's *Air Conditioned Nightmare*, which articulated a jeremiad against the materialism and banality of everyday life in the United States, a critique that delineates the horrors that Miller believed arose from the substitution of technological proficiency for spiritual enlightenment. He had many predecessors and has had many successors. Henry James built a career on posing American practicality, which ultimately proves either naïve or shrewdly hypocritical, against European manners. Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* has provided an essential symbol for the consumerism and complacent smugness of American society. *Babbitry* describes a state of being that Americans despise to the degree that they fear Sinclair Lewis's classic portrait of middle America succeeded only too well in capturing the emptiness of their inner lives. Forgotten in a fascination for a mirror that reveals one's ugliest traits is the actual dramatic thrust of Lewis's novel, in which the hero achieves by the conclusion of the work a limited, but genuine self-awareness.

In the aesthetic variety of anti-Americanism, the nation exists to suppress the dream and must be rebelled against. American writers have taken upon themselves as well the classic role of prophets crying in the wilderness, rejecting the claims of the prince while pointing the way to individual redemption. Aesthetic rejection of America rests in the fierce protection of the imagination of the individual in his or her intimate

social relations. The response to American wickedness is literally physical. Outrage at the failures of American life is reinforced by revulsion that proves that survival and health require spiritual separation.

One accepts isolation and impotency only to discover in social powerlessness an escape from the limitations of American life and an augmented sensibility that opens the door to new conceptions of power. Ralph Waldo Emerson might guide us here, and his example suggests how historically linked religious, moral, and aesthetic forms of anti-Americanism have been. "Self-reliance is precisely that secret," Emerson wrote in 1837, in which the "very want of action," the "very impotency shall become a greater excellency than all skill and toil."

For abolitionists coming out of evil meant refusing to participate in the political structures of a nation whose Constitution sanctioned slavery. One accepted one's political impotence in order to speak to the imaginations of a public spiritually drowning in the demands of business as usual. The challenge was hard, but from this emerged new modes of public action. Moral exhortation and personal witness channeled into civil disobedience, which emerged in the United States in the 1840s as a way of expressing a social protest that refuses to accept the legitimacy of the state.

The aesthetic and moral condemnation of American society combined to create a tradition of dissent and protest that is suspicious of collective social relation based on the nation state. The utilization of collective force remains an object of anxiety that undercuts the easy articulation of remedies. This aspect of internal anti-Americanism has grown since World War II. After 1940, the commercial republic with the least developed military of any industrial nation organized a standing army, put itself on permanent war

footing, and amassed the most formidable arsenal ever known. The ability of the American state to project military force has become the primary source of anxiety. The "military-industrial complex" and the "national security state" provide the key metaphors today in much the same way that slavery provided the clearest example of what was wrong with the United States 150 years ago.

The continued vitality of the discursive regime I have outlined today can be found in American responses to the expansion of the Balkan war and NATO's bombing campaigns. From the presentations at a teach-in in Kosovo that occurred in Los Angeles, May 23, one might think that only US leaders are capable of action. There were no European actors, either in NATO, whose leaders are all puppets, or in Yugoslavia, where everybody is an equal victim of American presumption magnified and made dangerous by the Babbitry of its leaders. In the image presented, American leadership is, and must be, both evil and incompetent. The American state as a spiritual principle of everything deficient in the nation was the only effective cause of the suffering of the Kosovars, the victims whose disaster testifies to the inner nature of American power. Threats of future conflicts to come with Russia and China invoked the punishment that has yet to be administered but of which the nation is thoroughly deserving. The demands articulated were simple: stop the bombing and allow the peoples of the Balkans to sort out their relationships under the eye of international observers but with no military presence whatsoever.

Similar demands have emerged in Europe, of course, but I want to emphasize how strongly these formulations resonate with a historical experience that is particularly American. It is not simply an experience of the Vietnam War that is relevant here. I

hope I have showed that there is a very long tradition of seeing the republican state as an evil that must be curtailed but not replaced. The result is a peculiar form of politics that embraces powerlessness and allows the contradictions of a reasoned moral position to act as an irritant generating new ways of imagining how people might organize their relationships.

