

Anti-Americanism in Sweden? A Discussion of Terminology and Examples

Dag Blanck

Uppsala University

Anti-Americanism is a phenomenon that has been discussed intensely in recent years. A search for the key word "anti-Americanism" in three electronic databases of articles yielded close to 150 hits for 2002 and 2003 only.¹ During the same time books with titles like *America Embattled: 9/11, Anti-Americanism, and the Global Order*, *Why Do People Hate America*, and *Rogue Nation: The America the Rest of the World Knows* were published.² Also, in September 2002 the U.S. State Department hosted a conference on anti-Americanism with leading academics from the U.S. and around the world addressing U.S. government officials discussing possible causes and solutions to the question.³

The strong interest in anti-Americanism in the past years is obviously linked to the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. It would, however, be wrong to assume that anti-Americanism is a recent or modern phenomenon.⁴ Instead it has been a part of a trans-Atlantic dia-

1. The databases ArticleFirst, WilsonSelect Plus and Electronic Collection Online (ECO), all a part of FirstSearch, were examined on June 10, 2003.

2. Richard Crockatt, *America Embattled: 9/11, Anti-Americanism, and the Global Order* (London, 2003); Ziauddin Sardar and Meryll Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America* (Cambridge, Engl., 2003); Peter Scowen, *Rogue Nation: The America the Rest of the World Knows* (Toronto, 2003).

3. "U.S. to Probe Anti-Americanism," *New York Times*, August 28, 2002.

4. Rob Kroes & Maarten van Rossem, eds., *Anti-Americanism in Europe* (Amsterdam, 1986) provides a general discussions of the topic. Philippe Roger, *L'Ennemi américain: Généalogie de l'antiaméricanisme français* (Paris, 2002) is a recent study of French anti-Americanism, emphasizing its long history.

logue dating back to 1776 about U.S.-European relations and about the nature of America in Europe. Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Dickens, James Bryce, and Jean-Jacques Servan-Schriber are but a few names in a long tradition of European discourse about America.⁵

This article consists of two parts. In the first part the idea of anti-Americanism will be discussed. It is a term that has been used (and perhaps abused) in many ways. It is not my intention to create a new definition, but rather to analyze the ways in which anti-Americanism has been defined by different authors so that it will be possible to arrive at some kind of definition that may prove useful for empirical analyses. In the second part, the question of anti-Americanism in Sweden will be discussed.

Definitions of anti-Americanism

Does anti-Americanism exist? It all depends on what we mean by it. It is obvious that negative opinions of the United States exist throughout the world, and it is also obvious that this is not something new. As already noted, the U.S. has generated reactions – both positive and negative – ever since 1776. As part of its ongoing Global Attitudes Project, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press has over the past years been charting world attitudes vis-à-vis the United States. In December 2002, for example, the Pew Center reported that in Europe between 60 and 75% of the respondents had a favorable view of the United States, whereas between 16 and 35% had an unfavorable view.⁶ The war in Iraq in the

5. Some "classic" studies include Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1934); Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (Princeton, N.J., 1957); Sigmund Skard, *The American Myth and the European Mind: American Studies in Europe 1776-1960*, 2 vols., (Philadelphia, 1958), and Daniel J. Boorstin, *America and the Image of Europe: Reflections on American Thought* (New York, 1960). For some stimulating examples from the last decade or so, see for example C. Vann Woodward, *The Old World's New World* (New York, 1991); Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed., *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995); Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York, 1997); and Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

6. Pew Research Center for People and the Press, *What the World Thinks in 2002: How Global Publics View Their Lives, Their Countries, The World, America* (December 4, 2002), 53. Available online at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=165>.

spring of 2003 led to major declines in favorable opinions of the U.S. in Europe, with only 14% of those polled in Spain, 25% in Germany, 31% in France, and 48% in Britain approving. Following the end of the war, figures have gone up, although they are not quite up to pre-war levels yet.⁷

The 2002 data shows a variety in world opinion about the U.S. Among those countries where a favorable view of the U.S. dominated, serious criticism of certain aspects of American society was still voiced. In almost all European countries, more than half of the respondents (and in some substantially more) was critical of the spread of American customs and ideas. The British had the most favorable view of the spread of American ideas, but even half of the British respondents saw this as something bad. Strong opposition to the spread of American customs and ideas was seen in France and Germany.⁸ On the other hand, most European countries overwhelmingly approved of American popular culture, with between two thirds and three fourths of the respondents expressing favorable views.⁹

