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Seth D. Armus, *French Anti-Americanism (1930-1948): Critical Moments in a Complex History*. Lanham, Md. and Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2007. x + 179 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-0-7391-1268-7, ISBN-10: 0-7391-1268-6.

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No one, even if only passingly acquainted with modern French literary and intellectual life, can miss the many negative caricatures of America it has produced. But what is the historian to make of such caricatures? One might be tempted to point out that similar negative stereotypes of France are certainly not uncommon in America, and thus to conclude that there is nothing either surprising or particularly revealing about French anti-Americanism. Fodder for dinner party chatter, perhaps, but hardly material worthy of serious historical interest. A number of relatively recent studies of anti-Americanism suggest otherwise. Among these, the most comprehensive are Jean-Philippe Mathy's *Extrême-Occident* (1993) and Philippe Roger's *L'Ennemi américain* (2002).^[1] Both studies make the case that, far from being incidental, anti-Americanism opens a highly revealing window on French culture and, even more importantly, has been a central feature of the ongoing debates over French identity. In *French Anti-Americanism (1930-1948)*, Seth D. Armus brings a nuanced analysis based upon historical context to this discussion, an important consideration underemphasized in Mathy and Roger's more sweeping accounts.

Though Mathy and Roger's books are in many respects quite different from one another, their authors reach similar conclusions on several issues. First, they agree not only on the longevity of anti-Americanism in France but on the constancy of certain themes across vast stretches of American history, themes surprisingly impervious to complex and often changing realities on the ground. From this perspective, anti-Americanism is a classic "intertext" in the sense that most of the common French narrative renditions of America have circulated from one text to another without being seriously encumbered by *extra*-textual points of reference.^[2] This helps explain why so many of the most outspoken French anti-Americans seem untroubled by the fact that they have had little or no direct contact with the United States. Second, Mathy and Roger share the view that the long, anxious, and often repetitive French conversation about America is really more about France than about America. Going back to the nineteenth century, when the specter of decline began to haunt French imaginations, questions of national identity were often framed in terms of "defense" against impending threats. The rise of American industrial and financial power became a growing source of concern; perhaps even more threatening, albeit less concrete, was the "American way of life"—a consumer society fueled by easy credit and advertising, and a culture that caters to "mass" taste. From the perspective of Frenchmen alarmed by the onrush of modernity, America became the perfect foil. Finally, the fact that both Mathy and Roger focus almost exclusively on intellectuals suggests a shared belief that the task of erecting a French defense against the American "other" has been largely assumed by the intelligentsia. That a number of French interwar intellectuals, steeped in classical humanism, undertook this task with a certain relish is hardly surprising in light of the fact that America had come to symbolize everything they disdained and feared. Adopting the American model, they claimed, would result in the triumph of the material over the "spiritual," the democratization and vulgarization of culture, and, no less distressingly, the replacement of an intelligentsia of humanistically-oriented generalists by a narrowly-trained cadre of American-style specialists. In addition, both Mathy and Roger are wonderfully comprehensive, tracking down, across the span of more than two centuries, virtually every significant contribution to the compendium of French anti-Americanism. So comprehensive, in fact, that one might have thought that little remained to be said on the subject.

Seth Armus, however, proves this too hasty a judgment. His study is, to be sure, more narrowly focused than those of Mathy and Roger; he covers only the period of the 1930s and 40s. However, as both Mathy and Roger have pointed out, this period, particularly the early 1930s, is critical because it was then that anti-Americanism progressed from a concern to a preoccupation--and, indeed, for certain intellectuals, became something of an obsession. Yet, Mathy and Roger, basing their work on the assumption that anti-Americanism is most usefully studied as a *discourse*, tend to emphasize the persistence and continuity of the phenomenon over time rather than to flesh out the process by which each particular historical context intensifies or even reconfigures its various elements. For Armus, however, "French anti-Americanism exists as a cultural trope, but it also exists within a historical context" (p. 5). And the historical context of the 1930s was especially conducive not only to the intensification of already existing anti-Americanism sentiment in France but to the development of new lines of attack. In fact, by the late 1920s and early 1930s, the juxtaposition of two very different developments created the conditions for the eruption of what Armus aptly calls "a perfect storm": first, a world in the process of rapid and fundamental transformation--in the Soviet Union, in Italy and Germany, and in the United States; and second, the rise of a new French intellectual cohort, the "generation of 1930," whose leading voices bristled at the notion that France would stand on the sidelines while the history of their age was being acted out elsewhere (pp. 5-6).

