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Source: *Metaphilosophy*, April 2004, Vol. 35, No. 3, SPECIAL ISSUE: THE PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGE OF SEPTEMBER 11 (April 2004), pp. 365-385

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24439555

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DOMENICO LOSURDO

Abstract: The war against Iraq unleashed in March 2003 spawned an attempt to silence the protest movement by accusing it of anti-Americanism. This essay argues that the theory according to which right-wing anti-Americanism and left-wing anti-Americanism coincide is a myth. A new issue appears now, a paradox that characterizes the United States, where democracy developed within the white community concomitantly with the enslavement of blacks and the deportation of American Indians. In the American "*Herrenvolk* democracy," a line of demarcation between whites and people of color fosters the development of relations based on equality within the white community. Furthermore, U.S. history is marked by the fundamentalist tendency to transform the Judeo-Christian tradition into a sort of national religion that consecrates the exceptionalism of the American people and the sacred mission with which they are entrusted ("Manifest Destiny"). Europe is unable thoroughly to comprehend the American mixture of religious and moral fervor, on the one hand, and overt pursuit of political, economic, and military world domination, on the other. But it is this mixture, or rather this explosive combination, this peculiar fundamentalism, that constitutes the greatest threat to world peace today.

Keywords: Americanism, anti-Americanism, colonial tradition, fascism, fundamentalism, *Herrenvolk* democracy, liberalism, racial state.

The Myth and Reality of Leftist Anti-Americanism

The March 2003 invasion of Iraq was accompanied by a curious ideological phenomenon: the attempt to silence the large and unprecedented protest movement by accusing it of anti-Americanism. With still new wars on the horizon, this supposed anti-Americanism was and continues to be depicted as something more than just a flawed political position; it is considered a disease, a symptom of maladjustment to modernity and a deafness to the rationales of democracy. This disease —it is claimed—subsumes anti-Americans from the right and from the left, and marks the worst pages of European history. Thus—the conclusion is

drawn—to criticize Washington and preemptive war represents an actual menace. It would be easy to respond to this by calling attention to the anti-Europeanism mounting on the other side of the Atlantic, one with a long tradition behind it. It is quite significant that, in this political and ideological climate, no one remembers the terror perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan in the name of "pure Americanism," or the "one hundred percent Americanism" opposed to blacks and whites guilty of challenging white supremacy (in MacLean 1994, 4-5, 14). In a similar manner, no one seems to remember the McCarthy witch hunt for those nurturing un-American ideas or sentiments.

Let us consider the main question here. Is there any historical foundation to the anti-democratic equating of left-wing and right-wing anti-Americanism? Indeed, the young Marx declares the United States to be the "country of complete political emancipation" and "the most perfect example of the modern state," one that ensures the dominion of the bourgeoisie without excluding a priori any social class from the benefits of political rights (see Losurdo 1993, 21-22). Already here one can notice a certain indulgence: hardly absent, in the United States class discrimination takes on a "racial" shape.

Engels's position is even more drastically pro-American. After distinguishing between the "abolition of the state" in the Communist sense, in the feudal sense, and in the bourgeois sense, he adds: "In bourgeois countries the abolition of the state means a reduction in state power to the level of that in North America. There, class conflicts develop only incompletely; the collisions between classes are constantly camouflaged by the emigration to the West of the proletarian overpopulation. The intervention of the state power, reduced to a minimum in the East, does not exist at all in the West" (Marx and Engels 1955, 7: 288). More than just an example of the abolition of the state (even though in the bourgeois sense), the West seems to be synonymous with an increase in the sphere of freedom: there is no mention of the plight of the American Indians, just as there is silence regarding the slavery of blacks. The position is similar in *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State:* the United States is referred to as the country where, at least during certain periods of its history and in certain geographical areas, the political and military apparatus removed from society tends to disappear (Marx and Engels 1955, 21: 166). The year is 1884: at this time blacks are not only deprived of the political rights they had acquired immediately after the Civil War but are also bound to a system of apartheid and subjected to a violence that even includes the cruelest forms of lynching. In the American south the state was perhaps weak; much stronger was the Ku Klux Klan, an expression of a civil society, yet a civil society which can itself be the locus of applied power, and brutal power at that. Just one year prior to the publication of Engels's book, the United States Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a federal law that would have prohibited the segregation

of blacks in the workplace or in services (like railways) managed by private companies, on the grounds that, by definition, such companies were removed from any and all government interference.

Above all it is important to observe that, at the level of international politics, Engels seems to echo the ideology of manifest destiny as it emerges in his celebration of the war against Mexico: thanks also to the "courage of American volunteers," "beautiful California was wrenched from the indolent Mexicans who knew not what to do with it." By taking advantage of the new, enormous conquests, "the dynamic Yankees" have brought new life to the production and circulation of wealth, to "world trade," and to the diffusion of "civilization" *(Zivilisatiori)* (Marx and Engels 1955, 6: 273-75). Engels overlooks a fact decried in the same time period by American abolitionists: the expansion of the United States meant the expansion of the institution of slavery.