Negative attitudes to the U.S. can thus be found around the world, and they vary from country to country and from topic area to topic area. This is, perhaps, not particularly surprising. The question is if these attitudes can be called anti-American. Clearly, there is a lack of consensus among scholars with regard to the question of definition. Marie-France Toinet has observed that "there is no neutral and universally acceptable definition of anti-Americanism," and that discussions of the topic often "degenerate" into "moral judgments."¹⁰ It ought to be possible to go beyond political or ideological rhetoric and arrive at a way of using the term while still retaining a scholarly explanatory value.

A survey of the literature shows a variety of definitions, all including some element of criticism of the U.S. David Strauss, for example, talks about anti-Americanism as "sharp criticism of American policies, fre-

7. Pew Research Center for People and the Press, *Views of a Changing World 2003: War With Iraq Further Divides Global Publics* (June 3, 2003), 19. Available online at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=185>.

8. *What the World Thinks in 2002*, 63.

9. *What the World Thinks in 2002*, 66.

10. Marie-France Toinet, "Does Anti-Americanism Exist?," in Denis Lacorne et al. ed., *The Rise and Fall of Anti-Americanism: A Century of French Perception* (London, 1990), 221-222.

quently resulting in violent demonstrations against the symbols of American power abroad."¹¹ Many definitions also point to the critique of certain American values as the basis for anti-Americanism. David Strauss adds that anti-Americanism is also "a philosophy, ideology, or institutional framework based on assumptions and principles which ran counter to... values, practices, and institutions which had their origin in the United States."¹² Stephen Haseler defines the term as "a straightforward opposition, ranging from distaste to animus, to the cultural and political values of the United States."¹³

Most scholars seem to include an emotional or irrational element in the discussion. Paul Hollander maintains that anti-Americanism "implies more than a critical discussion: it refers to critiques which are less than fully rational and not necessarily well founded,"¹⁴ whereas Charles Doran and James Sewell defines the phenomenon as involving "perceptual distortion such that a caricature of some aspects of behavior or attitude is raised to a general level."¹⁵ André Kaspi talks of it as "malice, resentment, hatred or condescension, all of them passions or states of mind."¹⁶ Still other scholars have used medical metaphors to describe the term, talking about its symptoms, and of the topic's epidemiological aspects.¹⁷ Marie-France Toinet has called it "a sort of allergic reaction to America as a whole."¹⁸

In trying to assess the variety of definitions, several conclusions can be drawn. First, one feature of the discussion that stands out is the importance of distinguishing between specific criticism of the United States and of anti-Americanism. Being critical of a specific U.S. policy does not necessarily imply anti-Americanism. According to Marie-France Toinet, a distinction should be made between "criticism of the United States," such as specific American actions or policies, and "judgement of

11. David Strauss, *Menace in the West: The Rise of French Anti-Americanism in Modern Times* (Westport, Conn., 1978), 6.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Stephen Haseler, *The Varieties of Anti-Americanism: Reflex and Response* (Washington, D.C., 1985), 6.

14. Paul Hollander, *Anti-Americanism: Critiques at Home and Abroad, 1965-1990* (New York, 1992), 7.

15. Charles Doran & James Sewell, "Anti-Americanism in Canada," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 407 (May 1988), 106.

16. André Kaspi, "By Way of Conclusion," in Lacorne, *The Rise and Fall*, 237.

17. Theodore Zeldin, "The Pathology of Anti-Americanism," in Lacorne, *The Rise and Fall*, 35-41.

18. Toinet, "Does Anti-Americanism Exist?" in Lacorne, *The Rise and Fall*, 219.

America,"¹⁹ which implies a denunciation of the entire country. Similarly, Haseler asserts that anti-Americanism "should not be confused with opposition to particular U.S. policies or administrations."²⁰ This is obviously an important distinction, which, according to the 2002 Pew data, seems to be reflected in the popular mind as well. Roughly between half and two thirds of the European respondents attributed the differences between the U.S. and their own countries to a difference in policies rather than in values,²¹ suggesting both that people do seem to distinguish between criticism and judgement, to use Toinet's terms, and that in 2002 the former was more common than the latter.

