I. Introduction: Why and How Anti-Americanism Matters

This article examines the convergences and divergences of anti-Americanism and antisemitism in contemporary Europe. It can be argued that anti-Americanism is an even more contested concept than antisemitism. According to Paul Hollander, “anti-Americanism is a predisposition to hostility toward the United States and American society, a relentless critical impulse toward American social, economic, and political institutions, traditions, and values; it entails an aversion to American culture in particular and its influence abroad, often also contempt for the American national character (or what is presumed to be such a character) and dislike of American people, manners, behavior, dress, and so on; rejection of American foreign policy and a firm belief in the malignity of American influence and presence anywhere in the world.” (Hollander 1992: 339)

It is a generalized and comprehensive normative dislike that often lacks distinct reasons or concrete causes. Anti-Americanism is a particularly murky concept because it invariably merges antipathy towards what America does with what America is—or rather is projected to be in the eyes of its beholders (Ajami 2003). The difference between “does” and “is” corresponds well with Jon Elster’s fine distinction between “anger” and “hatred.” Elster writes: “In anger, my hostility is directed towards another’s action and can be extinguished by getting even—an action that reestablishes the equilibrium. In hatred, my hostility is directed toward another person or a category of individuals [Americans and/or Jews in the case of this paper, A.M.] who are seen

1 Emphasis on original. In addition to Hollander’s key book on this topic, I would like to mention three others that, in my view, offer the most comprehensive analysis on this topic. For Germany, it is clearly Diner (2002), for France Roger (2002); for Spain Seregri (2007); and for Canada Roy (1993) I have yet to find comparable books for anti-Americanism in Britain and Italy.
as intrinsically and irremediably bad. For the world to be made whole, they have to disappear.” (Elster 1999: 65) Thus, it has characteristics like any other prejudice in that its holder “prejudges” the object and its activities apart from what actually transpires in reality. And just as in the case of any prejudice, anti-Americanism, too, says much more about those who hold it than the object of its ire and contempt. But where it differs so markedly from “classical” prejudices such as antisemitism, which will also be subject of this study, homophobia, misogyny and racism, is the fact that unlike in these latter cases—where Jews, gays and lesbians, women and ethnic minorities rarely, if ever, have any actual power in and over the majority of populations in most countries—the real existing United States most certainly does have power.

Because of this unique paradox, the separation between what America is—i.e. its way of life, its symbols, products, people—and what America does—its foreign policy writ large—will forever be jumbled and impossible to disentangle. I would argue that it is precisely because of this fact that—unlike these other prejudices which, as a fine testimony to progress and tolerance over the past forty years, have by and large become publicly illegitimate in most advanced industrial democracies—anti-Americanism remains not only acceptable in many public circles, it has even become commendable, indeed a badge of honor, and perhaps one of the most distinct icons of being a progressive these days. After all, by being anti-American, one adheres to a prejudice that ipso facto also opposes a truly powerful force in the world. Thus, in the case of anti-Americanism, one’s prejudice partially assumes an antinomian purpose, thereby attaining a legitimacy in progressive circles that other prejudices—thankfully—do not anymore, at least in the accepted public discourse of advanced industrial democracies. Anti-Americanism, as any other prejudice, is an acquired set of beliefs, an attitude, an ideology, not an ascribed trait. Thus, it is completely independent of the national origins of its particular holder. Indeed, many Americans can be—and are—anti-American, just as Jews can be—and are—antisemitic, blacks can—and do—hold racist views, and women misogynist ones. The reason I am mentioning this

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2 Elster himself attributes the distinction between anger and hatred to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

3 For an excellent article demonstrating how American intellectuals have cultivated anti-American views, see Buruma (2003).