As for the history of the Communist movement as such, the influence of Taylorism and Fordism upon Lenin and Gramsci is well known. In 1923, Nikolai Bukharin goes even further: "We need Marxism plus Americanism" (in Figes 2003, 24). A year later, Stalin seems to regard the very same country that participated in the intervention against Soviet Russia with so much admiration that he tells the Bolshevik cadres if they really aspire to the heights of the "principles of Leninism," they will have to learn to assimilate "the pragmatic American spirit." Here, "Americanism" and the "pragmatic American spirit" signify not only concreteness but also the intolerance of prejudices, and they ultimately call to mind democracy. As Stalin explains in 1932, the United States is certainly a capitalistic country; however, "the traditions of industry and the practice of production have something of democracy about them, which cannot be said of the old capitalist countries in Europe, where the genteel spirit of feudal aristocracy lives on" (see Losurdo 1997, 81-86).

Somehow, Heidegger is right to criticize the United States and the Soviet Union for representing, from a philosophical viewpoint, the same thing: "the unleashing of technique" and "the transformation of man into mass" (see Losurdo 2001, 105). There is no doubt that the Bolsheviks find the American notions of melting pot and self-made man highly appealing. On the other hand, they find other aspects of Americans to be thoroughly repugnant. In 1924, *Correspondance Internationale* (the French version of the Communist International organ) published an article written by a young Indochinese immigrant to the United States: while he has great admiration for the American Revolution, he is horrified by the practice of lynching blacks in the South. One of these mass spectacles is brutally described: "The Black is cooked, browned, burned. But he deserves to die twice instead of once. He is therefore hanged, or more exactly, what is left of his corpse is hanged …. When everybody has had enough, the corpse is brought down. The rope is cut into small pieces which will be sold for three or five dollars each." Yet the loathing of the system of white

supremacy does not result in a general condemnation of the United States: yes, the Ku KIux Klan possesses all "the brutality of fascism," but it will eventually be defeated, not just by blacks, Jews, and Catholics (all victims at various levels) but by "all decent Americans" (in Wade 1997, 203-4). This is hardly indiscriminate anti-Americanism.

A "Wonderful Country of the Future"

It is an Indochinese man who compares the Ku Klux Klan to fascism, but the similarities between the two movements are evident to American writers of the time as well. More than just occasionally, and both positively and negatively, the white-robed men in the American South are compared to the Italian "black shirts" and the German "brown shirts." After pointing out the similarities between the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi movements, a present-day American scholar comes to the following conclusion: "Had the Depression not hit Germany as hard as it subsequently did, National Socialism might today be dismissed as the Klan sometimes is: a historical curiosity whose doom was foreordained" (MacLean 1994, 184). In other words, more so than a different political and ideological history, what explains the failure of the Invisible Empire in the United States and the coming of the Third Reich in Germany is the different economic contexts. This claim might be a bit excessive. And yet when the essential contributions by the United States and other countries (first of all the Soviet Union) in the struggle against Hitler's Germany and the Axis powers is brought up in order to silence criticism against Washington's current policies, only part of the truth is spoken. The other part of the story consists in the important role that reactionary movements and American racists played by inspiring agitation in Germany that would eventually lead to the rise of Hitler.

Already in the 1920s relationships, exchanges, and collaborations promoting antiblack and anti-Jewish racism were forming between the Ku Klux Klan and right-wing German extremists. Even in 1937 the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg hails the United States as a "wonderful country of the future," one that has the merit of formulating the brilliant "new idea of a racial state," an idea that will now need to be put into practice, "with young might" and through the expulsion and deportation of "blacks and yellows" (Rosenberg 1937, 673). One need only consider the laws passed immediately after the Third Reich's rise to power to realize how similar the situation is to that in the American South. Obviously, in Germany the position of Germans of Jewish origin corresponds to the position of African-Americans in the American South. Hitler clearly distinguishes, even on a juridical level, the position of Aryans with respect to that of Jews and the few mulattos living in Germany (at the end of World War I troops of color belonging to the French Army had participated in the occupation of the country). "The

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black question," writes Rosenberg, "is the most urgent of all the decisive issues in the United States"; and once the absurd notion of equality is eliminated with regard to the blacks, there is no reason why "the necessary consequences" should not be drawn "for yellows and Jews" as well (Rosenberg 1937, 668-69).

None of this should come as a surprise. Since the foundation of the Nazi plan was the construction of a racial state, what other possible models existed at the time? Rosenberg does mention South Africa, which must remain firmly held in white and "Nordic hands" (thanks to appropriate "laws" against the "Indians" as well as "blacks, mulattos, and Jews"), and serves as a "solid bulwark" to fend off the threat represented by the "black awakening" (Rosenberg 1937, 666). Yet, to some extent Rosenberg knows that the segregationist policy in South Africa was largely inspired by the system of white supremacy born in the United States after Reconstruction (Noer 1978, 106-7, 115, 125). Therefore, he focuses primarily upon the latter.