A second important point deals with the fact that there are different kinds of anti-Americanism. Just as the Pew data shows that European responses to America vary from area to area, Paul Hollander has identified three kinds of anti-Americanism, namely anti-Americanism as political and cultural nationalism, as anti-capitalism, and as protest against modernity.²² To separate between *political anti-Americanism*, which is related to the political role of the United States and the fact that it is the only remaining superpower, *cultural anti-Americanism*, with all the discussions relating to American cultural influences in the rest of the world, and *ideological anti-Americanism*, which focuses on ideological aspects of the U.S., such as the capitalistic-materialistic nature of the U.S. economy, thus seems to be of great importance as well. Thirdly, the questions of degree and context must also be taken into account. At some point, the line between criticism and judgement is crossed, meaning that the argument changes from being a critique of specific aspects of U.S. policies or society to a condemnation of America as a whole. It seems to be both a matter of degree, i.e. how harsh and comprehensive the criticism is, and a matter of the context in which the critique is articulated.

A fourth aspect in the discussions of definitions is the need for an historical perspective. In his exhaustive study of French anti-Americanism, Philippe Roger underscores a continuity or *longue durée* of French anti-Americanism, and argues that once it had been formed, it followed its own "trajectory." Moreover, Roger identifies a distinctly French anti-

19. *Ibid.*, 220.

20. Haseler, *The Varieties*, 1.

21. *What the World Thinks in 2002*, 69 and question 64 in appendix.

22. Hollander, *Anti-Americanism*, 444.

American "discourse," which transcends the immediate context in which the U.S. is being discussed, and provides a longer tradition in which the discussions take place. Roger even suggests that the existence of the American discourse makes it possible for individual participants in the conversations about America to be part of a longer negative (or positive) discussion and to (re)use the different arguments about America without being aware of them.²³

Anti-Americanism in Sweden

What can be said then about anti-Americanism in Sweden? Just as Philippe Roger has shown for France, there is a long history of discussions about the United States in Sweden, dating back to at least the time of the American Revolution. Although a positive view has been prevalent at times, a critical point of view can also be found. Using Paul Hollander's distinction of different kinds of anti-Americanism, examples of both ideological and cultural anti-Americanism can be found in the Swedish debate. An early case of an ideological critique is that of Count Axel von Fersen, who had joined the French forces under de Rochambeau during the Revolutionary War.²⁴ In 1781 von Fersen wrote to his father, focusing on the materialistic aspects of America and the Americans: "Money is the prime mover behind their actions; they think of nothing else than how to acquire it. Everyone is for himself and no one thinks of the public good."²⁵ Swedish lieutenant Otto Natt och Dag, who for political reasons fled Sweden for the U.S. in the 1810s, echoed the same sentiments several decades later, characterizing the Americans as "sour," counting everything "according to gold and silver." He continued his diatribe, noting that what Swedes called "honor, altruism, integrity,

23. Roger, *L'Ennemi américain*, 16-20.

24. H. Arnold Barton, *Count Hans Axel von Fersen: Aristocrat in an Age of Revolution* (Boston, 1975), 27-28.

25. R. M. Klinckowström, ed., *Le comte de Fersen et la cour de France*, 1 (Paris, 1877), 50-51. Quoted after Harald Elovson, *Amerika i svensk litteratur 1750-1820: En studie i komparativ litteraturhistoria* (Lund, 1930), 89.

and honesty” were lacking in the U.S., and that the guiding principle for the Americans was “to exploit each and everyone they know.”²⁶

A contempt of American culture was introduced in the nineteenth century and has been prevalent ever since, displaying a superior and condescending attitude towards American culture, which is seen as shallow and lacking in historical continuity and cohesiveness. Many of these notions can be traced to Knut Hamsun’s highly critical and dystopian view of the U.S. in *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv* from 1889, which had a significant impact in Sweden.²⁷ The book paints a very dark picture of America as a country without any serious literature, with a short history, and with strong xenophobic tendencies, concluding that “because of their temperament and social organization... [the Americans] have no culture.”²⁸

