

---

H-France Review Vol. 5 (November 2005), No. 131

Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*. Translated by Sharon Bowman. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. xiii + 518, \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-72368-2.

Review by Seth Armus, Saint Joseph's College (New York).

---

Several years ago I attended a conference in Britain with the theme of "France and United States." My paper, which argued for the deep cultural roots of French anti-Americanism, was not particularly well-received, meeting with especial skepticism from British attendees, although the French and Americans weren't much more favorable. The objections fell into two broad schools; one arguing that anti-Americanism, rather than being an essential theme in French thought, is typically rational and contextual—a political response to, for example, American policy. The other objection argued, more dismissively, that anti-Americanism was more American fantasy than French reality, a sort of American exceptionalist flattery projected onto the Gallic stage.

Recent events have tended to weaken objections of the second camp. Whatever its reasons, the outpouring of hostility towards the United States cannot be written off as an American fantasy. It has instead become one of the defining characteristics of the French political and cultural scene in the early twenty-first century. The first objection, however, that of politics over culture, remains resilient. Philippe Roger's *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism* should be prescribed especially for those who view current French anti-Americanism through the lens of the war in Iraq. [1]

For those of us who see anti-Americanism as a constant in French discourse, Roger's book, which originally appeared in French in 2002, is a deeply satisfying contribution. Spanning the entirety of Franco-American history, Roger, a professor at EHESS and a CNRS researcher, methodically traces instances of hostility to the New World, from the most arcane to the most transparent, from Buffon to Bové. Along the way he acknowledges all the masters of this discourse (Baudelaire, Duhamel, Sartre) and calls attention to some influential voices whose anti-Americanism has been sometimes overlooked. These choices tell us something of Roger's strategy—his is a strictly intellectual history and unapologetically so, since, for Roger, French anti-Americanism is a self-replicating product of the intelligentsia, one that has only occasional popular appeal. While not denying the existence of popular or working-class anti-Americanism, Roger sees the distinctively French obsession with America as an outgrowth of that distinctively French obsession with the intelligentsia.

Philippe Roger, who has also written an excellent book on Roland Barthes, is a talented writer who wears his theoretical vestments easily. He regards anti-Americanism as a major aspect of French intellectual life—establishing itself through constant repetition from at least the mid-nineteenth century until reaching a sort of "tipping point" in the 1920s. From this moment on, it became a widely accepted intellectual discourse, never just a narrative, but not quite an ideology. [2] Regardless of their era or political stripe, French intellectuals become participants in and, to some extent, prisoners of, this over-determined discourse. The mere mention of "America" conjured up a variety of images, since America is considered modern, barbaric, nationalist, globalist, capitalist, individualist, communitarian, racist, anti-Semitic, Jewish-dominated, overly technological, urban, provincial, soulless, and religious—in other words, an impossible cocktail of contradictory ideas. Anti-American discourse became a sort of *doxa* that excluded the real America. The evidence of this is everywhere in anti-American writing—Paul Claudel, for example, saying that in America "dogs don't bark," or Georges Bernanos's suggestion that

Americans enjoy watching children starve. America became, for anti-Americans, a concept detached from reality, seen in the excesses in the writings of many anti-Americans. Absurd and frightening things may be said about America, Roger argues, because contained within the discourse is an implicit understanding that “nothing is at stake.” French intellectuals frequently assumed a position of weakness against the superpower, believing that America would not listen anyway, but also acknowledged that their critiques were part of an intellectual game. This is why so many anti-Americans have paradoxically good (or at least ambivalent) relations with real Americans. Reality is largely beside the point.

Historians, who are frequently awkward with the use of literary theory, might well be jealous of the ease and fluency with which Roger makes this all work. His book has many strengths but collapsing the complex web that is French anti-Americanism into a workable theoretical framework may be his greatest contribution. His introduction is probably the smartest and most responsible ten pages ever written on the subject of French anti-Americanism. Anyone at all interested in the subject, or in any aspect of French history, should read it.