There exists yet another reason why the American republic represents an inspiration for the Third Reich. Hitler's goal is not a generic colonial expansionism but rather a continental empire to be created by the annexation and Germanization of the contiguous eastern territories. Germany is called upon to expand into eastern Europe as if it were the Wild West, and to treat the "natives" in the same way the American Indians were treated (see Losurdo 1996, 212-16), without ever losing sight of the American model, which the Fiihrer hails for its "unprecedented inner force" (Hitler 1939, 153-54). Immediately after the invasion, Hitler proceeds to dismember Poland: one part is directly incorporated into the Great Reich (and from it the Poles are expelled); the rest becomes a "General Government" within which, declares Governor General Hans Frank, the Poles live as in "a sort of reservation": they are "under German jurisdiction," though they are not "German citizens" (in Ruge and Schumann 1977, 36). Here, the American model is followed almost literally: we cannot fail to notice a strong resemblance to the condition of the American Indians.

The Racial State in Germany and the United States

The American model leaves a deep mark even at the categorical and linguistic levels. The term *Untermensch,* which plays such a central and ruinous role in the theory and practice of the Third Reich, is nothing more than a translation of *Under Man.* The Nazi Rosenberg is well aware of this, and he expresses his admiration for the American author Lothrop Stoddard, who first coined the term, which appears as the subtitle *(The Menace of the Under Man)* of a book first published in New York in 1922 and then in German translation *(Die Drohung des Untermenschen)* three years later. As for its meaning, Stoddard states that it serves to indicate

the mass of "savages and barbarians," "essentially uncivilizable and incorrigibly hostile to civilization," who must be dealt with in a radical manner in order to avoid the collapse of civilization. Even before being praised by Rosenberg, Stoddard had been commended by two American presidents (Harding and Hoover). He was later welcomed and honored in Berlin, where he met not only the most renowned representatives of Nazi eugenics but also the highest officials of the regime, including Hitler, who had already begun his campaign for the decimation and subjugation of the *Untermenschen,* the "natives" of eastern Europe?

In the United States of white supremacy, as in the Germany gripped by the increasingly more powerful Nazi movement, the program to reestablish racial hierarchy is firmly linked to the project of eugenics. First of all, the best must be encouraged to procreate, so as to avoid the risk of "racial suicide" *(Rasseselbstmord)* that looms over whites. Sounding the alarm in 1918 is Oswald Spengler, who cites Theodore Roosevelt (Spengler 1980, 683). Indeed, Roosevelt's warning against the specter of "race suicide" or "race humiliation" goes hand in hand with his denunciation of the "diminution of the birth rate among the highest races," that is, "among the old native American stock." Obviously, the reference here is not to Native American "savages" but to WASPs (see Roosevelt 1951, 1: 487, note 4, 647, 1113; 2: 1053).

Second, an unbridgeable gap must be created between servant races and master races, cleansing the latter of any waste and preparing them to face and break the revolt of the servant races, which, following the Bolshevik lead, have begun to spread around the world. Here, too, the findings of unbiased historical research are surprising. *Erbgesundheitslehre,* or *Rassenhygiene,* another keyword of Nazi ideology, is nothing more than a translation into German of *eugenics,* the new science invented in England during the second half of the nineteenth century by Francis Galton. Not by chance is this new science received most favorably in the United States, where the relationship between the "three races" and "natives," on the one hand, and the increasing mass of poor immigrants, on the other, is particularly problematic. Well before Hitler's rise to power, on the eve of World War I, a book is published in Munich entitled *Die Rassenhygiene in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika* (Racial hygiene in the United States of North America), which already in its title points to the United States as a model for "racial hygiene." The author, Geza von Hoffmann, vice-consul of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Chicago, extols the United States for the "lucidity" and "pure practical reason" it has demonstrated in confronting, with the

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[1] On the eugenics between the United States and Germany, see Kiihl 1994, 61; the flattering judgment of President Harding is found at the beginning of the 1925 French version of Stoddard's book *(Le flot montant des peuples de couleur contre la suprematie mondiale des blancs,* translated by Abel Doysie. Paris: Payot, 1925).

necessary energy, a very important problem that is instead so often ignored: for in the United States, to violate the laws that forbid sexual intercourse and interracial marriages can be punished with up to ten years in prison. And not only the people responsible for the act are liable to prosecution; so are their accomplices (Hoffmann 1913, 9: 67-68). Ten years later, in 1923, a German doctor, Fritz Lenz, complains that so far as "racial hygiene" is concerned, Germany is well behind the United States (Lifton 1986, 23). Even after the Nazis take power, the ideologues and "scientists" of race continue to hammer away: "Germany too has much to learn from the measures taken by the North Americans: they know their business" (Gunther 1934, 465).

The eugenic measures passed immediately after the Nazi *Machtergreifung* aim to prevent the risk of "Volkstod" (Lifton 1986, 25), the "death of the people" or of the race. Once again the theme is that of race suicide. To prevent the suicide of the white race, which would mean the end of civilization, one must not hesitate to implement the most rigorous of measures, the most drastic of solutions, with regard to the "inferior races": if one of them—Theodore Roosevelt proclaims—should assault the "superior" race, the latter would respond with "a war of extermination," called upon "to put to death man, woman and child, exactly as if they were crusaders" (Roosevelt 1951, 2: 377). It is worth pointing out that a vague notion of "ultimate solution" regarding the black question had already appeared in a book published in Boston in 1913 (Fredrickson 1987, 258 note). Later, of course, the Nazis theorized and attempted to put into practice the "final solution" *(Endlosung)* to the "Jewish question."

