

 **Review ESSAY**

Seth D. Armus. *French Anti-Americanism (1930-1948): Critical Moments in a Complex History.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. pp. x, 179. ISBN-10: 0739112686, ISBN-13: 978-0739112687. \$60.00.

by **Irwin Wall**, Professor Emeritus, University of California, Riverside and Visiting Scholar, NYU

Published by H-Diplo on 11 June 2007

Anti-Americanism, Seth Armus reminds us, has long been a permanent feature of French cultural life; it is a cultural trope, an *idée fixe*, that exists independently as a mode of intellectual discourse quite independently of American government policies and behavior. Of course such behavior influences it strongly, and the recent crisis over Iraq has brought it once again to the fore. This revival has also stimulated an outpouring of studies, some of them extraordinary, and it should be said at the outset that Philippe Roger's work, now available in English, has become an instant classic, required reading on the subject.¹ Roger traces anti-Americanism back to the eighteenth century, when French naturalists believed that life in the Americas was of necessity savage, brutish, short, and destructive of civilization. He takes us through several critical periods in its development, from the early national period through the Civil and Spanish-American wars, when the specter of American imperialism first began to frighten Europeans, through the 1920s and 1930s, and the postwar period. The merit of Armus's study is to focus in on one such critical moment, the period from 1930 to 1948, which in his telling became a defining moment, in which anti-Americanism developed into an obsession with some thinkers, a world-view and an ideology almost in itself. For thinkers such as Emmanuel Mounier and Georges Bernanos, Armus notes, it was the single consistent pattern underlying their thought, the one unalterable strand that withstood every other shift in their thinking. In the case of Mounier, it carried him from the far right and collaboration during World War II and the Vichy regime through a Marxist phase afterward in which he tried to reconcile Marxism with Christianity. Through it all Armus's subjects never lost sight of the danger America allegedly posed to humanist values, incarnating as it did technology run amok, materialism, consumerism, a predatory empire always in expansion, and worship of the mammon god money.

The 1930s in France was characterized by a group of intellectuals who stand accused by several historians of apologizing for fascism and paving the way for the collaborationist era of the Vichy regime in France that followed the military defeat of 1940. One historian, Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, dubbed them "non-conformists," and that moniker has stuck; they criticized both rampant capitalism and Marxism, upheld spiritualism over materialism and community over society, and criticized modernization and technology as disruptive of

¹ Philippe Roger, *American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*, Sharon Bowman, translator (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

traditional values, although some of them proposed schemes through which technology and modernization could be accommodated without their negative effects.² All were anti-American. In addition to Mounier and Bernanos, they included Robert Aron, Arnaud Dandieu, Henri Massis, and Pierre Cousteau among others. Among them Cousteau, the brother of the Oceanographer of world fame, is perhaps the least known, but had the dubious distinction of most forcefully tying together anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism, another of the major themes of Armus's work.

Aron and Dandieu were most notable for a work titled *Le Cancer américain* that actually diagnosed Americanism as a disease. Mounier was the influential philosopher of Personalism, a notion influenced by Heidegger that allowed for a humane Catholicism that was profoundly spiritual and conducive to human communitarian values and artisanal means of production, eschewing the big, impersonal conglomerations that characterized American corporate capitalism and materialist values. Mounier was more critical of New Deal America than of Fascism because the latter incorporated communitarian and spiritual values over democratic and materialist ideals that were typical of the New World, and he welcomed the installation of the Vichy regime in France as an opportunity to put his philosophy into practice. Moreover Mounier did not become disillusioned with Pétain until after D-Day, by which time most respectable politicians had defected to de Gaulle. When he did go over to the Resistance it was through acceptance of the Soviet Union and the Communist party rather than the hated Americans as better possible bearers of spiritual values. The one consistent element in Mounier's peregrinations was his anti-Americanism. Pierre Cousteau systematized the characterization of Uncle Sam as Uncle Shylock, conflating America and the Jews, who presumably expressed its gangster-prone materialist essence. Indeed for Cousteau, as for Hitler, FDR was in fact a Jew, and money was America's religion as it aspired for world conquest in the service of the international Jewish conspiracy. Bernanos began with the identification of Jews and America as destructive of his idealized vision of an idyllic Catholic world; his idols were the founding French anti-Semite Edouard Drumont and the ultra-nationalist monarchist Charles Maurras. However he became disillusioned with fascism and ultimately followed Mounier in rejecting anti-Semitism, but as in Mounier's cases the single enduring strand in his thought remained anti-Americanism.

