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**'THAT MOST HATEFUL LAND'**  
**ROMANTICISM AND THE BIRTH OF**  
**MODERN ANTI-AMERICANISM**

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Abstract:

This article presents a comparative study of romantic anti-Americanism focusing on Britain, Germany, and France. On the basis of the notion that romanticism invented what might be called the basic vocabulary of anti-American discourse, the article presents a taxonomy of this vocabulary and point to the determining factors underlying the romantic disaffection for America and Americans. Five motifs are singled out as fundamental to romantic anti-Americanism: the lack of history and culture in the US, the crass materialism of its inhabitants, their vulgarity, their religious excesses, and the flaws of the American political system. The article closes with an interpretation of romantic anti-Americanism as a strongly self-affirming, Eurocentric discourse, which accustomed Europeans to think of Europe and America as antithetical entities – thereby paving the way for cultural constructions not only of the American “other”, but also of a common European identity.

Keywords:

Europe, the United States, chauvinism, cultural identity, resentment

Where shall I learn to get my peace again?  
To banish thoughts of that most hateful land,  
Dungeoner of my friends, that wicked strand  
Where they were wreck'd and live a wretched life;  
That monstrous region, whose dull rivers pour  
Ever from their sordid urns unto the shore,  
Unown'd of any weedy-haired gods;  
Whose winds, all zephyrless, hold scourging rods,  
Iced in the great lakes, to afflict mankind;  
Whose rank-grown forests, frosted, black, and blind,  
Would fright a Dryad; whose harsh herbage meads  
Make lean and lank the starv'd ox while he feeds;  
There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song,  
And great unerring Nature once seems wrong.

– John Keats<sup>1</sup>

In recent years the concept of anti-Americanism has risen to prominence in discussions of the damaged relationship between the United States and Europe. The concept is often used in a highly politicised way, and it rarely fails to stir up controversy. Supporters of the Bush administration and its foreign policy have thus argued that European criticism of the “War on Terror” ultimately derives from a long European tradition of hating the United States and regarding it as a major source of evil in the world.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, European critics of the United States complain that their objections, instead of being properly answered, are simply attributed to prejudices and blind resentment; among these critics the concept of anti-Americanism is seen primarily as a way of silencing or discrediting otherwise perfectly legitimate viewpoints on the United States and its policies.<sup>3</sup>

This study focuses on negative perceptions of the United States in the early nineteenth century and makes no attempt to address these present-day controversies. The contemporary politicisation of the concept of anti-Americanism clearly simplifies the issue far beyond what is permissible in an academic context. On the one hand, it seems indisputable that this concept is used too often and too indiscriminately. On the other hand, the existence in Europe of a tradition of resentment towards the Americans is well-documented to the point of being a fact, and calling attention to this tradition is not in itself indicative of political bias and does not always amount to an apology for specific American policies. When employing anti-Americanism purely as an analytical category, i.e. as a way of elucidating a historically significant way of thinking and talking about America, the fundamental methodological challenge lies in establishing a definition of the concept that offers enough leeway for political disagreement – and thus avoids stigmatising rational critique, even when it is harsh.

Without claiming that this is an easy task, or indeed a task that can be accomplished to everyone's satisfaction, one might take a step towards a depoliticisation of the concept by defining anti-Americanism as a sort of madness with method, thereby emphasising the irrational and the systematic as the two core constituents of this discourse. Anti-Americanism, firstly, is *irrational* in so far as it relies not on fair-minded, balanced observation, but on prejudices, generalisations, distortion, unqualified resentment, feelings of superiority, or fear sometimes bordering on paranoia; often it is so completely dominated by such irrational factors that it is much more revealing of the observer than the

country or people he purports to observe. Secondly, anti-Americanism is *systematic* in the sense that the scorn it pours on the United States is aimed at all aspects of the country, i.e. not exclusively at the government and its policies, but at the “Americanness” of America – American culture, American values, the American society, and the American as a national type. In its purest, most aggressive form, anti-Americanism posits an unalterable and inescapable American essence which is inherently corrupt, and of which all the repulsive aspects of American life are simply examples. However, the systematic nature of anti-Americanism is not always rooted in such ontological determinations; it is more likely to assume the shape of a generalised hostility towards the United States, an unwillingness to acknowledge or even perceive anything positive about the country or its citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Anti-Americanism in the sense of an irrational, systematic aversion towards the United States is a discourse with long historical roots. How long exactly is open to discussion. The most radical claim is that the underlying logic of anti-Americanism came into being with the discovery of the Americas, for this discovery created a mirror-like relationship between the “New” and the “Old” world, which on the European side led to a perception of America characterised both by exaggerated fears and unrealistic hopes (Arendt, 1994: 409-17; Markovits, 2004: 67 f.). In the middle of the eighteenth century, the French Enlightenment developed a sort of prototypical anti-Americanism directed against the New World as a “human habitat” (Chinard, 1947); following the influential natural scientist Buffon, the *philosophes* wrote horrified accounts of

America's cold, moist climate, which made the continent a paradise for reptiles and insects, but a living hell for humans, who inevitably lost their physical and mental vigour when breathing the noxious American air.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the American Revolution sparked an outburst of rage in Europe, especially among conservatives, against the ungrateful colonists who had had the impudence to rebel against their lawful sovereign. In Britain this attitude was shared by among others Samuel Johnson, who in 1778 famously stated his willingness to "love all mankind, *except an American*" (Boswell, 1953: 946).

However, if any specific period can lay claim to having "invented" modern anti-Americanism, it is no doubt that of romanticism.<sup>6</sup> Although the United States in the early nineteenth century was still in its infancy and did not play a major role on the international stage either politically, militarily, or economically, and although communication and interaction across the Atlantic was still in many respects limited, the romantics introduced several of the negative stereotypes that still influence European perceptions of the United States and the Americans. In short, the basic vocabulary of anti-Americanism was invented in the first half of the nineteenth century, not least by writers and philosophers with ties to the thinking and culture of romanticism.

The following study presents a taxonomy encompassing the dominant motifs of this romantic anti-Americanism; at the same time it aims to identify the key factors underlying the romantic disaffection for the United States. No attempt will be made to draw parallels to the present day. However, that romanticism does in fact mark the birth of modern anti-Americanism, and that core

elements of the romantic resentment of America are still very much alive in a present-day context, should be sufficiently clear from the examples cited.

