

Revel's Cause

Jean-Francois Revel

Anti-Americanism

Encounter, 176 pages.

Reviewed by Claire Berlinski

Born in Marseille in 1924, French philosopher and essayist Jean-Francois Revel has led a quintessentially French intellectual life: A graduate of the Ecole Normale and a member of the Resistance, he began his career in the French cabinet, serving in the undersecretary's Department of Arts and Letters. Thereafter he became a distinguished professor and lecturer at a series of elite French universities, abandoning teaching in the 1960s to edit the influential weekly *L'Express*. After a prolific writing career attacking sterile academism and defending Western democracies—his books include the best-selling *The Totalitarian Temptation* (1977) and *How Democracies Perish* (1984)—he was elected in 1997 to the French Academy. He is one of France's best-known pundits, with a schedule of travel and

television appearances that would exhaust a younger man.

Now, at the age of 80, Revel has issued *Anti-Americanism*, a mordant denunciation of the United States' most full-throated critics. The book has been a best-seller in France, indicating that the French, however inclined they may appear toward animus toward the United States, are at least willing to consider the opposing case. This must be reckoned good news.

Revel's career has been most notable for his revival of a neglected literary form, the political pamphlet. The genre had met with disfavor in France, associated as it was with the right-wing tracts of the 1930s, but it is Revel's natural medium: His short, punchy essays feature pyrotechnic polemics, vigorous mockery of his opponents, and a delightful willingness to offend. They are not, however, serious endeavors to convert the nonbeliever, nor do they attempt to be. *Anti-Americanism* is a pamphlet in this style, a short, sharp, delicious, but ultimately insubstantial essay in which Revel explores anti-American

sentiment and endeavors to demonstrate that it has few rational or objective foundations. Observing the anti-American passion that has swept the globe since September 11, he finds it to be a miasma of fantasy, internal contradiction, and self-righteousness.

Anti-Americanism is a sequel, published thirty years after *Without Marx or Jesus*, in which Revel reported with astonishment, having visited America, that contrary to all expectation and belief, the place would *not* be best described as violent, uncultivated, materialistic, puritanical, racist, or anti-democratic. Indeed, Revel observed, the events of the late 1960s in the United States—the antiwar protests, the Free Speech movement, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution—constituted the birth of a new form of revolution, one in unexpected contraposition to then-fashionable Marxist predictions. Thus did Revel conclude that the great revolution of the century would be not Marxist, but liberal, and that multiparty democracy and the free market, not communism, would come to dominate the globe. In *Anti-Americanism*, Revel expands these themes, arguing that the United States is the preponderantly benevolent agent of this liberal revolution.

If, as Revel argues, the United States is not an illegitimate and terminally hypocritical world actor, why do so

many believe it to be? Revel's answer: To affirm the anti-American position is to attack liberalism itself; modern anti-Americanism, he holds, is the socially acceptable avatar of illiberal belief systems—Marxist ones, chiefly—discredited by history. Antiglobalists, in his view, are synonymous with the anti-Americans.

This is a distinction he might have drawn more finely. The emotional and ideological roots of anti-Americanism encompass a wide spectrum; the anti-Americanism of an Osama bin Laden—or, for that matter, a Gwyneth Paltrow—is something different from that of the scrofulous hoodlums of Seattle and Genoa, although the various anti-Americanisms are mutually reinforcing and comforting.

He might also have drawn more subtle distinctions among the antiglobalists. He is surely correct in asserting that many of the protesters are the direct legatees of fascists and Stalinists. To take just one example, the Soviet-created World Peace Council's secretariat boasts that it "participated in or co-organized" the worldwide anti-American demonstrations prior to the United States' military action in Iraq. The WPC's honorary chairman is former KGB asset Romesh Chandra, who in the 1970s led the WPC's frantic efforts to combat American anti-communist maneuvers. General Ion Mihai Pacepa,

the highest-ranking intelligence officer ever to have defected from the former Soviet bloc, managed Romania's WPC operations. He has affirmed that "The new anti-American Axis of Beijing-Moscow-Berlin-Paris is indeed a farcical effort to revive the anti-Americanism created by the WPC and its sponsors during the Cold War era."

But not all anti-globalists are unreconstructed cold warriors, and not all criticism of the modern economic order is crude. If it was Revel's aim to dismantle their arguments conclusively, he does not succeed. To do so, he would have had to engage with the anti-globalists' best arguments rather than their worst ones. The most sophisticated critics of the American-led economic order contend, for example, that the advantages of free trade posited by Adam Smith can accrue only in the context of other liberal freedoms, most notably free movement of labor. The decreasing regulation of trade has in the past half-century been accompanied by increasing regulation of migration. In this context, critics charge, the assumption that all nations will by means of the Invisible Hand take their rightful and prosperous place among the community of nations fails to obtain. It is the lack of freedom—the lack of liberalism's benefits—suffered by those structurally excluded by the

GATT and various multilateral agreements on investment to which these critics address themselves, not always absurdly. Anti-globalists charge that these agreements effectively remove power from accountable bodies such as parliaments and reposit it in unaccountable corporations, a criticism that is ideologically compatible with classical liberalism. It may not be *correct*, but it is not anti-liberal.

