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Past and Present: Is There Anything New with Anti-Americanism Today?

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Introduction

The conference “*Past and Present: Is There Anything New with Anti-Americanism Today?*”, held in December 2004 at Central European University in Budapest, was the first in a series of three international conferences planned as part of a three-year research project on the political consequences of anti-Americanism. The project, coordinated by the Center for Policy Studies, was launched at the beginning of 2004 with the fundamental aim to promote a critical investigation of the forms, functions, and consequences of anti-Americanism today.

Speakers have been invited to discuss some of the differences between anti-Americanism in the late 1960s and early 21st century. These issues were presented over two days in three separate panels. The first panel addressed the issue of “old” and “new” anti-Americanism in Europe, the second panel focused on regions and countries outside of Europe, while the final panel investigated the relationship between anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism.

Panel One: Old and New Anti-Americanism in Europe

CEU’s President and Rector, **Yehuda Elkana**, welcomed the conference participants and gave an introductory note pointing out the need to rethink the world in a way that would enable us to deal with contemporary political dimensions, such as the balance between democracy and security. When the change came, in 1989, most of us—except for a few very wise people—thought that a free, capitalist, democratic world with deep respect for human rights and freedom of expression would prevail. Today, after 15 years, we are still faced with semi-totalitarian states with poor human rights records. We need to develop theoretical tools to deal with contemporary challenges such as partial democracy and the growing tension between security and democracy.

One of the challenges we are faced with today is the growing appeal of anti-Americanism, embracing all kinds of negative sentiments and dissatisfaction with transition in Central and Eastern Europe, said **Ivan Krastev**, Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies and Open Society Center Director. He added that the broad appeal of anti-Americanism today makes it a “master framework” that can easily be assigned a number of different meanings. In his opening presentation at the first panel on anti-Americanism in Europe, Krastev pointed out that there are different reasons for and different levels of anti-Americanism around the world. Defining the phenomenon is very difficult and broad, over-arching explanations are insufficient. To be understood correctly, anti-Americanism must be placed into a particular context.

Krastev then moved to anti-Americanism in Central and Eastern Europe and its post-ideological nature. The phenomenon is not linked with US values or policy, it is rather based on the local context, directed against local political elites who are mistrusted by the people. From a historical perspective, Krastev continued, anti-Americanism in the region, until the collapse of the communist regime, was neither political nor cultural. Although political anti-Americanism emerged during the Cold War, as a part of the official ideology, it has never enjoyed populist appeal. In 1989, anti-Americanism was reestablished as a political resource, however, it was still far from being a cultural phenomenon. However, when anti-Americanism meets the post-ideological vacuum in transition societies, it becomes a social phenomenon. Exactly here, Krastev sees the political risk that anti-Americanism brings for the new democracies: a populist appeal, embracing all kinds of anti-sentiments, dissatisfaction, and a rhetoric of protest in opposition to the status quo.

Claus Leggewie from the University of Giessen in Germany criticized the anti-Globalization movement’s reference to anti-Americanism as one of its weak points. Anti-Semitism and anti-

Americanism are both based on stereotypes, prejudices, propaganda and subjectivity and both have an ideological appeal and political impact in European societies. The crucial point is the intermingling of Anti-Zionist and Anti-Semitic views in the critique of the U.S. and Israeli “war against terror.”

The final presenter in the first panel, **János Mátyás Kovács**, from the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, emphasized the need to measure “Americanism” in Central and Eastern Europe before estimating the overall potential of anti-Americanism. He talked of Central and Eastern Europe as a “Little America” that had imported a whole set of economic, political and welfare institutions, policies and cultures bearing the US label. In his view, accession to the European Union will serve as a test for the durability of American-style societal regimes if challenged by a powerful drive of social engineering represented by compliance with the *acquis communautaire*.

Tony Judt, Director of the Remarque Institute at the University of New York concluded the first panel with his comments on the presentations. He stressed the different sources of anti-Americanism and focused on US policy today as the most important factor. Judt outlined how the focus of the debate from what America does has moved to what America is, since domestic considerations drive current US policy towards the world today. A detailed understanding of what the US is is needed in order to comprehend what it does.

Panel Two: Anti-Americanism Old and New **Outside Europe**

The afternoon session was opened by **Alan McPherson** from Howard University, US, and his presentation on anti-Americanism in Latin America and the Caribbean. McPherson traces anti-Americanism in the region back to the early 20th century, when it began as a subversive movement by non-state actors in opposition to the nation-building and capitalism promoted by the United States. Later in the century, anti-Americanism in Latin America became a tool of state actors whose aim was to reverse US influence in their respective countries. Today, anti-Americanism in the region is perhaps more potent than ever because actors traditionally kept out of power now wield increasing control over the state. In places such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, such actors are decrying U.S. influence over their economic and social lives.