### **Absence of history and culture**

The turmoil of the French Revolution was a key formative experience for poets and philosophers of the early nineteenth century, and it is within the framework created by this experience that the romantic attitude towards the United States must be understood. The Revolution had brought about the destruction not only of the French monarchy, but of the entire social order of early modern France. The central pillars of the “old regime” had all been toppled: the nobility had been abolished, the church dispossessed, and the often arbitrary workings of absolutism had been replaced by a constitutionally guaranteed rule of law. Inspired by the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, many romantics had initially rallied in support of the fragile revolution – and many never lost their faith. However, the execution of Louis XVI in 1793 and the revolutionary terror, which intensified dramatically around the same time, had been received with outrage throughout Europe and had caused many to dissociate themselves from the chaotic events in France. A conservative reaction set in, which gained momentum at the beginning of the nineteenth century and finally, following the defeat of Napoleon, rose to the status of official government policy in a number of leading European countries.

In purely political terms this movement fought for the restoration of the old regime. It was fiercely royalist, supportive of the church, opposed to democrat-

ic reforms, and a chronic fear of new revolutionary risings loomed large in all its thinking. Ideologically it tended to define its views in opposition to the political philosophy of the Enlightenment. Like the Revolution itself, for which it had served as the ideological point of departure, the Enlightenment was seen to have advocated a radical restructuring of society based exclusively on the dictates of human reason. The conservative counterrevolution conversely insisted that the true sources of political legitimacy were to be found, not in reason, but in tradition and history. Institutions handed down by tradition were perhaps less than perfectly just, but it was unwise to abolish them altogether in favour of some untried, utopian scheme cooked up by unworldly philosophers. Revolutionary institutions that ignored the past and established themselves purely on the basis of rational deliberation would inevitably be “abstract” – they would not benefit from the practical reason accumulated in tradition, and would always be in danger of degenerating into violence and arbitrariness. The political system, institutions, customs, spiritual and cultural life were all “abstract” and of no lasting value if they were not securely anchored in the national past.

This anti-revolutionary argument was outlined for the first time by Edmund Burke in *Letters on the French Revolution* (1790). Although reasonably sympathetic towards the United States himself, this way of thinking quickly turned out to be a recipe for anti-Americanism. Not only had the Americans shown the French the way by rebelling against their legitimate sovereign. The United States was also the best conceivable example of a political institution based on



reason rather than tradition. In the eyes of the romantics, the American republic would therefore inevitably appear as the epitome of rationality, abstraction and revolution. Its founding was not lost in a distant, nebulous past, but could be dated with extreme precision to July 4 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed. With its pervasive inspiration from Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke and Montesquieu, this text itself was a further source of annoyance: Jefferson's high-flown celebration of universal, "self-evident" human rights, which were later specified in the American Constitution, seemed rather airy, rather lacking in historical substance. In short, the conservative Romantics had a strong tendency to regard the United States as a product of the shallow, unhistorical Enlightenment, of reason fatally overestimating itself. The country was a place without history and precisely because of this deficiency one could also – *a priori*, as it were – discount the possibility of it possessing anything like real culture.

Such a view of the United States can be found in more or less extreme versions in a host of contemporary writers, not least those with a conservative, anti-revolutionary outlook. In *Considérations sur la France* (1797), French philosopher Joseph de Maistre promoted the basic conservative tenet that the political order of a given country must always be rooted in the history and culture of that country, and that a revolution like the French that aspires to wipe the slate clean and introduce a new political order founded on pure reason was therefore bound to fail. Not even the American Revolution, the outcome of which had after all proved fairly durable, could serve as an argument in favour of

what de Maistre calls “this chimerical system of deliberation and political construction by abstract reasoning” (Maistre, 1834: 104). Apart from the fact that the United States is still a political “babe-in-arms” and therefore cannot be cited as an example, its new, democratic constitution is not altogether new, but in many ways rooted in British and colonial American tradition (Maistre, 1834: 104 f.). Where the American constitution built upon these foundations, de Maistre argues, it is durable. Where it departed from them, it is not: “But all those things that are really new in their government, all those things that are the result of popular deliberation, are the most fragile parts of the system; one could scarcely combine more symptoms of weakness and decay.” (Maistre, 1834: 105). Unfortunately, such departures from tradition, such ruptures with history, are a predominant feature of American democracy. According to de Maistre, the plan to build a new federal capital is a particularly striking example of the unhistorical nature of the United States. Just as revolutionary regimes never prove themselves to be permanent, it is hard to believe that a thriving city can be erected on such airy foundations. De Maistre is therefore prepared to give long odds on Washington never being built: “Essentially there is nothing in all this that surpasses human power; a city may easily be built. Nevertheless, there is too much deliberation, too much *humanity* in this business, and one could bet a thousand to one that the city will not be built, that it will not be called *Washington*, and that the Congress will not meet there. (Maistre, 1834: 105 f.)

De Maistre was undoubtedly an extremist, but his hostility towards the Enlightenment and his insistence that political legitimacy could only be derived from tradition were views shared by many of his conservative contemporaries. Whilst de Maistre saw the absence of history in America as a source of political instability, most romantics tended to regard it primarily as a cultural problem. Since culture was essentially the accumulated heritage of a nation, and since the United States had no real history and was not even a real nation, it was obviously foolish to imagine that it could develop a true culture of its own. Severing ties to the Old World – believing, like the French Revolution, in the possibility of a new beginning – was tantamount to cutting the historical umbilical cord of culture.

Irish poet Thomas Moore is a perfect example of these views. Considered in old age as something approaching Ireland's national poet, the young Moore was an intimate of English romantics Shelley and Byron, and he would eventually gain Herostratic fame for his role in the posthumous burning of the latter's memoirs. Unlike his friends, Moore had no family fortune to live off and was forced in 1803 by reasons of finance to take up a position with the British Admiralty as a subordinate official in Bermuda. As it turned out, island living did not appeal to Moore in the slightest and after six months of boredom he hired a replacement and went home. On his journey back to Britain, however, Moore made a detour of several months to the United States and Canada, visiting Niagara Falls and New York among other places, and attending a party in the White House hosted by president Jefferson. When he finally reached Eng-

land his trunk was full of poems and lyrical impressions of the journey, which were later, in 1806, published as *Epistles, Odes and other Poems*. Moore's attitude towards the United States was anything but favourable, and in three lengthy "epistles" in particular he launched a devastating, all-encompassing diatribe against the young republic and its citizens.<sup>7</sup>