Many of the issues Revel raises are more complex than he represents: His telegraphic summary of the debate about the Kyoto Treaty does not begin to address the scientific complexity of the subject. Serious students of America's foreign policy and its role in regulating global financial institutions will wish to consult the extensive academic literature, particularly that which treats the genesis of the Cold War and the postwar establishment of such organizations as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The works of John Lewis Gaddis would not be a bad place to start, particularly *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997). The scholarly literature, of course, is neither so amusing nor so satisfying as a Revel pamphlet.

Revel nonetheless scores significant goals against the most irrational anti-globalists, who are inevitably also the most vocal. He correctly notes that

these protesters do not oppose *all* globalization. A centrally planned, *dirigiste* world government would suit them just fine. Their enemy is *market* globalization. He culls a devastating example from *Le Nouvel Observateur*, which in 2001 applauded the “success of the anti-liberal summit at Porto Allegre.” The headline proclaimed, evidently without irony, that the event represented the “Birth of an International”—hardly a birth one would expect an enemy of globalization to celebrate.

Revel is exercised above all by the exuberant irrationality of the United States’ critics. The book’s chief mode of argument is to expose the inherent contradictions in their position: Americans, he notes, are pilloried simultaneously for their puritanism and their materialism, for their isolationism and for their imperialism, for their reluctance to dispense economic aid and for dispensing that very aid—this last generally interpreted as a sinister effort to control the destinies and dignity of the beneficiaries. Consider the case of the former Yugoslavia: With Europe incapable of bringing order to this genocidal tinderbox, the job fell upon the United States. “The Europeans afterwards offered them thanks by calling them imperialists—although they quake with fright and accuse the Americans of being cowardly isolationists the

moment they make the slightest mention of bringing their soldiers home.”

While this is a satisfying form of argument, it is not necessarily a sound one. It is perfectly true that criticisms of the United States often contain contradictions, but this does not logically entail that *all* the criticisms must be unwarranted, only that half must be. For example, while it is impossible rationally to hold that the United States is at once predominantly isolationist and predominantly imperial, this does not negate the possibility that the United States is predominantly imperial. But let us be satisfied with the observation that the simultaneous endorsement of contradictory views does, at the least, diagnostically suggest that we are in the presence of hysteria.

The geyser of criticism is not only self-contradictory, Revel correctly notes, but hypocritical—this last the attribute so often ascribed to Americans. Confronted with the outrageous human rights records of Libya, Sudan, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China, the critics who loudly deplore the curtailment of civil liberties in the United States in the wake of September 11 may suddenly be found coughing discreetly into their napkins and ponderously picking lint from their neckties. In the meantime, their countrymen profit handsomely from commercial

relations with these countries' dictators and kleptocrats.

Revel rightly finds it interesting and suggestive that critics so often attack the United States for failings that might more accurately be ascribed to their *own* societies: It takes real nerve, he observes, for the Germans and Japanese to excoriate American militarism or for Latin Americans to cavil at American electoral corruption. The French, complaining of American brutality in Afghanistan and Iraq, have misplaced entirely the memory of their own attempt to suppress a terrorist uprising in Algeria, an exercise of such savagery that by comparison, the jailors of Abu Ghraib appear kittenishly playful. Moving southwards, African elites, blaming their continent's misfortunes on the United States, demanded in 2001 a "Marshall Plan for Africa." Revel notes that Africans have received the equivalent of *four* Marshall Plans in as many decades. The bulk has been squirreled away in Swiss banks, invested in weapons used against their own citizens, or the palaces of presidents-for-life.

Revel is at his best when examining the anti-American delirium evident in the round international condemnation of the United States' war on terror and its foreign policy in

the Middle East. An example: In response to American military action in Afghanistan, and without reference to the 3,000 massacred in Manhattan, 113 French intellectuals launched an appeal against the United States' "imperial crusade," declaring that "This is not our war. In the name of the law and morality of the jungle, the Western armada administers its divine justice." This seems a bit far-fetched: Which party to this conflict, precisely, is more likely to see itself as divinely inspired? Revel is absolutely right to stress that the 113 could not more thoroughly have missed the point: The purpose of the American response was not revenge, but the preemption of more terrorism. The threat to the world, France included, came from a terrorist mastermind who had taken up residence *in Afghanistan*. What country should they have bombed?

Revel is surely not exaggerating about the extent of anti-Americanism or its frequently hallucinatory nature. Note the reception of *9/11: The Big Lie*, a book by the French journalist Thierry Meyssan, who argues that no airplane crashed into the Pentagon on September 11. He proposes that the American secret services and its military-industrial complex invented the event to prime their gullible, sheep-like countrymen for a war of

imperial conquest against Afghanistan and Iraq. The book was a best seller in France.