But theory is only the book’s starting point. Roger has dutifully done his homework, and the book takes us on a voyage through some of the lesser-known regions of French intellectual life. Other writers have seen the interwar as the turning point, but Roger insists we go back much further, making a compelling case for the mid-nineteenth century as the critical moment. While anti-Americanism, he argues, predates even American independence, Colonial era anti-Americans saw the early Republic as something merely deformed. It was the Civil War that turned French observers into fanatics. America, now a voracious monstrosity, had become a serious threat to French culture. The role historically played by Britain and Germany in French fantasies of weakness and Protestant conquest was now assumed by America—well before the German threat had been vanquished or the American empire made a reality. The First World War, and its resultant power shuffle, seemed bitter confirmation of French paranoia. French anti-Americanism has hardly matured since—condemned to repeat its foundational ideas. Roger cannot resist, nor should he, the analogy of the Statue of Liberty—built as it was before its pedestal was completed. The American enemy, however, “is a work in progress; each successive generation tinkers at it, tightening its bolts. But its pedestal is well-established and its foundations...are over two hundred years old.”(p. xi)

Much of the book is a catalogue of writings, which, in era after era, expose the similarities in the language of French anti-Americans. The discourse of the 1930s, for example, which may seem to be a response to contemporary issues such as Nazism, the Depression, war debts, and immigration, is revealed to have also been well-developed in the nineteenth century. Later, in the post-war era, it was revived in an entirely different context. The point is that any moment in French anti-Americanism might be understood contextually, but that context is rarely crucial. What French writers have done is create, reiterate, and then rely on a narrative about America that has been comforting, unifying, and damaging, but one that is ultimately an exercise in Sartrean *mauvaise foi*. Although Roger is somewhat sympathetic to the earlier critiques of America, his dislike of contemporary anti-Americanism is thinly disguised. They, he suggests, are intellectually lazy, philosophically dishonest, and should, at the very least, know better.

Not surprisingly, Roger’s book has taken some criticism in France. A position like his, which may appear merely eccentric or argumentative to American academics is just short of scandalous in France, where a significant element of the educated class has nurtured their anti-Americanism without much examination. But not all the criticism is misguided. There are, inevitably, some problems with Roger’s attempt to force this complex history into a sort of one-size-fits-all theory. What he offers, by isolating the language from its various contexts, is a sort of turning the tables—showing how uncritically the French intelligentsia have accepted and recycled a very old discourse. But historical context keeps

---

imposing itself—most especially in the twentieth century when America is, after all, the hegemon, and at times an aggressive one. A French writer complaining today about Americanization may be repeating the language of the past, but that does not mean “Americanism” is all fantasy. In his defense, Roger has made clear that he is not denying the real conflicts that may exist, but rather he is investigating the way in which they have manifested themselves in French writing. It is not that America and France disagree over how to proceed with loan repayment, or with the war in Iraq, but that the reactive and instinctual anti-Americanism exhibited in France turns rational disagreement irrational, and probably does serious damage to well-intentioned critics of America’s excesses.

The book’s thesis ultimately fails or succeeds on the notion that French anti-Americanism has been all but unrelated to politics. Even those of us sympathetic to this hypothesis might chafe at the ease with which Roger dismisses the undeniable ebb and flow of America’s vilification. The notion of anti-Americanism as a constant, unchanging trope divorced from popular and political pressures may be overstated. Richard Kuisel, while generally appreciative of Roger’s effort, cautions that isolating anti-Americanism from real economic and political issues can be deceptive, while Stanley Hoffmann suggests there may be an inherent problem with using intellectuals as sources.<sup>[4]</sup> His point is valid—Roger moves quickly from author to author—and with some reason—since there is much ground to cover, and his goal is to show the rhetorical accretion. But the result is sometimes a facile appreciation of a particular author’s work. By isolating instances of anti-Americanism (or what appears to be anti-Americanism) in the work of writer after writer, Roger risks reducing the ideas of remarkable individuals to stereotypes of their intellectual heritage. The complex trajectory of a thinker like Georges Bernanos, for example, is not well-served by an exclusive focus on his anti-Americanism. Bernanos’s intellectual journey took him across the political spectrum—but his ideas were finally too personal to fit anywhere. One need only observe that Bernanos, author of one of France’s most notorious pieces of anti-Semitism, emerged as a relentless defender of the Jews in 1940, when the chips were down. One’s head quickly fills with the names of “progressive” intellectuals who preferred silence at that critical moment.