The dilemmas of this mode of experiencing social force may be read as well in Noam Chomsky's forceful essay on the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia that appeared in the May 1999 edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*. Chomsky presents there a reasoned and astute analysis, as well as an effective, if schematic, framework for thinking about how the United States (inevitably conflated with NATO) has responded to international human rights crises. There is much that is valuable in his presentation, but I want to highlight the solution Chomsky presents in his conclusion. He recognizes that ethnic purification and the war crimes committed by the Serbian military forces are real and that they precede March 1999, but he cannot think of a solution that would neither strengthen the American state or make the situation worse. Hence he argues that inaction is the best answer, under the general rubric of "do no harm."

This may be unacceptable advice to those who are haunted by the tragedies of Sarajevo and Srebrenica, perhaps as well by the particularly European crimes related to the Shoah. American crimes have been of a different nature, and Chomsky's embrace of impotency in order preserve the possibility of excellency emerges out of nearly 200 years of grappling with contradictions inherent to a society where the will of the majority prevails and in the words of American poet, Robert Duncan, politicians bounce onto the world stage with "the character of Babbitt swollen with his opportunity in history."

Does not Chomsky's approach transfer the problem away from national governments to a yet unspecified realm of expanded civil society? For his proposal to have humanity and not simply allow Serbian Babbits to act unimpeded and discover the terrible fates they deserve, something like non-governmental organizations would have to take the place of governments. They would lack military force, but they could articulate the moral demands of the world—assuming for the moment that such a force exists. Chomsky's call for inaction adapts a particular American dynamic to a global situation, and thus the proposition affirms the globalization of American conceptions and practices of power. If one refuses that the state can ameliorate the situation, one must develop mechanisms within civil society that can exercise new forms of power. They may be relatively ineffective in their first manifestations, but meeting a succession of challenges they discover how to act with greater efficacy. Do we not see the growing power of this approach to international relations already bearing fruit with the convention to outlaw land mines, with proposals for nuclear free zones, with treaties developing out of the concern for global warming? If successful, such victories will also lead to the development of juridical institutions that can facilitate demands for increased accountability to civil society. That is to say, victories must overcome powerlessness through a recreation and reimagination of the state. Its powers expand, but in ways that complicate the exercise of executive power or the will of the majority.

Widespread critique of the state and its history displaces the definition of national identity from politics and the state onto centers of social power that honor the inner light such as religion and culture. The celebration of an inner freedom that can outwit and sometimes transform a corrupt public world remains a ubiquitous feature in American

popular culture. The self-critique I have outlined emerges in explicit denunciations of America's dark history as in Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* or the films of Oliver Stone. Its underlying logic appears as well in the more fantastic world that the television series "X-Files" offers its viewers, where the state appears simply as a conspiracy to suppress the "truth." Indeed, the truth is out there, within the heart of every person who dares to be honest.

No matter what patriotic discourse may proclaim, the institutional development of the U.S. assumes conflict rather than harmony as the practical basis of civic life. This was a conclusion that James Madison had drawn already in the Federalist Papers, but he was thinking primarily of the natural division of society into factions, each competing for their own self-interest. A vision of social change as a product of individual morality could have no other result. Personal truth cannot be subject to collective management except through coercion, while social harmony requires a delicate balance of negotiation that implies a willingness by most to sacrifice aspects of their interests for the sake of an abstract, greater good. The political and the social stand in opposition, but the conflict does not paralyze the country. Instead, it forces attention onto the disparity between the ideal and the actual that has motivated the engines of social change for over two hundred years.

Anti-Americanism has had such a stable and honored position within American cultural life because it affirms that progressive changes grow out of individual action. But only if the person acts from the heart and soul. Social critique from those who chose to stand at the margins of the body politic but in the light of inner truth repeatedly overturns the inertia that social harmony brings with it. The nation's ever-apparent

conservatism gives way to periodic catharses prompted by moral doubts and outrage. Critics present a world corrupt beyond redemption, but their chilling descriptions of national deficiencies and apocalypse lead to modest but real reforms that postpone zero hour for yet another generation.

The persistence and success of the jeremiad tradition in American life presents a challenge to all who try to understand and cope with the United States. Beneath the cultural invention, material wealth, and military force that give America such profound and often devastating influence throughout the world can be found the effects of ideals that are by definition impossible to realize. Within the American dynamo and the self-critique it generates, only states of time that are purely mental have been authentic. For those who wish that the American engine of change slow down or even stop for a while, the challenge might be to go beyond criticism and locate alternatives to the dynamic stalemate between a forever-guilty past and a redeemed future that will never exist because it can never exist.