Nazism as a Project of "White Supremacy" on a Worldwide Level

In the course of its history, the United States has directly had to face the problems resulting from the contact between different "races" and the influx of numerous immigrants from every part of the world. On the other hand, the angry racist movement that emerges at the end of the nineteenth century is a response to the Civil War and its radical Reconstruction period. Whereas the former property and slave owners suddenly find themselves, as rebels, without political rights, blacks go from being slaves to being full citizens with political rights. They often become part of the representative bodies, where, as legislators or managers, they somehow gain power over their former owners.

Let us now consider the experiences and emotions behind the unrest that leads to Nazism. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Ku Klux Klan and the theorists of "white supremacy" label the post-slavery United States, with its onslaught of immigrants coming from Europe's marginal countries and even from the Orient, a "mongrel civilization" (MacLean 1994, 133) or a "cloaca gentium" (Grant 1917,

81). Analogously, in *Mein* /Gawp/ Hitler describes his native Austria as a chaotic "conglomeration of peoples," a "Babylon of people," a "Babylonian kingdom" torn by "racial conflict" (Hitler 1939, 74, 79, 39, 80). In Austria, catastrophe seems imminent: the "Slavization" and "erasure of the German element" *(Entdeutschung)* is progressing, and thus the twilight of the superior race that had colonized and civilized the Orient is at hand (Hitler 1939, 82). The Germany where Hitler comes to live has witnessed unprecedented upheaval since the end of World War I, an upheaval somehow comparable to that visited upon the American South after the Civil War. Worse even than the loss of colonies, Germany is forced to endure a military occupation by the multiracial troops of the victors and seems to have been transformed into a "racial hodgepodge" (Hitler 1939, 439). Inflaming this fear that the end of civilization is at hand is the October Revolution, which calls for the rebellion of colonized people and seems to confirm ideologically the "horror" of a black military occupation. The October Revolution breaks out and takes hold of an area populated by people traditionally considered at the margin of civilization. Just as in the American South abolitionists are branded "Negro lovers" and traitors to their own race, social democrats and especially Communists are considered by Hitler to be traitors to the German and the Western race. In the final analysis, the Third Reich appears to be an attempt, under the conditions of total war and international civil war, to prevent the end of civilization and the suicide of the West and of the superior race by creating a regime of white supremacy on a worldwide scale, and under German hegemony.

Anti-Semitism and Anti-Americanism? Spengler and Ford

The campaign against those who dare to criticize Washington's policy of preemptive war typically links anti-Americanism to anti-Semitism. Here again, one cannot help but be amazed at the lack of historical memory. Does anyone recall the Ku Klux Klan's praise for "the genuine Americanism of Henry Ford?" (MacLean 1994, 90). Widely admired, the automobile magnate condemns the Bolshevik Revolution as being first and foremost the product of conspiring Jews, and he even founds a magazine, the *Dearborn Independent,* that publishes articles collected in 1920 into a single volume entitled *The International Jew.* The volume immediately becomes a seminal reference book of international anti-Semitism, to the extent that, more than any other, it is credited with contributing to the success of the notorious *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion.* It is true that Ford will eventually be forced to renounce his campaign, but by then his book will already have been translated into German and will have become quite popular. Well-known Nazi figures like von Schirach and even Himmler will later claim to have been inspired or motivated by Ford. Himmler in particular claims to have comprehended the "the danger of

Judaism" only after reading Ford's book: "For National Socialists, it was a revelation," as was the reading of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion.* "These two books showed us the way to free a humanity plagued by the greatest enemy of all time, the international Jew." Himmler follows a formula that echoes the title of Ford's book. These testimonials might be self-serving in part, but one thing is for sure: in Hitler's interviews with Dietrich Eckart, the anti-Semitic Henry Ford is among those most often cited as having had the greatest influence on him. And, according to Himmler, Ford's book, along with the *Protocols,* played a "decisive" *(ausschlaggebend)* role not only in his own personal development but in the Führer's as well.[2]

Here, too, the banality of a schematic contrast between Europe and the United States is revealed, as if the plague of anti-Semitism did not directly involve both Europe and the United States. In 1933 Spengler feels the need to clarify this point: the Judeophobia to which he openly confesses should not be confused with the "materialistic" racism typical of "anti-Semites in Europe and America" (Spengler 1933, 157). The biological anti-Semitism that rages impetuously on the other side of the Atlantic is considered excessive even by an author like Spengler, who speaks out against Jewish culture and history throughout his works. For this reason, among others, Spengler is considered timid and inconsequential to the Nazis. Their enthusiasm lies elsewhere: *The International Jew* continues to be published with honor in the Third Reich, and with prefaces that emphasize the distinct historical merit of its author (for having brought to light the "Jewish question"), as well as what is perceived to be a direct line of continuity leading from Henry Ford to Adolf Hitler! (See Losurdo 1991, 84-85.)