This view was reinforced during the twentieth century, especially as American mass culture began to reach Sweden. Ever since World War I, the influx of American popular culture has been seen as a threat to Swedish culture. American films and television, for example, which have dominated their Swedish markets since the 1920s, have been perennial sources of complaint. Already in the 1920s, American films were seen as technically advanced but lacking in culture and deeper meaning – “American nonsense,” as one reviewer put it.²⁹ Swedish author Hjalmar Bergman’s unhappy experiences in Hollywood are well known,³⁰ and his 1924 pronouncements where he argued that American culture was shallow and mass-produced and that “[o]ne cannot create culture in the same way one manufactures Ford automobiles,”³¹ seem emblematic for an attitude common ever since.³² In 1996 author and journalist Herman

26. Quoted after Elovson, *Amerika i svensk litteratur*, 271.

27. Gunnar Eidevall, *Amerika i svensk 1900-talslitteratur: Från Gustaf Hellström till Lars Gustafsson* (Stockholm, 1983), 20-21; Birgitta Steene, “The Swedish Image of America,” in Poul Houe & Sven Haakon Rossel, eds., *Images of America in Scandinavia* (Amsterdam, 1998), 170.

28. Quoted after the English translation, *The Cultural Life of Modern America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 145.

29. Martin Alm, *Americanitis: Amerika som sjukdom eller läkemedel. Svenska berättelser om USA åren 1900-1939* (Lund, 2002), 252-53.

30. Eidevall, *Amerika i svensk 1900-talslitteratur*, chapter 4.

31. Hjalmar Bergman, “Funderingar kring amerikansk psyke,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 20, 1924.

32. Ulf Jonas Björk, “Swedish Television and American Imports, 1956-1978,” in Kerstin Shands et. al., eds., *Notions of America. Swedish Perspectives* (Huddinge, forthcoming).

Lindqvist argued that Swedes had been brainwashed by American TV, a "trash culture" which like "a heavy and slippery blanket" covered and prevented "all spiritual and cultural development in Sweden."³³ The lack of historical and cultural traditions is another frequent theme, which according to critics helps explain Americans' lack of cultural cohesion. Author wrote Albert Viksten in 1938, for example, that America's "greatest tragedy" was its "lack of historical perspectives."³⁴

In light of the previous discussion, it is clear that these Swedish assessments of America go beyond criticism of specific aspects of American policies, and instead seem to be judgements of the country and its inhabitants, in the sense Marie-France Toinet uses the term. The ideological and cultural critiques of the United States in Sweden during the past three centuries certainly seem possible to discuss in the context of anti-Americanism. It is also clear that the critique echoes that in other European countries in its focus on materialism, on a shallow mass culture, and on a country devoid of history and cultural traditions.

The strong Swedish criticism of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia during the late 1960s and 1970s, which resulted in a very serious diplomatic crisis between the two countries, has often been discussed in terms of anti-Americanism. Clearly, both the Swedish government and Swedish public opinion became increasingly critical of American military involvement in Southeast Asia from the mid-1960s and on.³⁵ The Swedish government, however, strongly denied any charge of anti-Americanism, as in 1969 when an official government document maintained that "[a]nti-Americanism is not a feature of Swedish policy. We are well aware of the role the U.S. plays for democracy and freedom in the world."³⁶ In 1968 official Swedish foreign policy representatives argued that it was the concern that the U.S. was pursuing a policy that was not compatible with the democratic values always associated with the country that had resulted in the Swedish criticism.³⁷ Five years later, the

33. Herman Lindqvist, "Hjärntvättade av amerikansk TV," *Aftonbladet*, February 18, 1996, 11.

34. Albert Viksten, *Guds eget land* (Stockholm, 1938), 11.

35. See Yngve Möller, *Sverige och Vietnamkriget: Ett unikt kapitel i svensk utrikespolitik* (Stockholm 1992), for a comprehensive overview of the issue.

36. Utrikesdepartementet, *Utrikesfrågor: Offentliga dokument m m rörande viktigare svenska utrikesfrågor: 1969* (Stockholm, 1969), 125.

37. Utrikesdepartementet, *Utrikesfrågor: Offentliga dokument m m rörande viktigare svenska utrikesfrågor: 1968* (Stockholm, 1968), 12.