As is often the case with anti-American literature, Moore's epistles can best be described as catalogues of negative stereotypes. In fact, they present us with all the main motifs of romantic anti-Americanism, thus also the idea of the United States as a country without history and culture. In the poem entitled "Epistle VIII. To the Honourable W.R. Spencer. From Buffalo, Upon Lake Erie", the American lack of history is a central theme. Moore characteristically begins by conjuring up a contrasting vision of Italy, which is celebrated in fairly conventional terms as a land, where the poetic spirit of yore has survived until the present day. In Italy, one can still happen on "the ghost of ancient wit" and "the courtly bard", representatives of the culture of antiquity and the Middle Ages, and in the presence of such characters the modern poet has no difficulties letting himself be inspired by the Muses. From this perspective, Moore turns to the United States of the early nineteenth century, represented as the rude and exceedingly prosaic antithesis of Italy. The change of setting is abrupt, and the feeling of cultural loss is announced by the opening "alas!" and further accentuated by the fact that Moore describes the United States in terms of privations:

But here, alas! by Erie's stormy lake,  
As, far from thee, my lonely course I take,  
No bright remembrance o'er the fancy plays,  
No classic dream, no star of other days  
Has left that visionary glory here,  
That relic of its light, so soft, so dear,  
Which gilds and hallows even the rudest scene,  
The humblest shed, where Genius once has been! (Moore, 1806: 266)

If Italy is a cultural treasury, then, conversely, the United States is a cultural wasteland. Here – Buffalo, NY, on the bank of Lake Erie – there is no “bright remembrance”, no “classic dream”, no “star of other days”. No genius has ever wandered in these regions and left a lasting mark. And, owing to this lack of history and cultural traditions, the land is nothing but raw, uncultured nature. According to Moore, it is precisely history, or rather the cultural capital it accumulates, that imbues a landscape with spirit and makes it poetically fertile. Ideologically we are far removed from any Rousseau-like celebration of the simple, pastoral life in the wilderness. For Moore, pure nature is a corrupting force that inhibits the development of culture:

All that creation's varying mass assumes  
Of grand or lovely, here aspires and blooms;  
Bold rise the mountains, rich the gardens glow,

Bright lakes expand, and conquering rivers flow;  
Mind, mind alone, without whose quickening ray,  
The world's a wilderness and man but clay,  
Mind, mind alone, in barren, still repose,  
Nor blooms, nor rises, nor expands, nor flows!  
Take christians, mohawks, democrats and all  
From the rude wig-wam to the congress-hall,  
From man the savage, whether slav'd or free,  
To man the civiliz'd, less tame than he!  
'Tis one dull chaos, one unfertile strife  
Betwixt half-polish'd and half-barbarous life [...].

Is this the region then, is this the clime  
For golden fancy? for those dreams sublime,  
Which all their miracles of light reveal  
To heads that meditate and hearts that feel?  
No, no – the muse of inspiration plays  
O'er every scene; she walks the forest-maze,  
And climbs the mountains; every blooming spot  
Burns with her step, yet man regards it not!  
She whispers round, her words are in the air,  
But lost, unheard, they linger freezing there,

Without one breath of soul, divinely strong,

One ray of heart to thaw them into song! (Moore, 1806: 267 f.)

American nature is undoubtedly pretty and varied, but because it is not permeated with historical spirit, it lacks all inspiring, ennobling qualities – it is *just* nature. And what is worse, this lack of spirit reduces the people inhabiting this landscape to barbarians. Moore's damning verdict on the Americans, based on America's historical and cultural deficiencies, is astonishingly all-encompassing and includes Indians as well as immigrants, freemen as well as slaves. All human life in the United States is spent in a chaotic, sterile borderland between barbarism and civilisation, where immorality and vulgarity reign, and where everything profound and valuable succumbs. It is tempting to suggest that Moore himself actually manages to draw inspiration from the shallow Philistinism of the United States, for he rarely writes with such panache as when he derides the Americans. The poet himself, though, draws the opposite conclusion. America is not a "clime for golden fancy" or "dreams sublime". It is a supremely anti-poetical place, where the muse of inspiration whispers in the woods without ever being heard. The point of the stanzas is precisely that the American lack of history renders the landscape poetically sterile, reduces the people to barbarians, and stifles cultural growth.

## Materialism

A generation later, in 1832, another romantic, Hungarian-German poet Nikolaus Lenau, departed on a trip to the United States. Lenau was not taken in with the country either. On the contrary, his impressions were just as uniformly negative and biased as those of Thomas Moore, and although they were only available in the form of posthumously published letters to friends and family at home, they exercised considerable influence on anti-American discourse in nineteenth-century Germany. In his letters from America, Lenau paints a suggestive picture of both himself and the country he is visiting. He reminds the various addressees that his journey was originally conceived as an exercise in romantic self-education. Inspired no doubt by the enraptured accounts of the Indians, the idyllic natural environment, and the simple frontier life in the writings of Crèvecoeur and Chateaubriand among others, Lenau's aim had been to school his imagination in the North American wilderness, and he had hoped that the visit to the New World would open up new *poetical* worlds for him (Lenau, 1970: 158 f.). But the visit turned out to be a terrible disappointment. The United States was not a pastoral idyll or an oasis of authenticity, but an intensely prosaic, altogether anti-poetical country, deeply hostile to the muses and to all spiritual aspects of life. To Lenau, the United States was not only the antithesis to the old and cultured Europe, but most likely its future nemesis: "America is the true land of destruction. The West of Humanity. But the Atlantic Ocean is an insulating belt for the spirit and all higher life. I don't know



whether everything I have written here is not completely inane and boring, I am unable to judge it *here*.” (Lenau, 1970: 213)

The contemporary impact of Lenau’s letters was no doubt due to the fact that they present a powerful, almost mythological representation of romantic sensibility outlined in opposition to a prosaic, philistine “other”. When describing this American other and specifically trying to explain its absolute spiritual sterility, Lenau, too, points to the unhistorical nature of the United States, the fact that the country did not evolve organically in the course of centuries, but was deliberately created with a stroke of the pen. American culture, he states, is “not a culture that has emerged organically from within; rather it has rapidly been dragged there from outside, it lacks foundations [*bodenlos*] and therefore it is laboriously held floating in the air.” (Lenau, 1970: 215 f.) The key word in this characterisation is “bodenlos”, which literally means bottomless and is used in this context to refer to something that lacks roots or solid foundations. The United States is “bodenlos” (: bottomless, foundationless), because it is not rooted in a specific national history, a tradition, which present times can build upon. Without such historical roots, national culture is reduced to a free-floating hotchpotch without direction, taste, spirit, and sense of art. For Lenau, this irredeemable American rootlessness provides a comprehensive explanation for the pervasive baseness of the United States: “The expression ‘Bodenlosigkeit’, I believe, sums up the character of all American institutions, including the political.” (Lenau, 1970: 216).