The current polemic concerning anti-Americanism and anti-Europeanism is naive: it seems to ignore the cultural exchanges and reciprocal influences America and Europe have had on one another. In the immediate aftermath of World War I, Croce has no problem pointing out the influence that Theodore Roosevelt had on Enrico Corradini, the nationalist leader who joined the fascist party (Croce 1967, 251). In the early twentieth century, the American statesman had made a triumphant trip to Europe, during the course of which he was awarded an *honoris causa* degree in Berlin and acquired—according to Pareto—numerous "flatterers" (Pareto 1988, 1241 42, §1436). The representation of the United States as a sort of sacred space, immune to the plagues and horrors of Europe, is above all a product of the cold war. One must never overlook the exchange of ideas flowing between the two continents: the American Stoddard coined a keyword of Nazi ideological discourse

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[2] See the account by Felix Kersten, Himmler's Finnish masseur, in the Paris Centre de documentation Juive et contemporaine *{Das Buch von Henry Ford,* 22 December 1940, no. CCX-31); see also Poliakov 1977, 278, and Losurdo 1991, 83-85.

(Unlermensch), but Stoddard in turn had studied in Germany and read the theories so dear to Nietzsche regarding the superman *(JJebermensch)* (Losurdo 2002, 886-87). Moreover, while Germany gazes with admiration upon the land of white supremacy, it reacts with repugnance to the notion of the melting pot. Rosenberg recounts with disgust that in Chicago there is a "big [Catholic] cathedral" that "belongs to the niggers." There is even a "Negro bishop" who celebrates Mass: it marks the "breeding" of "bastard phenomena" (Rosenberg 1937, 471). In turn, Hitler denounces the "Jewish blood" that flows in the veins of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose wife is said to have a "negroid look" about her (Hitler 1952-54, 2: 182, conversations dated July 1, 1942).

The United States, the West, and *"Herrenvolk* Democracy"

At this point it becomes clear that the theory according to which right-wing anti-Americanism and left-wing anti-Americanism coincide is based upon ideology and myth. In fact, the very same elements criticized by the leftist tradition that begins with abolitionism and carries on to the Communist movement are instead viewed positively and even enthusiastically by the right. What is cherished by one side is despised by the other, and vice versa. Yet both sides find themselves facing the paradox that has characterized the United States from its very foundation, a paradox that was articulated in the eighteenth century by the British writer Samuel Johnson: "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of the negroes?" (in Foner 1998, 32).

It is a fact: democracy developed within the white community concomitantly with the enslavement of blacks and the deportation of American Indians. For thirty-two of America's first thirty-six years as an independent country, the presidency was in the hands of slave owners. And it was also slave owners who drafted the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Without slavery (and the subsequent racial segregation) one can understand nothing about "American freedom": the two go hand in hand, the one supporting the other (Morgan 1975). While this "peculiar institution" ensures firm control over the "dangerous" classes at places of production, expansion westward serves to defuse social conflict by transforming a potential proletariat into a class of landowners, though at the expense of peoples who must be removed or crushed.

After the War of Independence, American democracy comes to experience a further development with Jackson's presidency in the 1830s: the expansion of suffrage and the elimination, in large part, of property restrictions within the white community are concomitant with the rigorous deportation of American Indians and with increasing resentment and violence directed against blacks. The same might be said for the period dating from the end of the nineteenth century to the

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end of the first fifteen years of the twentieth century. This so-called
Progressive Era is undeniably characterized by numerous democratic
reforms (which ensure the direct election of the Senate, the secret ballot,
the introduction of primary elections and the institution of the refer-
endum, and so on); yet it is an especially tragic period for blacks (the
targets of Ku Klux Klan terror squads) and American Indians (stripped
of their remaining homeland and subjected to a ruthless leveling intended
to deprive them even of their cultural identity).

Concerning this paradox of their history, numerous American intel-
lectuals have spoken of " Herrenvolk democracy," that is, democracy only
for the "genteel population" (to use an expression of the sort Hitler was
fond of) (Berghe 1967; Fredrickson 1987). A clear line of demarcation
between whites, on the one side, and blacks and redskins, on the other,
fosters the development of relations based on equality within the white
community. Members of an aristocracy of class or color tend to consider
themselves "equal"; the inequality imposed upon the excluded is the
flipside of this relation based on equality among those who wield the
power to exclude "inferiors."

Must we then juxtapose Europe to the United States in a positive-
negative contrast? This would be a grave mistake. In fact, the category of
Herrenvolk democracy can be of assistance in explaining the history of the
West as a whole. From the end of the nineteenth century and into the
beginning of the twentieth, the extension of suffrage in Europe goes hand
in hand with colonization and the imposition of servile and semiservile
work relations upon subjugated peoples. Government by law in Europe is
tightly interwoven with bureaucratic will and police violence, and with a
state of siege in the colonies. In the final analysis, it is the same
phenomenon that occurs in the United States, except that in Europe it
is less evident becasue the colonized people live across the ocean.