The country where anti-Americanism has been gaining momentum is South Korea. **Youngshik Bong** from Wellesley College, US, spoke about “young” anti-Americanism in South Korea, which has become a new phenomenon emerging only in the last couple of years among young and educated Koreans. It is strongly tied to national security concerns, democratization, and US policy toward North Korea, added Bong. If the United States fails to take these concerns among South Koreans into account, the more that anti-American sentiments are likely to persist. This generational phenomenon, as he called it, can have political consequences because it has the potential to undermine the military alliance between South Korea and the United States. It is important for both countries to acknowledge that an anti-American South Korea is by no means a bygone conclusion, as the US and South Korea have many common security interests between them.

The following presentation by **Farish Ahmad Noor** from the Center for Modern Orient Studies in Germany focused on anti-Americanism in the Muslim communities of Southeast Asia. The region's strong political and economic ties with the US have been threatened by the emergence of anti-Western radical Islamic political movements that have penetrated deeply into all spheres of life and brought significant changes to society. Noor emphasized two varieties of the current brand of anti-Americanism in Southeast Asia: religious anti-Americanism, reinvented as jihad and a struggle against the enemies of Islam; and anti-elite anti-Americanism that has a local, social and political context as a protest rhetoric against local governments that cooperate with the US. However, the Muslim anti-Americanism of Southeast Asia is more dangerous than the religious anti-Americanism

of the Arab world, since it is a modern, economically developed and technologically advanced society. Moreover, it combines Islamist ideology with instruments of modern communication, mass mobilization, networking, and political organization.

The second panel was concluded by a presentation on attitudes towards the US in the Arab World, particularly after the war in Iraq by **Aziz Al-Azmeh**, a distinguished visiting professor at the Central European University. He rejected the view presented earlier at the conference that anti-Americanism was an ideology, or an empty and irrational master framework that everyone could assign a different meaning to. Instead, he pointed out, we need to be very specific as to the different contexts of anti-Americanism. In the context of the Middle East anti-Americanism is a political response to US policy in the Middle East, up to and including the intervention in Iraq.

Final comments and conclusions emphasized the weakness of any general explanation of anti-Americanism. The panel concluded that anti-Americanism should be put into a context to be understood. The phenomenon has specific reasons and consequences in various political, social and cultural contexts, as the conference speakers demonstrated.

Panel Three: Anti-Americanism and Anti-Semitism

The last panel of the conference dealt with the link between anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. **Brian Klug** from Saint Xavier University, US, opened the panel by criticizing the view that they are inextricably linked. Klug argued that there is a difference in the logic of the two concepts: anti-Americanism can be a rational reaction to American policies and actions, whereas anti-Semitism is inherently irrational. Klug identified what he called a “mindset”: a predisposition to conflate hostility to America, Israel and Jews, to overstate the extent of this hostility, and to see it as largely anti-Semitic.

Ian Buruma from Bard College, US said that anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism are linked. Those who believe in blood and soil purism see Jews and the United States as polluting, corrupting, materialistic, parasitic, rootless, cosmopolitan; in short, as everything they hate. Buruma also pointed out the strong inter-relation between current anti-Americanism and conspiracy theories about Israeli influence over US foreign policy.

The myth of rising European anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism, as Eric Frey, managing editor of Vienna-based *Der Standard* called it, is used as a shield against criticism of US foreign policy and as an excuse to act unilaterally by the US. By linking specific and often legitimate critical views of the US to the scourge of anti-Semitism, conservative American voices are painting an overly negative picture of Europe. This kind of anti-Europeanism is also used for domestic political purposes, most prominently in the last presidential election.

The final presenter, **Daniel Dor** from Tel Aviv University in Israel, focused on the link between pro-Americanism in Israel and societal attitudes towards globalization. Dor raised the hypothesis that pro-Americanism in the Clinton era was associated with a strong pro-Globalization sentiment, which played a role in the public support for the Oslo agreement. Today, however, both Sharon and Bush are viewed as concentrating on security—the classic topic of the strong state. As the Bush administration is viewed as working in a way that weakens global governance and re-strengthens the power of the American state, and, by implication, that of the Israeli state, pro-American sentiment in Israel is associated with an anti-globalization perspective.

Results

Conference speakers expressed their deep appreciation of this forum for discussion and debate, and several new ideas were conceived for research within the anti-Americanism program. Conference papers are currently being prepared for a publication in an edited volume.

The next conference is scheduled for the fall 2005 and will take place in the US.