The case of Bernanos leads to another problem—anti-Semitism and its frequent convergence with anti-Americanism. Roger is to be applauded for not avoiding this uncomfortable connection, whose presence perennially threatens to undermine the integrity of French thought. But here, I believe, Roger takes a few wrong turns. Anxious, for example, to expose the anti-American/anti-Semitic link, Roger momentarily loses his way, proclaiming André Siegfried an anti-American because of his anti-Semitism, and vice versa, when Siegfried was probably neither.<sup>[4]</sup> Although Roger is very good at discussing the many features that go into the anti-Semitism/anti-Americanism connection, one suspects that anti-Semitism is being used here a bit opportunistically, and its own complex dimensions are left unexplored.<sup>[5]</sup> I found it strange that, given his willingness to discuss this convergence, the Occupation and Vichy are mostly ignored in his book. Others will no doubt find fault with his near refusal to address France’s “other” heritage—a less sexy but very important cohort of pro-American thinkers. Pro-Americans like Hyacinthe Dubreuil (or even Tocqueville) appear here only as foils for anti-Americans.

But that is criticizing Roger for not writing a different book. As a history of French anti-Americanism, his work, translated with superb subtlety by Sharon Bowman, is highly readable and accessible, without sacrificing scholarly integrity. While he has not, as a New York Times reporter foolishly gushed, “almost single-handedly (created) a new field of study,” he has fashioned an overwhelming amount of research into a coherent story. And, just as importantly, he has done serious damage to the arguments that downplay the specificity of French anti-Americanism or the role of intellectual culture in French life. A high standard has been set for this topical field of study.<sup>[6]</sup>

---

## NOTES

[1] This sort of reductive political explanation plagues both popular and scholarly literature. Typically bad examples of each can be found, respectively, in Eric Alterman, "USA Oui, Bush Non," in *The Nation*, February 10, 2003. Alterman, searched for, and found, a very pro-American France, one whose objections are, as the title suggests, only to America's politics. As much as we might enjoy this sort of France, it in fact bears little resemblance to reality—a fact that is perhaps explained by the writer's absence of any French sources. A recent, ostensibly more serious, collection on the subject by two literature professors, Andrew Ross and Kristin Ross, eds., *Anti-Americanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), all but ignores French anti-Americanism, which, in any event, is robbed of its national distinctiveness and forced into an anti-globalist context. For Kristin Ross, today's French anti-Americanism is to be celebrated, since it serves political causes with which she sympathizes, and is, therefore, innocent of whatever historical baggage it may carry—a position historians are likely to have a difficult time accepting.

[2] By resisting the term "ideology," Roger avoids the trap of Jean-François Revel's *Anti-Americanism*. Translated by Diarmid Cammell. (New York: Encounter Books, 2003). That enjoyable, but flawed, book can be paired with Emmanuel Todd's *After the Empire* (London: Constable and Robin, 2004). Both are passionately argued theses, albeit from opposite positions, but both are polemics rather than scholarship. Emmanuel Todd, in particular, seems insensitive to how at odds with observable reality is his world of a rising (democratic!) Russia and a collapsing America.

[3] Matthew Price, "Over There: Americans may love to hate the French, but a Parisian scholar says that American Francophobia is nothing compared to the 200-year-old Gallic tradition of Yankee-bashing." *Boston Globe*. April 10, 2005.

[4] Siegfried's alleged anti-Semitism is the subject of some debate. Sean Kennedy has written interestingly on this subject and is now, I believe, completing a book on Siegfried and French identity. The anti-Semitic charge is one with which I am not entirely comfortable. As distasteful as this may be, the post-Holocaust world obliges us to distinguish between *antisémitisme de raison* (the prejudices of respectable French Catholics) and *antisémitisme primaire* (an ideological anti-Semitism that, in France, sometimes led to common cause with Nazism). Siegfried's excessive reductionism and racial stereotyping are distasteful to the modern reader, but nothing unusual in his time. Moreover, there seems to be nothing especially French about Siegfried's anti-Jewish comments about New York. They would be consistent with what was said in much of the American press of 1920s.

[5] One wishes in particular that Roger had looked at how anti-Zionism has, in contemporary French anti-American writing, continued and amplified some of these tendencies.

[6] My own forthcoming book, *French Anti-Americanism in the 1930s and 1940s: Critical Moments in a Complex History* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, an imprint of Rowman and Littlefield, 2006) will, I hope, meet this standard, and fills in some of the aforementioned gaps.

Seth Armus  
Saint Joseph's College (New York)  
setharmus@aol.com

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes,

provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172