Imperial Mission and Christian Fundamentalism in American History

It is on a different level that we grasp the real differences in the political
and ideological development between Europe and the United States.
Profoundly marked by the Enlightenment, Europe at the end of the
nineteenth century experiences an even more radical secularization: the
disciples of both Marx and Nietzsche are convinced that "God is dead."
In the United States the situation is very different. This is how in 1899
Christian Oracle magazine explains its decision to change its name to
Christian Century. "We believe that the coming century is to witness
greater triumphs in Christianity than any previous century has ever
witnessed, and that it is to be more truly Christian than any of its
predecessors" (in Olasky 1992, 135).

At this time, war is being waged against Spain, which is accused by
American leaders of having unjustly denied Cuba its right to liberty and

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independence, and moreover to have resorted, against an island "so near our own borders," to such measures as disgust the "moral sense of the people of the United States" and represent a "disgrace to Christian civilization" (in Commager 1963, 2: 5). Here, the indirect gesture to the Monroe Doctrine and the call for a crusade in the name of democracy, morality, and religion are woven tightly together to excommunicate, so to speak, a Catholic country and to bestow a saintly character upon a war that was to confirm the powerful role of imperial America. Later, president McKinley will explain the decision to annex the Philippines by way of an illumination from "Almighty God," who, after hearing the kneeling president's ceaseless prayers, at last, on a particularly restless night, frees him of every doubt and indecision. It would not be right to leave the colony in the hands of Spain or to surrender it "to France or Germany, our commercial rivals in the Orient." Nor, for that matter, would it be right to leave the Philippines to the Filipinos themselves, who are "unfit for self-government" and would let their country slide into a state of "anarchy and misrule" even worse than the result of Spanish dominion:

> There was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed and went to sleep and slept soundly. (In Millis 1989, 384)

Today we know of the horrors perpetrated during the suppression of the independence movement in the Philippines: the guerrilla war carried out by the Filipinos was met with the systematic destruction of fields and livestock, the massive confinement of the population in concentration camps where they fell victim to starvation and disease, and in certain cases even the murder of all males over the age of ten years (McAllister Linn 1989, 27, 23).

And yet, despite the extent of "collateral damage," the march of imperial-religious war ideology triumphantly resumes during World War I. Immediately after U.S. intervention, in a letter to Colonel House, Wilson says of his "allies": "When the war is over we can force them to our way of thinking, because by that time they will, among other things, be financially in our hands" (in Kissinger 1994, 224). At any rate, there is no doubt about the fact that "a strong element of *realpolitik* was at work" (Heckscher 1991, 298) in Wilson's position concerning Latin America and the rest of the world. This, however, does not stop Wilson from carrying out the war as if it were an actual crusade even in the literal sense of the term: the American soldiers are "crusaders," the agents of a "transcendent achievement" (Wilson 1927, 2: 45, 414), of a "holy war, the holiest in all history" (in Rochester 1977, 58), a war destined to champion peace, democracy, and Christian values throughout

the world. Once again, material and geopolitical interests and imperial ambitions are inextricably linked to a missionary and democratic conscience.

The same ideological platform is applied to other American conflicts in the twentieth century, the cold war being particularly noteworthy in this regard. One of its protagonists, John Foster Dulles, is said by Churchill to be "a dour Puritan." Dulles is proud of the fact that "nobody in the Department of State knows as much about the Bible as I do." His religious fervor is by no means a private affair: "I am convinced that we here need to make our political thoughts and practices reflect more faithfully a religious faith that man has his origin and destiny in God" (in Kissinger 1994, 534-35). Along with faith, other fundamental theological categories seep into the political struggle at an international level: the neutral countries that refuse to take part in the crusade against the Soviet Union are conspiring in "sin," while the United States, at the head of the crusade itself, represents the "moral people" by definition (in Freiberger 1992, 42-43). The leader of these people who are so distinguished by their morality and nearness to God is, in 1983, Ronald Reagan. He will spark the climax of the cold war, a climax destined to mark the defeat of the atheist enemy, with words resounding with theology: "There is sin and evil in the world, and we are enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might" (in Draper 1994, 33).

Moving on to more recent times, in his first inaugural address, Clinton is no less religiously inspired than were his predecessors or his successor: "Today we celebrate the'mystery of American renewal." After recalling the pact between "our founders" and "the Almighty," Clinton emphasizes: "Our mission is timeless" (Lott 1994, 366). Realigning himself with this tradition, and further radicalizing it, George W. Bush conducts his electoral campaign with a truly authentic dogma: "Our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world of justice" (Cohen 2000).

