PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPEAN ANTI-AMERICANISM REFLECTED IN ROMANIAN CULTURAL JOURNALS

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Abstract:
This study aims to highlight the main characteristics of Western European anti-Americanism – a long-standing phenomenon, which has become more powerful and widespread after the end of the Cold War – from a Romanian perspective. After a brief presentation of some of the most representative features of anti-American attitudes identified by scholars in the field, I will analyse several articles published in the last decade in two Romanian cultural journals – *Revista 22* and *Dilema Veche* – focusing on their authors' perception of Western European exacerbated criticism of America.
Key-words:
Anti-Americanism, Western Europe, Romanian.

Rezumat:
Percepții ale antiamericanismului european reflectate în publicații culturale românești
Studiul de față își propune să evidențieze principalele caracteristici ale antiamericanismului vest-european – un fenomen cu tradiție îndelungată, care a devenit mai puternic și mai larg-răspândit după sfârșitul Războiului Rece – dintr-o perspectivă românească. După o prezentare succintă ale câtorva dintre trăsăturile cele mai representative ale atitudinilor antiamericane identificate de cercetătorii din domeniu, voi analiza o serie de articole publicate în ultimul deceniu în două publicații cultural românești – *Revista 22* și *Dilema Veche* – concentrându-mă asupra percepției autorilor cu privire la critica acerbă a Americii de către vest-europeni.
Cuvinte-cheie:
Antiamericanism, Europa de Vest, românesc.

1. Preliminary comments on European anti-Americanism

Anti-Americanism is not a recent phenomenon, as the roots of criticisms against the United States can be traced back to late eighteenth – early nineteenth century, when European intellectuals first targeted America as a

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source of their discontent. As numerous analysts of the phenomenon have pointed out, long before America gained enough power to constitute a real threat to other nations, European elites had already started to feel resentment towards it and describe it using negative tropes which are still present in European anti-American discourse.[1]

Despite its long-standing history and the large number of studies in the field, anti-Americanism is extremely difficult to define. Analysts of the phenomenon have not been able to reach a consensus and propose a clear-cut definition. Instead, they agree that any discussion related to anti-Americanism should incorporate a variety of views regarding possible explanations of the phenomenon, as well as its sources and forms of manifestation.

Lengthy studies have been dedicated to the analysis of the nature of anti-Americanism. Many authors consider that not any criticism or reaction against the United States of America should be seen as anti-American, arguing that there are significant differences between objective observations of the negative impact of American policies and worldwide influence and subjective, unfounded tendencies to always perceive America in a negative light.[2]

In his definition of anti-Americanism, Paul Hollander shows that not all complaints against America are symptoms of anti-Americanism. He includes in the latter category criticisms that are determined by people's subjective reactions, by their emotional response to things they perceive as American or having originated from America rather than by what America really does to provoke such negative reactions. Hollander admits that:

"...hostility toward the United States, and especially certain aspects of American culture, is not always or entirely irrational, and even some of its irrational manifestations may originate in conditions that warrant concern"[3].

However, he states that the specific type of hostile attitudes which can be described as anti-American are largely irrational and not related directly to American actions.

In a more recent study, Hollander compares two conflicting perceptions of anti-Americanism in terms of whether it stems from reason

[1] See Kroes and van Roseem, 1986; Lacorne et al., 1990; Rubin and Rubin, 2004; Roger, 2005; O'Connor and Griffiths, 2006; Markovits, 2007.
[2] See Hollander, 1992; Hollander, 2004; Berman, 2004; O'Connor and Griffiths, 2006; McPherson and Krastev, 2007; Markovits, 2007.
[3] P. Hollander, 1992, p. XI.