Armus's portrait of the "generation of 1930" is indebted--a debt duly acknowledged--to Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle's watershed study *Les Non-conformistes des années 30*.^[3] Three main coteries of young intellectuals comprised Loubet's *non-conformistes*: the Ordre nouveau group around Arnaud Dandieu and Robert Aron; a Catholic circle at Emmanuel Mounier's journal *Esprit*; and a contingent of neo-Maurrassians, known as the Jeune Droite, led by Jean-Pierre Maxence, Robert Brasillach, and Thierry Maulnier. Although one might be tempted to emphasize the differences among these three groups, which were considerable, Loubet chose to stress their similarities. What unified them, above all, was a strong sense of generational mission and a commitment to bring about a "spiritual revolution." Though the content of this "revolution" tended to be maddeningly abstract and imprecise, its essentials were clearly derivative of the young men's humanist education. They envisioned a society guided by "spiritual" rather than by materialist values, an economy directed by human needs and community requirements rather than by the vagaries of the market, and a culture and a polity governed by "disinterested" elites who would reassume their responsibilities and reassert their leadership role over the masses. The *non-conformistes*, Armus convincingly argues, found in America a nearly perfect foil, and thus their critique of the United States became something qualitatively different than the standard-issue anti-Americanism that had been prevalent up to that point. Admittedly, they borrowed liberally from the old and well-stocked cupboard of anti-American bromides, but they deployed fresh arguments in their attack on America and endowed it with a new sense of intellectual seriousness.

Symptomatic were two *non-conformiste* publications: Aron and Dandieu's *Le Cancer américain* (1931) and Maulnier's *La Crise est dans l'homme* (1932).^[4] For Aron and Dandieu, America was not just a place but a "spirit;" it represented a perversion of the tradition of Western rationalism, and they believed that it would ultimately lead to the assembly-line techniques of Henry Ford and the management methods of Frederick Taylor. Measures needed to be taken to cut out the "cancer" lest the same "antihuman" society that afflicted America be transplanted to France. Maulnier, according to Armus, raised anti-Americanism "to even higher philosophical levels" (p. 44). What was at stake for Maulnier was no less than the survival of European "man," the product of centuries of classical humanism. According to Armus, Maulnier believed the danger lay in the fact that America, "through the logic of its production, not only destroys man, it also creates a system that has the destruction of man as its end" (p. 46). And the danger is all the greater, Maulnier claimed, because of American marketing techniques, which makes the inhuman seem appealing: "The menace [of America] is not that production abolishes l'esprit, but that it creates a form of esprit in its own image."^[5]

Though the version of the "spiritual revolution" formulated by Mounier and his collaborators at *Esprit*-

—representing the third component of Loubet’s *non-conformiste* triad—was more overtly religious than those elaborated by Aron, Dandieu, and Maulnier, it was no less anti-American. In fact, according to Armus, those “elements that define America for Mounier were also those he hated the most: mass liberal democracy, individualism, and materialism” (p. 66). Also, Mounier, like the other *non-conformistes*, equated America with the Soviet Union. Though seemingly ideological opposites, capitalist America and communist Russia, the *non-conformistes* concurred, employed similar techniques of mass production in pursuit of similar materialist objectives and, in the end, produced the same regimented, soulless result.

Whereas the *non-conformistes* cast the United States and the Soviet Union as the antithesis of their “spiritual revolution,” they expressed optimism concerning the spiritual potential of the Fascist and Nazi “revolutions.” This raises the controversial question of the relation between the *non-conformistes* and fascism. Here Armus engages those involved in the controversy: Zeev Sternhell on the one side, who views the *non-conformistes* as part of the large segment of the interwar French intelligentsia who were either fascist or fascist-leaning, and most of the French commentators on the other, who argue that Sternhell is too indiscriminate in his use of the fascist label, especially when applied to the *non-conformistes*. Armus steers a judicious middle course. Although he argues that Sternhell goes too far in labeling leading *non-conformistes*, like Maulnier, “fascists,” he questions the tendency of certain French historians to place *non-conformisme* outside the context of European fascism. Admittedly, all of the *non-conformistes* expressed serious reservations concerning many aspects of the Mussolini and Hitler regimes. Yet, Armus insists that they expressed more than a passing interest in both, detecting a powerful, if as yet unfulfilled, spiritual promise in the movements that brought Mussolini and Hitler to power. Although Armus recognizes that Mounier himself never openly embraced either the Hitler or the Mussolini movement, he makes the point that both movements nevertheless “received a great deal of sympathetic attention in *Esprit*”—a sympathy, Armus remarks, that was never extended to the liberal democracies and certainly not to the United States (p. 61).

In addition to focusing on the *non-conformistes*, Armus includes chapters on two other leading voices of French anti-Americanism in the 1930s and 40s, Pierre-Antoine Cousteau and Georges Bernanos. Cousteau wrote for *Je suis partout*, which during the Occupation became a voice for French fascism and collaboration with Nazi Germany. *Je suis partout* also developed a strain of anti-Americanism, and Cousteau, who, unlike most French anti-Americans had actually lived in the United States, became the review’s resident expert. By the time of the Occupation, not only had Cousteau’s anti-Americanism become increasingly vehement, but, as the publication of his *L’Amérique juive* (1942) made apparent, it was also intertwined with a virulent form of racial anti-Semitism.[6] Cousteau’s book illustrates, for Armus, the ease with which certain forms of anti-Americanism can commingle with anti-Semitism. Not a surprising tendency, Armus concludes, since both America and Jews have, in different contexts, served as convenient symbols of encroaching modernity.