In the history of the United States it is clear that religion is called upon to play a fundamental political role at an international level. We witness an American political tradition that expresses itself in overtly theological terms. More so than the declarations issued by European leaders, the "doctrines" pronounced by American presidents time and time again call to mind the encyclicals and dogmas proclaimed by the leaders of the Catholic church. American inaugural addresses are really and truly sacred ceremonies. I shall limit myself to two examples. In 1953, after inviting his listeners to bow their heads before "Almighty God," Eisenhower addresses Him directly: "All may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen" (Lott 1994, 302). Here, the identification that exists between God and America is particularly striking. Half a century later, not much has changed. We have seen how Clinton's inaugural address begins, but it is worth looking also at how it ends. After citing

"Scripture," the new president finishes by saying: "From this mountain-top of celebration we hear a call to service in the valley. We have heard the trumpets, we have changed the guard. And now each in our own way, and with God's help, we must answer the call. Thank you, and God bless you all" (Lott 1994, 369). Again, the United States is hailed as the city upon the mountain, the blessed city of God. In his address immediately following his reelection, Clinton feels the need to thank God for having made him be born an American.

This ideology, or this missionary theology, has always made Europe uncomfortable. Clemenceau's irony concerning Wilson's fourteen points is well known: God Himself was content with only ten commandments! In 1919, in a private letter, John Maynard Keynes calls Wilson "the biggest imposter on Earth" (in Skidelsky 1989, 444).

Freud is even more explicit with regard to Wilson's tendency to view himself as being invested with a divine mission: this is "unmistakable insincerity, ambiguity, and an inclination to deny the truth." Kaiser Wilhelm II had already claimed to be "a man favored by Divine Providence" (Freud 1995, 35-36). But here Freud errs, and risks confus-ing two very distinct ideological traditions. True, the German emperor is also prone to attributing religious motives to his expansionist ambitions: before the troops departing for China, he invokes the "blessing of God" for what will be a ruthless undertaking to crush the rebellion of the Boxers and defend "Christianity" (Rohl 2001, 1157). It is also true that the emperor considers the Germans to be "the people chosen by God" (Rohl 1993, 412). Hitler, too, claims to have felt himself called upon to carry out "the work of the Lord," and he states his desire to obey the will of the "Omnipotent" (Hitler 1939, 70, 439), all the more so since the Germans are "the people of God" (in Rauschning 1940, 227). The slogan *Gott mit uns* (God with us) is well known.

Yet, one should not overemphasize the importance of these declara-tions and ideological motivations. In Germany (the home of Marx and Nietzsche) the secularization process is well under way. Wilhelm H's invocation of the "blessing of God" is not taken seriously even by extreme nationalists. According to one of the cleverest among them (Maximilian Harden), the return of the "days of the Crusades" is ridiculous, as is the grandiose attempt to "win the world over to the Gospel"; "thus vision-aries and crafty speculators stroll around God" (in Rohl 2001, 1157). True, even before ascending the throne, the future emperor hails the Germans as "the people chosen by God"; but one of the first to mock him is his own mother, the daughter of Queen Victoria, who if anything would like to lay claim to the preeminence of England (Rohl 1993, 412).

This last point is worth reflecting upon further. In Europe, imperial genealogical myths neutralized one another to some extent; the royal families were all related to one another, and therefore each of them faced missionary ideals and imperial genealogical myths that were both diverse

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and contradictory. Such ideals and genealogies were further discredited by the catastrophic experience of two world wars. And, despite its defeat, the ten-year struggle by communist agitators, fighting against imperialism and in the name of the equality of nations, has left a mark on the European conscience. The result is evident: in Europe, any imperial mission or direct election by God of one nation or another is unbelievable. There is no place left for this imperial-religious ideology, which instead plays such a central role in the United States.

With regard to Germany, the historical transition from the Second Reich to the Third Reich is characterized by an oscillation between nostalgia for a warlike paganism, centered around the cult of Wotan, and the aspiration to make Christianity a national religion called upon to legitimize the imperial mission of the German people. The latter ambition was most thoroughly developed by the *Deutsche Christen,* or "German Christians." It was not a very realistic aim, given that secularization had made its way not only throughout German society but also throughout Protestant theology itself (Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer come to mind). In addition, since the leaders of the Third Reich tended to support paganism, the Christian aim could hardly be expected to command a great following. The history of the United States, on the other hand, is marked by the tendency to transform the Judeo-Christian tradition into a sort of national religion that consecrates the *exceptionalism* of the American people and the sacred mission with which they are entrusted. Is this interweaving of religion and politics not synonymous with fundamentalism? It is not by chance that the term *fundamentalism* is first used in American and Protestant spheres as a proud and positive self-characterization.

The shortcomings of Freud's and Keynes's position can now be better understood: of course any American administration will have its hypocrites, its schemers, and its cynics; but this is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Wilson or, today, of Bush Jr. One must not lose sight of the fact that the United States is not a very secular society: 70 percent of Americans believe in the devil, and more than a third of adults claim that God speaks to them directly (Gray 1998, 126; Schlesinger Jr. 1997). Still, this is an element of strength, not one of weakness. The placid conviction that one represents a sacred and divine cause facilitates not only the formation of a united front during times of crisis but also the repression or trivialization of the darkest pages of American history. Undeniably, during the cold war Washington sponsored bloody coups in Latin America and put ruthless military dictators in power; in Indonesia, in 1965, it promoted the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Communists or Communist sympathizers. Yet, as unpleasant as they might be, such details do not mar the sanctity of the cause embodied by the "Empire of the Good."