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or emotion. According to one of these perceptions, anti-Americanism appears as a rational and to a large extent reasonable reaction to American actions, as *"an entirely plausible and justified response to the nature of American society and U.S. foreign policy"*[4]. This type of reaction against America requires little analysis in Hollander's opinion. A much more interesting and challenging explanation of the phenomenon is provided by the opposite perception, which depicts anti-Americanism as an emotional reaction determined more by one's inability to deal with the immediate environment than by America itself.

Hollander considers that the understanding of emotion-driven anti-Americanism requires thorough analysis, which should focus on issues such as the complex and often ambivalent nature of the phenomenon, or the various sources of criticisms against America. Due to its irrational character, anti-Americanism encompasses ambivalent attitudes of attraction toward and rejection of the United States. In many cases, it is also based on a process of generalization, as critics of America only choose to focus on its negative side and perceive it as *"an unmitigated and uniquely evil entity and the source of all, or most, other evils in the world"*[5], thus assuming American influence to be the main cause of all the difficulties people have to face.

There are several other analysts of the phenomenon that share Hollander's view on anti-Americanism as a mainly irrational response. One of them is Roger Kimball, who emphasizes the lack of logical reasoning in the discourse of many anti-American supporters:

"Anti-Americanism is hard to argue with. I don't mean that there is an abundance of good arguments in favor of the phenomenon. Quite the contrary: in so far as arguments enter the arena at all, they usually lean heavily on assertion backed up by belligerence and cliché. But it is seldom that argument does enter. Anti-Americanism has always been more a matter of attitude than argument. It depends on, it draws its strength from, the wells of passion, not reason."[6]

Russell Berman also focuses on the apparent resistance of anti-Americans to reasonable argumentation, as well as on their tendency

[4] P. Hollander, 2004, p. 9.
[5] P. Hollander, 2004, p. 12.
[6] R. Kimball, 2004, p. 239.

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to automatically and constantly associate America to negative values. In his view, one of the main characteristics of anti-Americanism is that its source can be found in people's imagination, in their perception of America, rather than in America itself. He goes as far as stating that due to all these aspects the phenomenon *"functions as a prejudice, magnifying the power and presence of its presumed opponent, turning it into a ubiquitous threat"*[7]. Therefore, the core features of anti-Americanism are represented by generalization, overreaction to real and mostly imagined threats, reconstruction of reality based on people's biased interpretation of American actions.

Andrei Markovits also defines anti-Americanism as a prejudice, as a:

"generalized and comprehensive normative dislike of America and things American that often lacks distinct reasons or concrete causes"[8].

Similar explanations of the concept are provided by many of the researchers whose conclusions are presented in *The Rise of Anti-Americanism*, a book-length study edited by Brendon O'Connor and Martin Griffiths. In the introductory chapter, the two editors define anti-Americanism as *"a disposition or sensibility rather than a substantive set of beliefs or arguments"*, which implies *"an across-the-board abhorrence of American politics, culture and people"*[9] and advocate the need to differentiate between reasonable criticism and emotionally-driven negative views. In another chapter, O'Connor argues that the nature of anti-Americanism is a heterogeneous one and that the phenomenon is characterized by:

"*a series of criticisms and prejudices regarding the United States that have haphazardly been labeled anti-Americanism"*.[10]

2. Romanian perceptions of Western European anti-Americanism

The articles discussed below are selected from two prestigious Romanian cultural journals, namely *Revista 22* and *Dilema Veche*. As I will show further in my study, they illustrate many Romanian intellectuals' wonder at the increasingly aggressive European anti-Americanism, which they often describe as an unfounded and irrational phenomenon.

[7] R. Berman, 2004, p. 34.
[8] A. Markovits, 2007, p. 17.
[9] P. O'Connor and M. Griffiths, 2006, p. 1.
[10] P. O'Connor, 2006, p. 11.