American chargé d'affaires in Stockholm reported to Washington that Sweden's Under-Secretary of State Sverker Åström had told him that the Swedish government considered it "important to be understood" that Swedish criticism of U.S. Vietnam policies should not be seen as "hostility to the U.S. as such," and that the Swedish people had the "highest admiration and affection" for the U.S.³⁸

Prime Minister Olof Palme was, according to his close collaborator Jan Eliasson, "hurt" by accusations of anti-Americanism, and said that they were plainly "wrong." Palme felt his comments to be "a necessary reaction to the flawed behavior by a superpower," and argued that they had nothing to do with the U.S. or with Americans in general. Palme greatly admired Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy, Eliasson notes, and was "fascinated by American politics and the vitality of American democracy," perhaps as a result of his years as a student at Kenyon College in the late 1940s. It was, Eliasson concludes, Palme's "almost emotional ties to the U.S." that made his criticism so harsh.³⁹

The diplomatic crisis between Sweden culminated during Christmas 1972. In a public statement following the American bombings of Hanoi, the Prime Minister used very strong language in his critique of the American government's actions. Palme suggested that the bombings were "crimes" of which there were many in modern history, adding that such crimes "are often associated with a name – Guernica, Oradour, Babi Yar, Katyn, Lidice, Sharpeville, Treblinka... Now there is another name to add to the list – Hanoi, Christmas, 1972."⁴⁰ This statement immediately caused a severe diplomatic crisis between Sweden and the United States. American government officials called the Swedish comments "outrageous," and were especially incensed by the comparisons with Nazi Germany. The Prime Minister's statement, the outgoing Swedish ambassador to Washington was informed, "came with singular ill grace" and "assumes the worst motives and the basest of attitudes on the part of the U.S. government."⁴¹ Subsequently, the incoming Swedish ambassador

38. Quoted in Leif Leifland, *Frostens år: Om USA:s diplomatiska utfrysning av Sverige* (Stockholm, 1997), 29.

39. Jan Eliasson, "Olof Palme och utrikespolitiken," in Erik Åsard, ed., *Politikern Olof Palme* (Stockholm, 2002), 171-172.

40. Quoted in Leifland, *Frostens år*, 39.

41. Quoted in *ibid.*, 212-13.

was denied accreditation and the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Stockholm was withdrawn. For a period of 18 months diplomatic relations between the two countries were frozen, and it was not until 1979, when Vice President Mondale visited Sweden, that the controversy over the Vietnam issue was finally laid to rest.⁴²

Was the Swedish policy on the Vietnam War an example of anti-Americanism? Obviously, official Swedish government pronouncements were careful in making a distinction between criticism and judgement, making it difficult to classify the official Swedish position as anti-American. Palme's Christmas statement might be seen in a different light. The comparisons with not only Nazi Germany, which particularly offended Henry Kissinger, but also with South Africa, Franco's Spain and Stalin's reign of terror, carry with them such strong connotations of brutal dictatorial regimes that clearly go beyond the normal diplomatic discourse between nations. Thus, the context of the pronouncements suggests that this might be considered as an example of an anti-American discourse. Moreover, the Christmas statement was clearly intensely emotional, which is another important criterion of anti-Americanism.

Palme's statement should be viewed in the context of other (more or less) anti-American sentiments in Sweden during the Vietnam War. Even though the topic has not been studied systematically, such ideas were certainly expressed in the public Swedish debate on the issue, and the discussion of the war in Vietnam often seems to have been secondary to a fundamental criticism of American capitalism, U.S. social problems, or American culture in general. An examination of the public debate in the mid-1960s, for example, shows several examples of anti-American attitudes.⁴³

Sweden thus does not seem to deviate from other European countries when it comes to anti-American sentiments. Political anti-Americanism has probably been weaker than cultural anti-Americanism in Sweden, and it is important to remember that even large parts of the Swedish debate on the U.S. and Vietnam were, in Eva Queckfeldt's words, "an echo" of the American anti-war debate.⁴⁴ In order to make a more thor-

42. Eliasson, "Olof Palme och utrikespolitiken," 172.

43. For some examples see, Artur Lundkvist, "Problemet är USA," *Clarté*, 1964, No. 4; Sara Lidman, "Medan det regnar," *Expressen*, June 16, 1965; Peter Weiss, "Vietnam," *Dagens Nyheter*, August 2, 1966.

44. Eva Queckfeldt, "Vietnam." *Tre svenska tidningars syn på vietnamfrågan* (Lund, 1981), 94-95.

ough, a number of important questions have yet to be studied, such as the intensity of anti-American feelings in Sweden, the existence of an anti-American discourse, and of the overall relationship between the positive and negative estimations of the United States in Sweden. Due to the paucity of current research on the issue, they will have to await further studies.