However, the lack of historical roots is only one of Lenau's two basic explanations for the dismal state of American culture. The other explanation is the raging materialism of the Americans: the predominance of a commercial mindset, the dedication to business and money-making, the subordination of all moral, spiritual, and aesthetic values to the dollar. This crass materialism constitutes a favourite romantic objection to the United States, and there is virtually no end to the remarkably unvaried variations on this theme in the writings of the romantic generations. Thomas Moore thus states in another of his verse epistles that the avariciousness of the Americans is so complete that life itself has become commercialised, virtue has been put up for sale, and "conscience, truth, and honesty" are commodities, the prices of which fluctuate according to demand.<sup>8</sup> French novelist Stendhal, who always found ways of slating the Americans in his otherwise very European novels, spoke contemptuously of "the cult of the god dollar" in the United States (Stendhal, 1952a: 135), while his compatriot and colleague Balzac similarly characterised the United States as "this sad country of money and selfishness where the soul is freezing" (Balzac, 1965: 323). According to the philosopher Hegel, the "fundamental character" of the American republic consisted in "the endeavor of the individual after acquisition, commercial profit, and gain; the preponderance of *private* interest, devoting itself to that of the community only for its own advantage." (Hegel, 1970: 112). The poet Heinrich Heine claimed of the Americans that "temporal utility is their true religion, and money is their God, their only, almighty God." (Heine, 1978: 38). In his almost grotesquely anti-

American novel *Der Amerikamüde*, Austrian novelist Ferdinand Kürnberger, who will reappear later in this article, summed up Benjamin Franklin's (and the Americans') philosophy of life in a satirical aphorism: "Tallow is made from the ox, money is made from man." (Kürnberger, 1986: 33).<sup>9</sup> And finally Charles Dickens, who will likewise be discussed below, characterised the United States as "that vast counting-house which lies beyond the Atlantic" and went on to claim that the inhabitants of this counting-house worshipped "the almighty dollar" just as the Israelites had worshipped the golden calf (Dickens, 2000: 36).

Nikolaus Lenau is in complete agreement with these views. Making money is the be-all and end-all of the Americans, and the dollar is their only true value. In the United States, even patriotism, a central obsession of European Romanticism, is subordinate to the boundless love of the dollar. In fact, the Americans love their country, not because it is the home of the nation, the soil of national history, culture, and language, but simply because it protects private property: "What we call fatherland is here just *asset insurance*. The American knows nothing and pursues nothing but money; he has no ideas." (Lenau, 1970: 216). In the eyes of Lenau, the Americans are a practical, commonsensical people destined for trade and manufacture, not for thinking or writing: "The education [*Bildung*] of the Americans is exclusively mercantile and technical. Here, practical man expands in his most terrible soberness." (Lenau, 1970: 215).

In this passage – as in many others – Lenau draws a distinction, which originates in the romantic discourse on America and went on to become a key feature of European anti-Americanism in general. The claim is that Americans are materialistic, shallow, and pragmatic people, whilst Europeans are spiritual, deep, and idealistic. The Americans are shopkeepers, the Europeans artists. The United States is ruled by crude utilitarianism, whereas the Europeans are devotees of philosophy, spirit, art, and true morals. A week after having disembarked in Baltimore, Lenau is thus able to inform his brother-in-law back home that the Americans are so completely inane and greedy that the nightingale, the romantic symbol of art par excellence, is sensible enough to stay away. The intransigent, all-embracing nature of Lenau's criticism, its astounding aggressiveness and its choice of motifs, are all characteristic features of romantic anti-Americanism:

The American has no wine, no nightingale! He may sit with a glass of cider and listen to his mockingbird with his pockets full of dollars; I prefer to sit with the German and with his wine listen to the beloved nightingale, even if the pocket is poorer. Brother, these Americans are shopkeeper-souls who stink to high heaven. Dead to all spiritual life, stone dead. The nightingale is right not to turn up among these bastards. To my mind it is of deep, serious importance that America has no nightingale. It seems to me to be a sort of poetical curse. You need a Niagara

voice to preach to these scoundrels that there are higher gods than those  
coined in the treasury (Lenau, 1970: 207).

It is worth mentioning as an addendum to the legend of Nikolaus Lenau that the poet had other reasons to travel to America than the romantic desire to whet his imagination in the American wilderness. The ethereal, wholly impractical “poet of world-weariness” had made a sizeable profit speculating in Austrian government bonds and had formed the idea of reinvesting his capital in American land. His journey to America therefore not only resulted in poems and epistolary tirades to his family and friends, but also in the purchase of 400 acres of farmland, which Lenau immediately entrusted to a German immigrant against a handsome yearly rent payable in dollars, and with the further expectation that the value of the property would increase tenfold in less than a decade (Lenau, 1970: 158, 220 ff). American materialism may have “stunk to high heaven”, but Lenau – along with quite a few of his contemporaries – was not too proud to enjoy its fruits.<sup>10</sup>

### **Vulgarity**

To its romantic detractors the United States was thus a country without history and culture, where people lived their life in a never-ending pursuit of dollars, but had no time for or sense of poetry. However, the romantics regarded poetry – or in more general terms, art – as a vanguard of culture that spread its beneficial, elevating effects to the surrounding society, so that culture, beauty

and morals would flourish everywhere. This view implied that the Americans, a new nation, for whom culture was at best an imported good, could only be a raw and primitive people with a shaky grasp of taste and propriety – i.e. of the norms and behavioural patterns prevalent in the great cultural powers of Europe. To the romantics, the temporal and spatial coordinates of the United States – its youth and its distance from Europe – made it self-evident that the country was a dreadfully barbaric place. Travelogues and literary descriptions of the United States were therefore full of a sometimes horrified, sometimes joyous resentment of the boundless vulgarity of the Americans. When asked by Napoleon about his opinion of the American people, Tallyrand, who had himself been an exile in the United States, allegedly quipped: “Sire, ce sont des fiers cochons, et des cochons fiers” (the wordplay is not directly translatable, but the witty foreign minister meant to say that the Americans were terrible pigs, and proud ones at that).<sup>11</sup> Novelist Honoré de Balzac went one better by asserting that the animal filthiness of the Americans was not only physical, but also moral. Thus, Philippe Bridau, the black sheep of *La Rabouilleuse* (1841-42), is already a crook when he decides to go to America, but when he returns, the encounter with the rude and vulgar Americans has ruined him completely:

His misfortunes in Texas, his stay in New York, a place where speculation and individualism are carried to the very highest level, where the brutality of self-interest reaches the point of cynicism and where a man, fundamentally isolated from the rest of mankind, finds himself com-

pelled to rely upon his own strength and at every instant to be the self-appointed judge of his own actions, a city in which politeness does not exist; in other words, the whole voyage, down to its very slightest details, had developed in Philippe the pernicious inclinations of the hardened trooper. He had started to smoke and drink; he had become brutal, impertinent and rude; he had been depraved by the hardship and physical suffering. [...] Finally, life in New York – as seen and interpreted by this man of action – had removed all his remaining scruples in matters of morality (Balzac, 1966: 52 f.)<sup>12</sup>

British travellers were marked by pre- or early Victorian ideals of decency and through the lens of these ideals, the vulgarisms of the American “cousins” were often shockingly conspicuous. Unsurprisingly, they could pay much more attention than continental travellers to the variety of English spoken in the United States, and they unfailingly perceived it as a corrupted, inferior version of their own. Charles Dickens and Fanny Trollope, two of the most notable English visitors of the period, relished in imitating and lampooning the pronunciation and vocabulary of the Americans, and both found that American English was a perfectly suitable means of communicating the vulgar American ideas. Apart from this preoccupation with language, however, English travellers tended to concentrate on that which in the title of Trollope’s highly popular travelogue is called the “domestic manners” of the Americans, i.e. the way

in which Americans behaved privately and in everyday social interaction. Usually they concluded that these manners left much to be desired.

Dickens presents us with a particularly powerful example of the English obsession with American vulgarity. In 1842, after having published five highly successful novels, Dickens was already a literary superstar, and the success had made him prosperous enough to take a break from writing and pursue an old dream of visiting the New World. Six months of travelling took the novelist to many parts of the country and acquainted him with the most significant aspects of contemporary American society. His impression of the country was not as black and white as Moore's or Lenau's, yet it was still by and large negative, especially with regard to the manners of the Americans. On returning to England, Dickens put his American experiences to use in two books: the travelogue *American Notes* (1842) and the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44), in which the protagonist goes to America in an unsuccessful attempt to win financial independence. Both books are veritable catalogues of American vulgarity. A brief survey of some of Dickens' biggest grievances makes it clear why the books caused a scandal in the United States. Americans are too intrusive in conversations with strangers, and suffer from misguided, excessive patriotism, finding their own country exemplary in every respect and taking offence when foreigners dare to think otherwise. Furthermore, Americans are terrible hypocrites; they talk about freedom with slaves in their backyard, and preach equality although they themselves are incorrigible snobs when it comes to titles and social distinctions. Americans are extremely prudish – any reference to nudity



shocks them, even in a phrase such as “the naked eye” (Dickens, 2004: 353). Americans are stupid, ignorant, and shallow. And as an ultimate insult, Dickens concludes *American Notes* by advising Americans to be more attentive to matters of personal hygiene (Dickens, 2000: 274).<sup>13</sup>

A permanent obsession of Dickens’ is the American fondness for chewing tobacco and the ceaseless spitting that accompanies it. There are several part outraged and part satirical passages concerning this habit in the two books – in fact they make up as prominent a part of Dickens’ critique of the United States as his more weighty objections to the continued existence of slavery in the southern states. Describing a journey by train from New York to Philadelphia, he relates how he at one point looked out of the window and noticed a shower of something he first took to be feathers from a torn up duvet coming from the windows of “the gentlemen’s car”. Feathers it was not: “At length it occurred to me that they were only spitting, which was indeed the case; though how any number of passengers which it was possible for that car to contain, could have maintained such a playful and incessant shower of expectoration, I am still at a loss to understand.” (Dickens, 2000: 109). Later, Dickens visits Washington, “the head-quarters of tobacco-tinctured saliva” (Dickens, 2000: 125), and is horrified to discover that spittoons are in place everywhere, even on Capitol Hill. To the grave detriment of the interior decoration, however, they are not used: “Both houses are handsomely carpeted; but the state to which these carpets are reduced by the universal disregard of the spittoon with which every honourable member is accommodated, and the extraordinary im-

provements on the pattern which are squirted and dabbled upon it in every direction, do not admit of being described.” (Dickens, 2000: 135). Dickens finds it bizarre to see venerable representatives and senators with faces swollen due to the large quantities of tobacco they store in their cheeks, and it is no less bizarre to see them lean back in their chairs, place their legs on the desk, form a “plug” with their penknife and then shoot out the old “as from a pop-gun”. Unfortunately, even the most experienced chewers are not always good shots, “which has rather inclined me to doubt that proficiency with the rifle, of which we have heard so much in England.” (Dickens, 2000: 135).

Dickens was by no means the only European writer who took offence at the tobacco chewing and spitting of the Americans. Fanny Trollope, too, was remarkably interested in this “annoyance so deeply repugnant to English feelings” (Trollope, 1997: 18). The first time she is exposed to it is onboard a Mississippi river steamer, where the spitting is aimed at the beautiful carpet in “the gentlemen’s cabin”. Propriety does not allow Trollope to offer any details, but she does confess that she would have much preferred the company of “well conditioned pigs” (Trollope, 1997: 18). At other times, Trollope is less modest, and she is able to describe a private prayer meeting she attended in the village of Mohawk, Ohio, which began with the preacher producing “a sound between a hem and a cough” and then placing “a considerable portion of masticated tobacco” on each side of his chair (Trollope, 1997: 98).

Dr. Moorfeld, the emigrant protagonist of Ferdinand Kürnberger’s *Der Amerikamiide*, is likewise appalled by the omnipresent gobs of tobacco spit in

the United States. The entrance to the “Generallandamt”, i.e. the government office in charge of selling frontier land for cultivation, is guarded by a yellowish “ocean of saliva”, which the repulsed Moorfeld only with great adroitness manages to cross, physically unharmed, but with the loss of a good pair of white trousers (Kürnberger, 1986: 72). And to cite one last example, Heinrich Heine was surely not just being ironic when he listed the constant spitting among the reasons why he did not emigrate to America, even though in Europe he had to live in exile for most of his adult life. In the satirical poem “Jetzt wohin?” (1851), written in view of the failed revolutions of 1848, Heine, an obstinate opponent of European absolutism, strikes republican America off his list of possible places of refuge. Thus, the thought of emigrating to the “great freedom stable/ Inhabited by equality louts” is immediately brushed aside by the poet with reference to his dread of a country “where people chew tobacco,/ where they flounder about without a king,/ Where they spit without a spittoon.” (Heine, 1992: 102).

Apart from tobacco chewing and spitting, the Romantics tended to single out American eating habits as proof of the all-pervasive American vulgarity. The criticism is always the same: Americans have no table manners, they eat too quickly, they eat too much meat, American cuisine is abysmal, and there is never any polite, sociable conversation at the table. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens returns several times to the occurrences at American dinner tables, and these provide him with ample material for derision and satire. The protagonist is first exposed to American eating habits shortly after disembarking in New

York. At one point he hears a bell ringing, and as everyone around him immediately rushes off, almost knocking him over in the process, he assumes that the fire alarm has gone off. As it turns out, the bell simply signifies that dinner has been served in the nearby boarding house. On sitting down at the table, he experiences American vulgarity at its rapacious worst:

All the knives and forks were working away at a rate that was quite alarming; very few words were spoken; and everybody seemed to eat his utmost in self-defence, as if a famine were expected to set in before breakfast time to-morrow morning, and it had become high time to assert the first law of nature. The poultry, which may perhaps be considered to have formed the staple of the entertainment – for there was a turkey at the top, a pair of ducks at the bottom, and two fowls in the middle – disappeared as rapidly as if every bird had had the use of its wings, and had flown in desperation down a human throat. The oysters, stewed and pickled, leaped from their capacious reservoirs, and slid by scores into the mouths of the assembly. The sharpest pickles vanished; whole cucumbers at once, like sugar-plumps; and no man winckled his eye. Great heaps of indigestible matter melted away as ice before the sun. It was a solemn and an awful thing to see. (Dickens, 2004: 263 f.).

In one of the last American scenes of the novel, Dickens succeeds in coupling his two obsessions with American tobacco chewing and American eating

habits. On a river steamer returning Martin Chuzzlewit from his failed adventure in the wilderness, the young protagonist dines one evening with a rather distinguished group of Americans, including a congressman no less, the honourable Elijah Pogrom. As usual, dinner is a very vulgar affair: “No man had spoken a word; every one had been intent, as usual, on his own private gorging; and the greater part of the company were decidedly dirty feeders.” (Dickens, 2004: 507). However, one of the company is not just a dirty feeder, but also an avid tobacco chewer, who sports “a little beard, composed of the overflowings of that weed, as they had dried about his mouth and chin”. In America, this is such a common sight that Martin barely notices it, but the table manners of this man do shock him: “this good citizen, burning to assert his equality against all comers, sucked his knife for some moments, and made a cut with it at the butter, just as Martin was in the act of taking some. There was a juiciness about the deed that might have sickened a scavenger.” (Dickens, 2004: 507). In this remarkable passage, a high point of satirical aggression in the novel, Dickens not only combines the two disgusting habits in one American character, thereby raising American vulgarity by a power of two, but also links this double vulgarity to the political institutions of the United States, i.e. to democracy and republican values: the ill-mannered American is a “good citizen” bent on asserting his “equality” with his fellow travellers. In this way Dickens connects and perhaps even subordinates his *cultural* anti-Americanism to an equally virulent *political* anti-Americanism, a general scepticism regarding

republican institutions that apparently spell the end of politeness and common decency.

Seemingly independent themes and motifs thus often turn out to be interconnected in anti-American discourse. Like many of his contemporaries, Dickens presupposes a relation of cause and effect when he describes the link between American democracy and American vulgarity: it is democracy and its blurring of social distinctions that brings about the decay of manners. Ferdinand Kürnberger, on the other hand, is too much of a romantic to adopt such “mechanical” ways of explanation and instead bases his portrait of the United States on the idea that the national character of the Americans is manifested symbolically in every aspect of American culture, from the lowest to the highest. Thus, *Der Amerikamüde* in large part takes on the form of an exercise in romantic cultural analysis where ostensibly insignificant details are scrutinised and interpreted as expressions of the deep, essential truth of the United States.

Kürnberger, too, is fascinated by the way Americans eat, and his description of Moorfeld’s first dinner in America is a striking example of his peculiar hermeneutic gaze. The meal is consumed with the Stauntons, with whom Moorfeld lodges during his stay in New York. The first thing the protagonist notes is the way the courses are served. Whereas a “European banquet” is composed of an artfully arranged sequence of individual dishes, not unlike the chapters of a novel or the acts of a play, the Americans serve all courses at once. This practice is barbaric in itself, but it also reveals some more fundamental features of the American national character. Moorfeld ventures three

mutually reinforcing interpretations: the simultaneous serving of the dishes testifies either to the commercialism of the Americans, to whom time is money; to their republicanism, which is incompatible with any kind of social division or hierarchy; or to the practical bent of the Americans, which makes them prefer having the entire meal in front of them at once so that they can make use of their appetite with complete efficiency (Kürnberger, 1986: 45 f.).

These fanciful interpretations are clearly three more ways of reaffirming that the Americans are unspeakably vulgar people, and this impression receives further confirmation when Moorfeld inspects the food itself. All courses have lavish quantities of meat for their main ingredient, and all of them are served either half raw or half burned. Apparently all have been put on the stove at the same time without due consideration of the “delicate play of individualities”, without regard for the “devoted receptiveness of the pork chop” or the “determined resistance of the roast beef”. This disregard of individuality leads Moorfeld to speak of the Americans’ “industrial cuisine”, which pours forth bland, standardised products lacking taste and class (Kürnberger, 1986: 46 f.). In this it reflects the nature of the United States, which from the nationalistic perspective of Kürnberger denationalises European immigrants, creating an inferior mishmash of peoples and races rather than a true nation. After the string of “defeats” which the meal has inflicted on Moorfeld, the champagne at the end is his last remaining hope. However, as he pours himself a glass, Mr. Staunton insists on “improving” the aristocratic drink with a splash of “plebeian” brandy. This final cocktail, the “high point of tastelessness”, further un-

derscores Kürnberger's basic conviction that American republicanism dissolves class distinctions and thereby undermines art, culture, decency, and taste: "If the American drinks his champagne with brandy, who in this country guarantees the genius against prose?" (Kürnberger, 1986: 48).