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In an article published in 2003 in *Revista 22* entitled "A căzut o stea (din drapelul American?)" ("A Star has Fallen (from the American Flag?)", Traian Ungureanu refers to anti-Americanism as a symptom of a world that is still trying to find its direction after the terrorist actions forced all countries to redefine their positions. The starting point of the discussion is represented by the disintegration of Space Shuttle Columbia in February 2003. If a similar catastrophe which resulted in the destruction of Challenger in 1986 had simply been perceived as a technical failure, the 2003 catastrophe was used as a pretext by critics of America, who interpreted it as a sign that American society is doomed to fail, or even that divinity itself is no longer on America's side. Ungureanu considers this case is a very good illustration of how anti-Americanism functions. He shows that this ideology is based on selective reading of real events, whose interpretation serves the purpose of reinforcing the validity of anti-American ideas.

The same selective feature of anti-Americanism is emphasized by Andrei Cornea. In his article "Pacifiștii noștri dragi" ("Our Dear Pacifists"), published in the same journal, Cornea expresses his amazement at the large number of protests against American military presence in Iraq, as well as at the heterogeneous structure of protesting groups, whose members come from a large variety of social strata and have different education and income levels. What is even more surprising is the existence of strong protests in Western European countries as France, Germany or Switzerland, whose governments have publicly expressed they do not support America's war on terrorism and will not send their own troops in Iraq. In these countries such protests are therefore futile, which makes Cornea wonder whether peace is really the protesters' main concern, or it only serves as a pretext for them to express their general dissatisfaction with the world they live in, choosing America as a target:

"What do these protests – which otherwise reflect the European public opinion's reaction against the war in Iraq – indicate? Pacifism, or rather no longer dissimulated anti-Americanism? Or maybe, at a deeper level, the projection of an irrepressible and unconscious fear of the large Muslim communities within European countries, the fear to lose their national identity, the fear of decadence, as well as remaining traces of left-wing

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ideology according to which capitalism and America are the Great Satan."[11] (my translation)

Cornea identifies more proofs to sustain his argument that the protests are anti-American rather than anti-war. For example, he notices the protesters' selective approach on war-related issues. Most criticisms target representatives of American power and its allies, while terrorist leaders as Saddam do not get the same negative attention. Similarly, Cornea finds it curious that such movements were not organized or did not have the same intensity in Europe during the Yugoslavian crisis, when geographically war was actually closer to Europeans than it is now.

Anti-American discourse is described by Cornea as highly paradoxical, especially because although America is blamed no matter what it does, people continue to have unrealistic expectations from it, requiring U.S. policies and actions to respect standards they would not consider necessary if another country implemented them. The journalist suggests another paradox is represented by the fact that when Europeans openly express their complaints against American violence and use of force, they do so knowing the U.S. will not actually retaliate. This might explain why they gather in such large numbers to show their opposition to America and its allies for participating in the war, but are more reserved in challenging representative figures of terrorist groups.

In another article published in 2005, Cornea focuses again on the Western Europeans' tendency to expect America to never fail, then express their joy when it does and perceive the failure as a proof of Europe's superiority. Cornea starts his discussion by describing a contemporary event – hurricane Katrina – and international reactions caused by American authorities' inability to deal with the crisis properly. The perspective he

[11] A. Cornea, 2003, "Pacifiştii noştri dragi". Original text: "*Ce indică atunci asemenea manifestaţii, care reflectă de altminteri o opinie publică europeană în majoritate împotriva războiului din Irak? Pacifism, sau mai curând un antiamericanism care nici nu mai încearcă să se disimuleze? Sau poate, mai adânc, defularea unei frici irepresibile şi inconştiente de marile comunităţi musulmane din interiorul ţărilor europene, teama de pierdere a identităţii naţionale, teama de decadenţă, cât şi un stângism rezidual pentru care capitalismul şi America rămân Marele Satan*".

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adopts is based on the perception of America not simply as a state whose evolution has nothing in common with that of European countries, but rather as:

"the quintessence of our world: with its technical advantages, its wide diversity, but also with its troubles, its poverty, its fanaticism, its bravery"[12] (my translation).

The city of New Orleans, where the hurricane produced extreme damage, also illustrates Cornea's point: the city is a mixture of civilizations – the traces of the French influence and the presence of American capitalism in the form of sky-scrapers, as well as a mixture of lifestyles – people populating the sky-scrapers shared the city with others who lived in slums and could not even afford to leave the city to save themselves. It is this blending that makes American society similar to any other. Consequently, blaming American authorities exclusively for not knowing how to deal with an event as Katrina is an inappropriate reaction, as similar problems could occur in other countries as well. According to Cornea:

"It would be ridiculous or superficial these days to point our finger at America contemptuously or to release our own frustrations by patronizing the Americans because they have not risen up to our expectations. Anti-Americanism or Schadenfreude is today more inappropriate than ever."[13] (my translation)

In the following lines of his article, he expands on the topic, trying to show the rising criticism against America is unjustified not only because American society has many things in common with European ones, but also because European countries themselves have made serious errors, not being able to control and eliminate damaging social phenomena:

[12] A. Cornea, 2005, "Lemnul strâmb al umanității". Original text: "…*chintesența lumii noastre în ansamblu: cu binefacerile sale tehnice, cu diversitatea sa enormă, dar și cu mizeriile ei, cu sărăcia ei, cu fanatismul ei, cu curajul ei*".

[13] A. Cornea, 2005, "Lemnul strâmb al umanității". Original text: "*Ar fi ridicol sau superficial zilele acestea să arătăm cu degetul la America cu dispreț sau să ne eliberăm de frustrările proprii privindu-i de sus pe americani fiindcă s-au dovedit mult inferiori așteptărilor avute de la ei. Antiamericanismul sau Schadenfreude sunt astăzi mai deplasate decât oricând*".

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"Who is better? The Germans? God forbid! The Russians, the Chinese? Ridiculous. The French? Remember the Terror! The Swiss? Remember Calvin's Geneva. The Spanish? Remember the Inquisition! The Romanians? Remember the miners' protests!"[14] (my translation)

Cornea concludes his comparison by clearly stating that in his opinion the same flaws the U.S. is blamed for can be identified in European societies. Furthermore, he states there are several American values that should represent an example for citizens from other countries:

"Therefore, we ourselves are like America – or worse: wherever we are, we are at least as bad as them – or worse: careless, superficial, violent, unrestrained, locked in our selfishness. Our politicians are like theirs – or much worse; we violate values we had promised to respect just like them – or much more frequently. On the other hand, we do not have their enthusiasm, their optimism, their efficiency, their power."[15] (my translation)

Petre Iancu also argues that in many cases critiques of America are unjustified and represent the need to project other countries' own failures onto a nation they perceive as more powerful. In his article "La bursa antiamericanismului" ("At the anti-Americanism Stock Exchange"), published in 2008, he states that the target of such projections is often a group or a nation whose evolution produces paradoxical feelings of distaste, fear, and at the same time envy. Unfortunately, the critics' perception relies on subjective selection of information: in the case of anti-Americanism, as in the case of anti-Semitism, only negative aspects are integrated in critical discourse, while positive ones are ignored:

[14] A. Cornea, 2005, "Lemnul strâmb al umanității". Original text: "*Cine sunt mai breji? Germanii? Ferească Dumnezeu! Rușii, chinezii? Ridicol. Francezii? Amintiți-vă de Teroare! Elvețienii? Amintiți-vă de Geneva lui Calvin. Spaniolii? Amintiți-vă de Inchiziție! Românii? Amintiți-vă de mineriade!*"

[15] A. Cornea, 2005, "Lemnul strâmb al umanității". Original text: "*Așadar, noi înșine suntem ca America – sau mai rău: oriunde am fi, suntem cel mult ca ei – sau mai rău: neglijenți, superficiali, violenți, incontinenți, închiși în egoismul nostru. Politicienii noștri sunt ca ai lor – sau mult mai rău; valorile în numele cărora ne-am angajat le încălcăm ca și ei – sau mult mai des. În schimb, nu avem entuziasmul lor, optimismul lor, eficiența lor, puterea lor*".