Weber is closer to the truth when during World War I he decries American "cant" (Weber 1971, 144). "Cant" is not a lie, nor is it conscious

hypocrisy: it is the hypocrisy of those who are able to lie even to themselves. It is similar to the false conscience of which Engels speaks. In Keynes and Freud we see both the strength and the weakness of the Enlightenment. While largely immune to the imperial-religious ideology raving on the other side of the Atlantic, Europe is nevertheless unable to comprehend thoroughly this mixture of religious and moral fervor, on the one hand, and of lucid and overt pursuit of political, economic, and military world domination, on the other. Yet it is this mixture, or rather this explosive combination, this peculiar fundamentalism, that constitutes the greatest threat to world peace today. Rather than to a specific nation, Islamic fundamentalism refers to a community of people who, not without reason, claim to be the targets of a policy of aggression and of military occupation. American fundamentalism, instead, transfigures and intoxicates a well-defined country that, appointed and empowered by God, regards the current international order and purely humane law to be irrelevant. It is within this framework that the delegitimization of the United Nations, the disregard for the Geneva Convention, and the threats made not only against enemies but even against Nato "allies" must be situated.

The Campaigns against "Drapetomania" and against Anti-Americanism

In addition to fighting "evil" and defending Christian and American values, the war against Iraq (not to mention wars on the horizon) aims also to expand democracy around the world. To what extent is this latter claim believable? Let us return for a moment to the young Indochinese man who in 1924 denounced the lynching of blacks. He later returned to his homeland, and there he took on a name that would come to be known throughout the world: Ho Chi Minh. During the relentless American bombings, did the Vietnamese leader perhaps remember the horrors perpetrated against blacks by the champions of white supremacy? In other words, did the emancipation of African Americans, and their acquisition of civil and political rights, truly mark a change, or is the United States still a *Herrenvolk* democracy, with the exception that now the excluded are no longer to be found within, but outside, the mother country, as had been the case with European "democracy"?

We might examine the question from a different perspective, by considering a reflection made by Kant: "What is an *absolute* monarch? It is he who, when he commands that war must be, war follows." Kant is targeting not the states of the ancien regime but rather England, with its century of liberal development behind it (Kant 1900, 90 note). According to Kant's position, the current president of the United States should be considered a despot on two counts. First, because of the emergence in the past ten years of an "imperial presidency" that, when embarking upon military actions, often presents Congress with a fait accompli. We are more concerned here with the second aspect: it is the White House that

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sovereignly determines when U.N. resolutions are binding or not; it is the White House that sovereignly determines which countries constitute "rogue" states and whether it is lawful to subject them to embargoes that will cause the suffering of an entire population, or to the hellfire of depleted uranium and cluster bombs, the effects of which will inflict damage and suffering for years after the conflict has ended. Sovereignly, the White House decides upon the military occupation of these countries for as long as it deems necessary, sentencing the countries' leaders and their "accomplices" to lifelong prison sentences. Against them, and against "terrorists," even "targeted killing" is legitimate, or rather, killing that is anything but targeted, such as the bombing of an ordinary restaurant where it was believed that Saddam Hussein might have been found. Clearly, legal rights do not apply to "barbarians." In fact, a closer look at, for example, the Patriot Act, reveals that the rule of law does not apply even to those who, while not "barbarians" in the strict sense of the word, are suspected of participating in their game.

The origin of the expression *rogue states* is interesting. In Virginia between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when semi-slaves, that is, temporary, white-skinned slaves, tried to flee and were caught, they were branded with the letter *R* (for Rogue): immediately recognizable, they no longer had any chance to escape. Later, the problem of identification was finally solved by substituting white semi-slaves with black slaves: skin color made branding unnecessary; to be black was itself synonymous with being a rogue. Now, entire States are branded rogue. *Herrenvolk* democracy is slow to die.

This is an old story. What is new is the growing intolerance that Washington has for its "allies." They too are called upon to kowtow to—without beating about the bush—the will of God's chosen nation. The perplexity and negative reaction provoked by the American president's unrestrained behavior as the world's sovereign, unchecked by any international body, is now clearly understandable. This is the scandalous disease that the ideologues of war condemn as anti-Americanism. While unique, the reaction is not without similar historical precedents. In the middle of the nineteenth century the system of slavery was alive and vital in the American South. Yet doubts did begin to emerge: the number of fugitive slaves was increasing. Not only did this alarm the white-supremacist ideologues of slavery; it confounded them. Why would a "normal" person flee from a society so well ordered and in tune with the hierarchy of nature? It must be some sort of plague, a psychological disturbance. But what? In 1851 Samuel Cartwright, a surgeon and psychologist from Louisiana, claimed he finally had an explanation, which he shared with the readers of an important scientific journal, the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal.* Taking his cue from the ancient Greek word SpartETEo*(drapetes),* meaning runaway slave, Cartwright triumphantly concluded that the psychological disturbance, the

disease that caused black slaves to run away, was "drapetomania" (in Eakin 2000). The current campaign being waged against anti-American-ism has much in common with the one carried out against drapetomania more than a century and a half ago.

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