Armus brings to life some previously unknown thinkers like Pierre Cousteau and he makes a case for the importance of the 1930s as a formative period in the development of anti-Americanism. He is undoubtedly right to remind us of its perennial existence as a trope or *idée fixe* in French thought that functions as an arsenal of ideas when the French periodically object to American policy excesses like Vietnam and Iraq; or when they reject sensible American advice as during their own inane war in Algeria. It is particularly interesting to see him tie Emmanuel Todd's recent diatribe into this packaged discourse.³

² Jean Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les Non-conformistes des années 30, une tentative de renouvellement de la pensée française*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1969.

³ Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* (European Perspectives: a Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism) Forward by Michael Lind, C. John Delogu (Translator) Columbia University Press (December 2003).

But it is not at all apparent that the current rejection of President Bush in France (or Europe for that matter) should be in all cases attributed to traditional anti-Americanism. Jacques Chirac was never anti-American, enjoyed excellent relations with President Clinton, and attempted to lead France back into NATO's integrated command in the 1990s. The headline in *Le Monde* after September 11, 2001, "Nous sommes tous Américains," carried through to NATO's first invocation of Article V, which made an attack on one country an attack on all, and the Atlantic Pact countries, including the French, were prepared to join America in Afghanistan. Washington summarily rejected these offers.

It is true that the rhetoric of anti-Zionism in France sometimes seems to carry an undercurrent of traditional anti-Semitism, but it is no less true that those who criticize Israel's occupation of the West Bank and its American supporters eschew traditional anti-Semitism. It seems to me almost absurd to begin a chapter on Cousteau by invoking the "explosion" of anti-Semitic incidents in France that began in 2002 among French immigrant Arab youth, as if there were any connection. These young people were enraged by the Israeli siege of Jenin, which they blamed on French Jews, and I would wager that none of them have ever heard of Cousteau. Their actions occurred at a time when studies by France's major Jewish organization, the CRIF, showed a weaker attachment of the French to traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes than at any time in French history; leaders of the Muslim community in France supported their national condemnation. They were also taken in hand by a dynamic Minister of the Interior named Nicholas Sarkozy, whose efforts were rewarded by the Wiesenthal Institute in Los Angeles with a decoration, and whose Jewish grandfather and immigrant origins did not prevent a solid victory in elections for the Presidency. Sarkozy, who has praised the lucidity of Chirac's "anti-American" policy during the Iraq crisis, is nevertheless expected to inaugurate a new era in French-American and French-Israeli relations, if that in fact had not already begun without him.

I also doubt that anti-Americanism, by virtue of having been the one single strand that endured through the otherwise changing ideas of Mounier and Bernanos, merits treatment as itself a world-view or ideology; as Armus is perfectly aware, it is more often simply a trope for modernization. The argument in France between pro and anti-Americans is most often an argument about modernization and very much a Franco-French debate. One would be hard-pressed, moreover, to show a single instance in the diplomacy between the two countries when anti-Americanism determined policy. It explodes in opinion as a *consequence* of policy. The truly remarkable aspect of the Iraq affair was the over-the-top manifestations of American anti-French feelings, themselves often attributable to easily identified tropes in the American past, yet obviously manipulated by the Bush administration in a way that the French government clearly abstained from doing.

I am not entirely convinced by Armus's insistence that the period from 1930-48 deserves to be singled out as the critical "moment" in the development of anti-American tropes in France either. Roger has shown the importance of the Civil and Spanish-American wars. Further, the anti-American diatribes of the cold-war French ideological left, led by thinkers of the stature of Jean-Paul Sartre (on this point Tony Judt revealed the connection to anti-Semitism of some of these polemicists, although not Sartre, as well) were undoubtedly more important to the contemporary context than the right-wing fulminations of the 1930s

which were discredited by Collaboration and the victorious ideology of the Liberation. Notwithstanding these reservations, Armus should be congratulated for offering us a distillation of an important if not critical moment in the formation of anti-Americanism, and bringing to light the contribution of thinkers previously ignored in the literature.

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse