

Anti-Americanism on the Rise?

Suggestions Toward a Rational Program of Study

PONARS Policy Memo No. 266

Georgi Derluguian
Northwestern University
October 2002

According to many analysts, anti-Americanism in Russia is on the rise. This is not a unique phenomenon, as anti-Americanism clearly exists across the globe. Although this memo focuses on Russia, many states have witnessed a surge in anti-Americanism, even in the wake of September 11. Much of the worldwide reaction to the September 11 attacks emphasized the sympathy felt toward the human tragedy in the United States. At the same time, however, the undercurrent of unsympathetic opinions from the Palestinian refugee camps, Argentina, Japan, France, and Russia was significantly under-expressed in public statements, underreported by the media, or simply dismissed by authoritative commentators worldwide.

There are relatively few expressions of anti-American sentiment on record, in the wake of the terrorist attacks; namely, the controversy in Italy provoked by Orianna Fallaci's essays, and opinion polls in Finland that found a surprisingly high proportion of respondents (nearly a quarter, which, incidentally, closely resembles Palestinian poll reports) who said that although they did not approve of the killings, they could see why the United States was the target of such attacks. Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence of growing anti-Americanism in countries like Hungary, the former German Democratic Republic, Poland, and Lithuania, where the relative success of post-Communist transitions makes this surprising. This evidence was gathered at a moment of high sympathy for the United States, which is subject to change with future events such as a possible war in Iraq. Anti-American sentiment, then, is not universal; it is expressed only by certain sectors but those sectors of opinion are found around the world, not exclusively in Islamic countries. Anti-American sentiment in Russia, then, does not seem all that exceptional.

Despite the heated rhetoric of the Cold War, anti-Americanism was not a pervasive sentiment among the Soviet people. Anecdotal evidence strongly indicates that Soviet-era populations held the American people, culture, and technology in high esteem; this sympathy and esteem, however, did not always extend to the government of the United States.

Recent field observations in Russia suggest that anti-Americanism is a very diverse phenomenon, not found only among the elderly neo-Communists or the scandalous populists who vote for Vladimir Zhirinovskii. Anti-Americanism is found in the sectors where it might seem very counterintuitive: among the intellectuals (including those

conversant in English), the new middle class created by the capitalist reforms, and especially among teenagers. Reliable Russian polls (for instance, those conducted by VTsIOM or the Finnish-Russian group led by Dmitri Furman) indicate that the shift away from the overwhelmingly positive attitudes of the perestroika period and early Yeltsin period became detectable as early as 1993, primarily at the elite level. Particular events such as the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 or the scandals surrounding the 2002 winter Olympics in Salt Lake City served to concentrate diffuse negative attitudes that have lingered in the background since the late 1990s. Even the exceptional popularity of President Putin did not translate into popular support of the U.S.-Russian alliance after Putin offered his support for the American war on terrorism.

Preliminary hypotheses that may begin to explain the recent surge in anti-American sentiments belong in the poles of usual antinomy between the material and ideal that, in the end, might not prove mutually exclusive. An explanation rooted primarily in economics, suggested by the heterodox American economists and also by their European colleagues, suggests that since Reagan's presidency, the United States has been using actively its extraordinary institutional and political leverage to direct global financial flows toward financing U.S. federal deficits and, especially in the nineties, the stock-market bubble. We might be reminded that the first use of the word "globalization" was in a 1983 editorial of the *Wall Street Journal* that praised Thatcher's opening of London's financial market to U.S. corporations. The editorial's hypothesis was based on the fact that the globalization of finance in recent decades, though certainly not the first in history, occurred in the more industrialized and connected world. This resulted in the growth of enclave economies linked to U.S. consumption (like the rise of southern China) and protracted industrial stagnation elsewhere. The atmosphere of rapid U.S. enrichment coupled with the erosion of wealth in national industrializing states (of which the Soviet Union was the foremost example) had the unexpected result of unleashing political-bureaucratic corruption and asset stripping on an unprecedented scale. The extracted liquidity was then invested primarily in U.S. financial markets, which offered reasonable guarantees of anonymity, political security, and annual returns. The effects could be observed in the USSR as well as in Turkey, Africa, and Latin America. Rather than test the validity of this hypothesis, this assessment only observes that this hypothesis offers a more robust explanation for the elite behavior of the last decade in many countries, including Russia, than ad hoc accusations of crony capitalism.