In this idea lies what is probably the most important background reason for the romantics' contempt for the vulgar Americans. Like champagne diluted with brandy, democracy to the anti-Americans of the early nineteenth century implied a levelling of taste, tact, and culture to the lowest common denominator. Obviously there were also Europeans who spat out their plugs in public and lacked the refined table manners of the bourgeoisie. But these people belonged to the lower, unprivileged classes, and they were certainly not affluent and powerful as in the United States. Significantly, Dickens, Trollope, and Kürnberger are all careful to focus on American *gentlemen* as the objects of their most extreme indignation. What particularly shocks them is precisely the fact that these gentlemen, who ought to have a higher sense of decency, are every bit as raw and vulgar as the masses. It is precisely the permanent anti-democratic point of romantic anti-Americanism that the republican pursuit of equality inevitably reduces all members of society to members of the mob.

### **Religious fanaticism**

In the eyes of the romantics, the vulgarity of Americans was also – and perhaps primarily – reflected in their religious customs. The United States had of course always been a deeply religious country. Many of the earliest immigrants



were protestant dissidents, who had left England to be able to exercise their faith in safety from persecution. Tolerance and freedom of religion had therefore from the outset been fundamental concepts in American political thinking, which had effectively prevented the formation of an established church of the European variety and instead allowed religious life to evolve in a large number of independent denominations, often supported by very small congregations. In the early years of the nineteenth century religious freedom in America flourished as never before. The United States experienced the second of the great waves of revivalism which has swept the country at regular intervals. Like most outbursts of religious fervour, this “Second Great Awakening” originated in a desire to return to a strict, fundamentalist interpretation of the Holy Writ. Concomitantly, it was based on a powerful religious enthusiasm, which was expressed and further reinforced at so-called “camp-meetings”, i.e. religious rallies, often held on the frontier, where large crowds, often consisting of thousands of people, gathered to hear the great preachers of the day – and to pray, dance, and sing themselves into a state of religious ecstasy. The period abounds in self-anointed prophets and founders of religions, but also gave rise to an army of charlatans, who exploited the strong religious sentiments to make easy money (Brogan, 2001: 231 ff.).

The highly varied religious life in the United States was bound to appear outlandish to chilly Northern European protestants, who were used to a state church enforcing uniformity in religious practice. Hegel conceptualised a predominant view, when, in his lectures on the philosophy of history, he declared

that the absence of an established religion in America had led to a radical individualisation of faith. According to Hegel, the religious supermarket, where anyone can put together his own religion, was already open for business in the United States of the early nineteenth century:

Everyone [...] may have his own individual worldview and consequently also his own religion. Thence the splitting up into so many sects, which reach the very acme of absurdity; many of which have a form of worship consisting in convulsive movements, and sometimes in the most sensuous extravagances. This complete freedom of worship is developed to such a degree, that the various congregations choose ministers and dismiss them according to their absolute pleasure; for the Church is no independent existence with a substantial spiritual being and an external arrangement, rather the affairs of religion are regulated by the good pleasure of the members of the community. In North America the most unbounded licence in religious matters prevails, and that religious unity is wanting which has been maintained in European states, where deviations are limited to a few confessions. (Hegel, 1970: 112 f.).

A religious man himself, Hegel does not criticise the Americans for believing in God, but for not believing in God in the right way, i.e. within the framework of an established church that can keep their vivid imaginations in check. He is convinced that the American individualisation of faith is reflected in forms of

religious practice which are at best ludicrous, at worst dissolute and morally objectionable. This is especially clear from the attack on the “sensuous extravagances” and “unbounded licence” of religious Americans: in the United States, Hegel claims, the pure interiority of faith has been polluted with corporeality and sex in a perverse, almost bacchantic way. Like the bad manners of Americans, this is due mostly to an exaggerated notion of freedom, which posits the freedom of religion as absolute and thus prevents the state from guiding and supervising citizens in matters of faith.

In *Domestic Manners of the American*, religion is one of the major, constantly recurrent themes. Trollope’s travelogue pinpoints a number of prominent features of American religious life during the wave of revivalism at the beginning of the century, but although her observations are often perspicacious and precise, the account is on the whole a caricature: it is the author’s uncompromising anti-Americanism which governs both her perception and her pen. The interpretation she offers of American religion hinges on two points.

First, Trollope agrees with Hegel that the absence of an established church gives free reign to religious excesses. An enlightened state church does not impair freedom of thought, she claims. It simply acts as a “rudder oar”, stabilising the “weak and wavering opinions of the multitude”, and thereby it prevents the “outrageous display of individual whim” characteristic of religious life in America (Trollope, 1997: 100). Besides, there is no such thing as true religious freedom in the United States. On the contrary, the religious institutions and practices of Americans reveal that “a religious tyranny may be exerted very effectually

ally without the aid of the government, in a way much more oppressive than the paying of tithe, and without obtaining any of the salutary decorum, which [...] is the result of an established mode of worship.” (Trollope, 1997: 84). Thus, religious life in the United States is characterised by immoderate individualism, by a kind of freedom that amounts to constraint, and by a fundamental lack of decency in the practice of the faith.

Secondly, Trollope finds that the contemporary wave of religious zeal in America can only be explained negatively as the result of the fact that young Americans have nothing else to do. Not only are culture and entertainment virtually non-existent, but religious hardliners make things even worse by outlawing amusements that are in fact completely harmless. In Cincinnati, playing cards and billiards have been prohibited. In Philadelphia, the citizens are so eager to remember the Sabbath that they block the streets with chains on Sundays, so that horses and carriages cannot pass. Trollope is even able to tell her readers about a New York tailor who on a Sunday sold a suit to a sailor just about to embark on a journey; the city council took legal action, and the subsequent trial not only ruined the tailor, but also his utterly innocent nephew (Trollope, 1997: 56, 213, 89 f.). It is thus primarily due to the lack of alternatives that American youth turns to the churches, chapels, and meeting houses, of which there are plenty, and which are always packed.