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"Blaming those we should admire or be grateful to for all the imaginary wrongs and shortcomings is dishonoring and immoral, but unfortunately very normal. Are the Jews "smart" and gave the Bible to the world? Too bad. And few people can forgive the Americans for repeatedly saving Europe from Nazism and Communism. Or for insisting to export their own freedom and welfare, trying to impose democracy and the rule of law in a world of tyranny."[16] (my translation)

Another feature of anti-Americanism is that in many cases it is rooted more in people's dissatisfaction with their own society and inability to change their surrounding environment than with American values or policies. As Iancu claims:

"To compensate for our feelings of inferiority it is simpler to denigrate the others than to reach the same position as them. It is easier, for instance, to damage the image of the U.S.A. than to try to raise ourselves at the level of a nation that does not only believe firmly in the intangibility of freedom, dignity and individual rights, but is also ready to bear daily the not inexpensive cost of actions required for protecting its humanist beliefs."[17] (my translation)

Radu Pavel Gheo presents anti-Americanism as common European ideology. In his article "Ghidul incorrect politic al Europei Unite – partea a doua" ("The Politically Incorrect Guide of United Europe – Part II"), he shows that anti-American discourse has been integrated in the European

[16] P. Iancu, 2008, "La bursa antiamericanismului". Original text: "*A-i învinui de toate relele și tarele imaginare pe cei pe care ar trebui să-i admirăm sau cărora le datorăm recunoștință este dezonorant și imoral, dar, din păcate, și foarte natural. Sunt evreii 'deștepti' și au dat Biblia? Cu atât mai rău. Iar pe americani prea puțini îi pot ierta pentru că au salvat Europa în mai multe rânduri de nazism și comunism. Ori pentru că insistă să exporte propria lor libertate și bunăstare încercând să impună, într-o lume a tiraniilor, domnia democrației și statului de drept*".

[17] P. Iancu, 2008, "La bursa antiamericanismului". Original text: "*Întru compensarea complexelor noastre de inferioritate e mai simplu să-i denigrăm pe alții decât să ne săltăm pe noi în poziția lor. Mai ușor este, de pildă, să șifonăm imaginea SUA decât să încercăm să ne ridicăm la nivelul unei națiuni, care nu se rezumă la a crede în mod ferm în intangibilitatea libertății, demnității și drepturilor fiecărui om în parte, ci e gata să plătească zilnic și prețul de fel ieftin al faptelor, de care e nevoie spre a-și apăra convingerile umaniste*".

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mainstream as a unifying element, as an attitude that is common to most Western Europeans. The increasing dissatisfaction with the U.S. became stronger after the end of the Cold War, when Europeans felt they no longer needed the American presence to keep the Soviet Union under control. However, paradoxically, while criticizing America, Europeans are aware that their actions will have no serious repercussions and that they can still rely on the U.S. to provide them support if required.

3. Conclusions

To sum up, the focus of my article was to identify the main characteristics of European anti-Americanism, as they are illustrated in articles written by Romanians. As shown in the previous section of my study, most journalists highlighted the extremely subjective nature of anti-American trends in Europe. The anti-Americans' approach is, according to the cited journalists, based on selection of specific aspects of reality, which convey information about America's failures, ignoring its successes. They also perform a one-sided interpretation of reality, using facts as devices to prove their point that America is somehow inferior to Europe. At the same time, anti-Americans seem to ignore that the same flaws they can identify in American society are also present in European ones, and the threats that America is exposed to can always turn against Europe. The European anti-American attitude is also perceived as a paradoxical one: while creating the image of America as dangerous or unable to compare itself to other societies, Europeans set high standards for the U.S., and have higher expectations from it than from other countries.

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