The overlapping of anti-American and anti-Semitic themes is also present in a much more influential figure, the Catholic novelist Georges Bernanos. Yet, in Bernanos’s case, the story is more complex. His early anti-Semitism, fully articulated in his *La Grande peur des bien-pensants* (1931), was a tribute to the father of modern French anti-Semitism, Edouard Drumont.[7] Bernanos’s animus, like that of his hero Drumont, is directed against Jews because, in Armus’s words, they “had invaded and corrupted France with their ideas of materialism, democracy, individualism, and money” (p. 135). Bernanos’s later rejection of anti-Semitism, along with his outspoken antifascism, is interpreted by his defenders as a genuine conversion. Armus, following the argument of recent revisionists, has questioned the sincerity of this conversion. He makes a convincing case that Bernanos, in effect, transferred his earlier anti-Semitism to anti-Americanism, a transfer made easy by the fact that America could stand, as had Jews at an earlier phase, as a symbol for the despiritualization of the modern world.

It is in these chapters on Cousteau and Bernanos that Armus drives home a major thrust of the argument in his study—namely, that not only was French anti-Americanism widespread, affecting

writers as different from one another as Cousteau and Bernanos, but that it betrays, like the anti-Semitism to which it is sometimes connected, a rather dark and disturbing tendency in French culture. Another important thrust of Armus's argument, implicit throughout the study, is made fully explicit in the conclusion. It is critical to study anti-Americanism in the 1930s, not only because it explains much about the climate of crisis that existed in the 1930s in France, but because the period contributes—significantly more than did earlier decades—to the formation of what has become an “ideology” of anti-Americanism. As did Roger and Mathy before him, Armus believes that the post-1945 outbreak of anti-Americanism, largely a phenomenon of the Left, is deeply indebted to the earlier anti-American tropes fashioned by writers of the reactionary Right in the interwar years. Moreover, Armus contends pessimistically, that anti-Americanism is a thread so deeply imbedded in French discourse that it is not likely to disappear any time soon. To be sure, there have been stretches of French history when it has remained relatively dormant, but it resurfaces in times of crisis and, when it does, there is no shortage of ready-made, culturally resonant arguments for those who practice it.

The strengths of Armus's study, I would argue, are considerable. First, as suggested earlier, it makes a useful companion piece to the more general studies of Mathy and Roger, exploring in greater depth the critical interwar period. Second, in addition to a perceptive interpretation of the primary texts, Armus provides the reader with a lively and fair-minded evaluation of the many scholarly debates surrounding each of his topics. Finally, in most cases, his arguments are well reasoned, supported by textual evidence, and compelling. There are, however, a few instances when his conclusions seem to overreach his evidence. Revealingly, each of these lapses occurs when Armus attempts to interpret very recent events in the light of his study of the 1930s and 40s.

To my mind, the most egregious of these arises in Armus's interpretation of the French reaction to U. S. foreign policy since 9/11. Though he admits that one cannot legitimately dismiss all criticisms of America as examples of “anti-Americanism,” he seems ready to interpret the French response to recent Bush administration foreign policy largely in that light. Undoubtedly, there are some French critics of that policy who might be inclined to admix their dislike of the policy itself with strains of historic anti-Americanism. But invoking anti-Americanism to explain why France's early support of the United States after 9/11 turned from “cooperation to contempt” or why, somewhat later, the Iraq war aroused “loud objections” from the French seems more of a politically-charged opinion than a considered judgment. It undermines the strength of his case about the existence of a well entrenched anti-Americanism in France by focusing on a specific case in which other factors might have been the determining ones. Although Armus recognizes that the Bush administration's policies sparked “worldwide” protest, he nevertheless concludes that the “denunciation of American ‘unilateralism’ had a decidedly French accent and was tied in with a long history of Franco-American mutual suspicion” (p. 3). Would Armus also label those Americans who have expressed dismay with recent U. S. foreign policy and who have, more specifically, raised objections to the Iraq war as anti-American? One would hope not. Most of Armus's judgments, however, are far more judicious and, overall, his book contributes to understanding why anti-Americanism played such an important role in the intellectual life of France in the 1930s and 40s.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Philippe Roger, *L'Ennemi américain: Généalogie de l'antiaméricanisme français* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2002) and translated by Sharon Bowman as *The American Enemy: A Story of French Anti-Americanism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[2] Mathy, pp. 2-3.

[3] Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les Non-conformistes des années 30: Une Tentative de renouvellement de la pensée française* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969).

[4] Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu, *Le Cancer américain* (Paris: Rieder, 1931); Thierry Maulnier, *La Crise est dans l'homme* (Paris: La Revue française, 1932).

[5] Maulnier, p. 57.

[6] Pierre-Antoine Cousteau, *L'Amérique juive* (Paris: Editions de France, 1942).

[7] Georges Bernanos, *La Grande Peur des bien-pensants* (Paris: Grasset, 1931).

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