

BOOK REVIEW

Anti-Americanism and American Exceptionalism: Prejudice and Pride about the USA

By Brendon O'Connor

London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 194 pages, ISBN 9780429277436 (e-book)

Although “anti-Americanism” and “American exceptionalism” are frequently used in the media and academia, the meanings of these concepts have not been clear. In *Anti-Americanism and American Exceptionalism*, Brendon O'Connor aims to define these two terms in an extensive manner. The book consists of seven chapters; in which, O'Connor analyses many of the sources written so far on the subject, while comparing how the meanings of these two concepts changed during the Bush, Obama and Trump periods.

In the introduction, O'Connor argues that both terms are frequently misused and therefore, it is necessary to define them. He briefly introduces what anti-Americanism and American exceptionalism mean and states that one of the goals of the book is to criticize the U.S. without being anti-American (p. 3). The author also indicates that the difference of this book from other works on the subject is that it examines the terms ideologically (p. 6).

In the first chapter, O'Connor states that anti-Americanism has two sides. A significant number of those who criticize the U.S. policies do so for the sake of anti-Americanism and identify the president with the people, which is a crucial mistake O'Connor argues. On the other hand, the accusation of anti-Americanism is also used by the U.S. administration and its proponents to silence dissidents; this occurred notably during the wars in Iraq and Vietnam. O'Connor rightly pays attention to the 9/11 attacks, a milestone for anti-Americanism, since some of America's European allies did not support the invasion of Iraq and there was even sympathy for Bin Laden, especially in some Muslim countries (pp. 27–29). The author concludes that there are five understandings of the term, based on the usage of the word: as a dichotomy, as a tendency, as a pathology, as a prejudice and

as an ideology. Among these understandings, seeing anti-Americanism as a prejudice and an ideology are the most useful ways of understanding the term, since these interpretations force us to care about details and straightforwardly debate what anti-Americanism is and what just criticism is (pp. 35, 48).

The second chapter deals with the history of anti-Americanism, and aims to find out the root of the hatred. O'Connor highlights how America was the "New World" for Europeans, and therefore, there was a bias toward it during the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact, during that time, the most prominent anti-Americanist views came from people who had never traveled to the country. They simply perceived the U.S. as an inferior version of Europe (p. 63). The stereotypes that developed at that time were varied, and included ignorance, bad weather and rudeness; they have been repeated ever since and have stuck with the Americans (pp. 154–155). From this chapter, one can see that anti-Americanism is not a new phenomenon; therefore, it cannot be easily overcome.

In chapters three and four, O'Connor tries to find out the difference between anti-Americanism and criticism of America. He focuses on the Bush effect on anti-Americanism. In the first case, he gives the example of a pro-American senator in Austria who sued a channel for being anti-American during the Korean War because of his political views. The second example is about an Austrian pro-Communist journalist and his fake reports during the Korean War. As can be seen from these examples, anti-Americanism is used both to silence the opponents of American policies and to undermine these policies. The author concludes that the decision of the Bush administration to invade Iraq and label those who do not support the U.S. as terrorists have also contributed to anti-Americanism.

Chapter five introduces American exceptionalism. Although the term is generally used to mean that America is different or superior to other nations, the author does not agree with this definition due to the difficulty of measuring it. Instead, O'Connor argues that American exceptionalism is an ideological part of American nationalism; accordingly, since the United States is considered superior to other nations, it needs to lead them (pp. 121–122). In other words, we need to understand the concept of American exceptionalism to understand America's military intervention abroad.

Chapter six investigates the validity of one of the most well-known American stereotypes: lack of geographic understanding. It concludes that compared to other nations Americans show weakness in geography, international affairs and foreign languages. The reasons for this dearth are "a lack

of school study of geography; less likeliness among Americans to travel overseas compared to citizens of other nations; less time watching or reading foreign news; and less likeliness to study a foreign language” (p. 150).

In the last chapter, the author explores how Trump has affected American exceptionalism and anti-Americanism. First, he argues, non-Americans do not identify Trump with the American people, in contrast to the conflation of the president with the people prevalent in the Bush-era (p. 181). Second, the author argues that popular culture helped Trump become president, since “popular culture and the internet have made the once unacceptable fairly commonplace.” Also, many people, especially politicians, underestimated how these tools can shape people’s perceptions (p. 168).

Anti-Americanism and American Exceptionalism is an up-to-date and well-researched book that is also rich and diverse in terms of its bibliography. The author is right that the definition of anti-Americanism and American exceptionalism are not clear and therefore, a clear definition is needed for both of the terms. O’Conner also rightly points out that the meaning of the concept of anti-Americanism has changed, since people have finally realized the difference between the American president and the American people. However, while the author thinks that this is because of the strong internal opposition to Trump, (p. 41) the fact that he (unlike Bush) did not order the occupation of a country based on “deliberately manipulated intelligence,” and did not label as “terrorists” those who did not cooperate with his administration (as the Bush administration did) is also helpful to make this difference for non-Americans.

O’Connor is right about how the invasion of Iraq shaped anti-Americanism in the 21st century; however, his failure to elaborate on this issue undermines the quality of the book. The fact that American soldiers committed war crimes during the war, such as targeting women and children, massacring civilians and using torture, has significantly contributed to anti-Americanism. Another shortcoming of the book is that O’Connor does not go into the details of America’s Israeli policy. Even though U.S. support for Israel shaped Islamist anti-Americanist sentiment during the 20th and 21st centuries, this policy is only briefly mentioned in the book. In other words, the impact of America’s influence over Israel on countries in the Middle East and North Africa is not adequately discussed.

In conclusion, although some important aspects of anti-Americanism have been left unexplored in the book, *Anti-Americanism, and American Exceptionalism* is nevertheless a timely and useful contribution to American studies. The framework of the book is not only beneficial to understanding

these terms, but also to realizing and overcoming misunderstandings about them.

Hüseyin Pusat Kıldıř

PhD Student

Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University,

Department of International Relations

ORCID: 0000-0002-4916-7341