Yet, the question remains how the common populace discerned and perceived these socioeconomic connections. Here we might revert to ideal or cultural-psychological explanations. In turn, however, these explanations need a conceptual reframing because mere envy of American prosperity smacks too much of accusative rhetoric and would not contribute to this analysis.

It might be more productive to begin with acknowledging that the United States today is indeed hegemonic and thus very exceptional. The common accusations of American egotism and presumed aloofness to the rest of the world need to be examined. Let us recognize soberly some obvious yet perhaps surprising facts. The United States is uniquely non-globalized in the contemporary world. The United States does not border on any truly foreign countries. The vast majority of American citizens can comfortably afford to know only English. Americans are able to use their national currency even when

traveling abroad. They watch films and TV shows almost exclusively produced in the United States. They grew up with hamburgers, the music of Madonna, and Marriott hotels. They get educated in American schools and universities. Their national, political, and economic leaders make the key decisions affecting their lives, and it is not easy to imagine foreign garrisons on American soil. This is the objective reality that both Americans themselves and the rest of the world tend to present as fairly nasty traits of American national psychology. This warrants public reconsideration.

As stated earlier, anti-American feelings are found around the globe and they might be growing, as seems the case in Russia and the rest of Eastern Europe. This does not mean that we are dealing with simple envy felt by the various and perhaps numerous losers in the new global geopolitical realm and capitalist markets. The sentiment might be better formulated as simple fear of losing social status in the emerging global hierarchy. Emile Durkheim or Max Weber would surely have recognized what this means. Social status is not merely a cultural perception or the sense of entitlement to certain treatment and lifestyle. It is a major organizing principle of collective identity, *i.e.* how people think of themselves and their communities. The American sociologist Bill Sewell suggests that social status and group culture determine the method of accessing resources; thus these factors are resources themselves. These are, hopefully, fairly simple theoretical propositions that might help us understand more rationally what is going on in some of the most irrational heads.

The immediate and obvious effect of globalization is to shift the wrath of the downwardly mobile or politically atomized masses from their increasingly irrelevant national governments to the world's dominant group construed as the "American plutocrats." The latter, due to enormous social and physical distance, assume mythical proportions in popular imagination. Such distance makes the usual forms of contention impossible. Nevertheless, a negative emotional background endures, which is expressed in the recent spread of anti-Americanism and, by implication, anti-Semitism. These generally remain at the level of impotent feelings, but in September 2001, a daring group of conspirators showed how ideological fantasies could materialize. The xenophobic attitudes of soccer hooligans in Moscow during last June's riot, whether instigated or spontaneous, are just another troubling sign.

Actually determining whether anti-American sentiment is indeed on the rise would belong primarily in the category of sociological field research like surveys, focus groups, and ethnographic observations. The latter method is favorable because professional experience shows how futile it might be to ask the Russian neo-Cossack nationalists or the activists of Zhirinovskii's campaigns to state their attitudes in formal interviews and surveys, while the mundane details of their childhood or relations in the workplace might prove quite revealing. Certainly, such sociological methods should be combined with the study of political and economic processes; research must be comparative regarding past periods, other countries, and other phobias such as fear of the Chinese at the time of Sino-Soviet clashes in the late 1960s and the current loathing of the Chechens and other Caucasian peoples. Psychology must be part of any serious research, although past experiences of interdisciplinary collaboration have often been dismaying, which means we must learn from past failures and recognize that laboratory psychology findings might be valid but, in the real world, they get transformed by so many incoming factors.

On the potential goals and impact of such a program of study, I limit myself to informed speculation, which is consciously intended to leave the door open to criticisms and suggestions. This presentation was deliberately couched in conditional clauses and evasive expressions. This is because the subject matter is very touchy and because there is little reliable, systematically collected data. The goal here is to call for rationalism and discipline in facing this emotional political issue. The rise of anti-American sentiments must be studied no less than the rise of anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic, and other expressions of xenophobic sentiments. A few years ago, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* was subjected to devastating intellectual critiques. This was easy because Huntington forfeited in defense of social science analysis—he certainly knew that his thesis could not be defended scientifically. This is also why Huntington remained immune to the criticism. What he formulated was a political program—a conservative vision of how current globalization might play out in the end. His is not the only possible future, which is very fortunate for many of us. But we should not be lulled into thinking that Huntington's analysis borders on prophetic; his version of the future is not possible. Incidentally, Huntington does not consider Russia a part of Western civilization. We are still waiting to hear whether Russian policymakers do.

© 2002