Anti-Americanism, Revel concludes, is a cultist system of faith rather than a set of rational beliefs. It is thus impervious to revision upon confrontation with logic, evidence, gestures of goodwill, public relations campaigns, or attempts on the part of the American secretary of state to be a better, more sensitive listener. The American Left's contention that it is the current administration's foreign policy that has made the United States an object of hatred worldwide is delusory. Revel is dismissive of their program to understand the world's antipathy toward the United States by means of pained introspection and to correct it with improved behavior: Nothing Americans might do, short of disappearing politely en masse, will help.

I do not wish to criticize a book for failing to be something it does not attempt to be, but I do wish that Revel had taken this idea further. The most interesting question, to my mind, and the one with which Revel engages least satisfactorily, is not whether the most delirious exemplars of anti-Americanism are correct—it takes nothing more than a few argumentative flyswatters to demonstrate

that they are not—but *why* they are so eager to embrace the hogwash. It is the astonishing persistence of these beliefs that needs to be explained, and here Revel's answers are not wholly satisfying. He sees anti-Americanism in terms of failed domestic politics, of the universal human propensity to turn complaints outward in preference to subjecting oneself to scrutiny. He suggests as well that European anti-Americanism reflects humiliation over the loss of Europe's six-hundred-year leadership role. This is fine as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough.

There is a quasi-religious, even messianic aspect about this latest spasm of anti-Americanism, particularly in its coupling with undifferentiated anti-modernism and anti-Semitism. It is this *mystical* element of the anti-American movement that is both most interesting and alarming, for it brings to mind the Continent's illiberal antecedents not only from the Marxist Left, but also from the Right. Here it is important to document the words and slogans of activists who conceive of their program as essentially spiritual or transcendental—to note, for example, characters such as “Starhawk,” a signatory to the Not in Our Name petition against war and repression, who claims to be “deeply committed to bringing

the techniques and creative power of spirituality to political activism,” or, more seriously, the extremely influential German neo-Protestant writer Eugen Drewermann. In this light, it seems germane to ask what kind of *spiritual* void, what kind of *existential* emptiness, does anti-Americanism serve to fill? And why?

The answers to these questions are apt to vary depending upon the kind of anti-Americanism under scrutiny. Revel sees anti-Americanism as an essentially undifferentiated phenomenon; it is not. The anti-Americanism of the Third World, Islamic anti-Americanism particularly, has its origins in resentment and envy; European anti-Americanism—the more interesting anti-Americanism—contains aspects of this, but also contains aspects of surrogate religious faith. George Orwell, observing the rise of fascism in Europe, described power worship as “the new religion of Europe.” In a sense, Europe has been searching for a new religion ever since Nietzsche and Sartre pronounced dead the God that had for two thousand years animated the Continent; anti-Americanism is but one more endeavor to recapture that sense of destiny. The movement answers many of the fundamental needs ordinarily filled by religion: It offers a higher collective goal; it

suggests new avenues for crusades. It affords its adherents a pleasing sense of moral superiority without the taint of now-unfashionable obvious religious primitivism. Socially, the anti-American movement functions much as the Church functioned: Young anti-American activists find community and social organization in these protest movements, as well as zeal, belonging, even ecstasy.

Revel concludes that the danger of anti-Americanism is its tendency to produce exactly the outcome it most fears: “The often extravagant ravings of anti-American hatred, the media imputations—sometimes the product of incompetence, sometimes of mythomania—the opinionated ill will that puts the United States in an unfavorable light at every turn, can only confirm for Americans the uselessness of consultation. The result is the exact opposite of what is sought.... And so America’s confused enemies and allies alike, valuing animosity over influence, condemn themselves to impotence—and thus, in effect, strengthen the country they claim to fear.”

This is surely so, and Revel is right to say so; indeed, he is right to say almost everything he says. This is an important little pamphlet, and one that deserves a wide audience. Yet it is more important still to

conclude that anti-Americanism is not merely a counterproductive folly, but a deeply disturbing *symptom*: There is something profoundly rotten at the core of this system of belief, and as the past century has shown, nations in the grip of mythomaniacal belief systems tend not merely to be

foolish, but volatile, self-destructive, and dangerous to international order.

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Were the Sephardim Religious?

Ella Shohat

**Forbidden Reminiscences:
A Collection of Essays**

*Bimat Kedem Lesifrut,
403 pages, Hebrew.*

Reviewed by Avi Picard

In a documentary that recently appeared on Israel television, director Nisim Mosek tries to track down Amram Cohen, a former leader of the Black Panthers movement in Israel, which in the early 1970s fought for the rights of Sephardi Jews. This man, whose black T-shirt and broad

shoulders were a fixture of Israeli tabloids back in the 1970s, once claimed in a press conference that he regretted allowing Ashkenazim into the movement's leadership. Thirty years later, however, he has dropped out of sight. His fellow Panthers have not heard from him. He has not been seen in his hometown for ages.

The search finally ends in an unexpected place: The mystical city of Safed, where Cohen has been living a quiet life with his wife and eight children as the head of a local yeshiva. Gone is the rage for which he was famous. Gone even, remarks one of his old friends, is the booming voice that