The individualised denominations in the United States are particularly offensive to Trollope, when religious services no longer offer abstract sermons and quiet, introverted prayer, but become sensual and physical. The English-

woman describes a Presbyterian revival in Cincinnati, where the preacher succeeds in whipping up such a level of religious hysteria that the young women of the congregation abandon all decency and start to sob, dribble and pant, fling themselves around on the floor with twitching limbs and utter convulsive screams, while solicitous preachers circle around them handing out words of comfort and caresses with unmistakable sexual undertones: “More than once I saw a young neck encircled by a reverend arm” (Trollope, 1997: 64). Later, Trollope witnesses one of the “camp-meetings” typical of the Second Great Awakening, in this case held in the wilderness of Indiana. Here the enthusiasm, and hence also the indecency, is even greater. The revival is described by the author as a witches’ Sabbath, where at midnight young women dance and moan themselves into a state of delirium and then move on to literally roll around in the mud. In the middle of the commotion an enclosure is set up, which penitent sinners can step into if they care to “wrestle with the Lord”. A horde of distinctly swinish women quickly flocks to “the pen”:

[A]bove a hundred persons, nearly all females, came forward, uttering howlings and groans, so terrible that I shall never cease to shudder when I recall them. They appeared to drag each other forward, and on the word being given, ‘let us pray’, they all fell on their knees; but this posture was soon changed for others that permitted greater scope for the convulsive movements of their limbs; and they were soon all lying on the ground in an indescribable confusion of heads and legs. They threw

about their limbs with such incessant and violent motion, that I was every instant expecting some serious accident to occur [...] Hysterical sobbings, convulsive groans, shrieks and screams the most appalling, burst forth on all sides. I felt sick with horror (Trollope, 1997: 130).

To Trollope, such hysteria is not only sickening; it also involves a ruthless exploitation of the naïve young women. It is inconceivable that the preachers are in good faith; they are clearly more inspired by burning desire than by burning religious zeal – desire for dollars, for as always the hullabaloo is concluded by a profitable collection, but also sexual desire, for Trollope again witnesses the preachers’ “insidious lips approach the cheeks of the unhappy girls”, and the following morning she notices “many a fair but pale face, that I recognised as a demoniac of the night, simpering beside a swain, to whom she carefully administered hot coffee and eggs.” (Trollope, 1997: 131 f.). Such desire lurking behind a veil of piety is by no means to be found only among fanatics on the frontier. On the contrary, Trollope insists that the link between “spiritual awe and earthly affection” (Trollope, 1997: 214) is a general feature of religious life in the United States, and she therefore makes a point of alluding to it almost every time she touches upon the theme of religion – explicitly, for example, in the story of an young itinerant preacher who managed to ingratiate himself with several respectable families in Philadelphia and had made no less than seven girls pregnant, when he was finally discovered and sent packing (Trollope, 1997: 214). For Trollope, religion in the United States is thus some-

thing purely exterior. Americans might express their faith in the form of loud confessions and lavishly staged shows, but upon closer inspection one notices that it is all a sham. The religious fire does not burn in their hearts, but in their loins and long fingers, and although they constantly talk about their superior virtue, their moral standards are in fact “very greatly lower than in Europe” (Trollope, 1997: 235).

Although Trollope’s account of American religion is intensely suspicious and tends to make broad generalisations on the basis of individual observations, it nevertheless preserves some connection, however distorted, to contemporary American reality. Unlike Trollope, who had travelled extensively in the United States, Ferdinand Kürnberger never visited the country he hated so intensely, and his objections therefore often spring from a combination of second-hand reports and freewheeling, resentful imagination. When Kürnberger speaks of American religion in *Der Amerikamüde*, he always takes as a starting point what he conceives of as the specific national features of the American people. First, he links the faith of Americans to their well-known materialism, so that “Sabbath” is made to rhyme with “shopping” (Kürnberger, 1986: 94). Later he repeats this exercise in debunking American religion by connecting the religious feelings of Americans with their practical, pedestrian nature. Thus, when protagonist Moorfeld comes across a religious pamphlet setting out a plan to build the New Jerusalem somewhere on the prairie, he is immediately struck by the level of practical detail, not least the outlining of a dress code for the congregation: “This boorish prophet wants to pursue spiritual tendencies

and in the process gets entangled in underpants and trousers! That is truly American.” (Kürnberger, 1986: 149).

However, these somewhat predictable interpretations are completely overshadowed by the protagonist’s bizarre experiences on his first Sunday in New York. After having been asked by his host to refrain from playing the violin, Moorfeld realises that on Sundays even going for a walk is considered an infringement of the third commandment. The black servant Jack – who in a way is Moorfeld’s ally, although the narrator bombards him with racist clichés – informs the shocked German that Sunday boredom in New York is so intense that the city’s young men have developed a special pastime, which simply consists in setting random houses on fire and then amusing themselves extinguishing the fires. Shortly after, the fire alarm goes off and Moorfeld is given a chance to experience this peculiar amusement first hand. It turns out to be a “true popular festival” (Kürnberger, 1986: 56). Spectators flock to the scene of the fire from all parts of the city and everyone is visibly relieved to have escaped the straitjacket holiday regulations. However, the real fun consists not so much in watching the fire fighting itself, but in the clash between the city’s different fire brigades and their colourful captains. At first, the battle is fought with fire hoses, but as it escalates revolvers are drawn, and a violent gunfight erupts, which leaves several wounded both among the firemen themselves and the spectators. Incidents such as this allegedly take place every Sunday, not only in New York, but all over the country. Moorfeld has witnessed “an Ameri-



can Sunday celebration” (Kürnberger, 1986: 60), a consequence of the excessive, hypocritical Puritanism of the American people.

## **Democracy**

Much romantic anti-Americanism derives from snobbery and feelings of superiority, from contempt for the nouveau riche Americans and their ignorance, lack of culture, and insatiable thirst for dollars. Alongside this *cultural* anti-Americanism, however, the romantics also developed a *political* anti-Americanism, for which there was likewise a great future in store. The prime target here was not, as in recent times, the foreign policy of the United States, for the first American presidents had on the whole heeded the advice given by George Washington in his Farewell Address to avoid involvement in foreign controversies. Instead, anti-American discourse concentrated on the nature of American democracy, which in the early 1800s had lost little of its original novelty and therefore inevitably attracted a great deal of interest in Europe, still predominantly absolutist. There was special interest in what Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal much later conceptualised as the “American Creed”, i.e. the political confession of faith, which unites Americans regardless of ethnicity, social status, or religious beliefs. This creed consists of the ideals of American republicanism, including “the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity” (Myrdal, 1944: 4). These ideals are as old as the republic itself, and they are expressed eloquently in key foundational

texts such as the Declaration of Independence, the preamble to the constitution, and the Bill of Rights (Myrdal, 1944: 4). Romantic visitors often had to listen to Americans singing the praises of their political rights, often intermixed with a sometimes condescending compassion for the poor downtrodden Europeans.<sup>14</sup> Predictably, they reacted with annoyance: the continental Europeans because they enjoyed no such political freedom themselves, and the British because they regarded the political self-image of the Americans as a usurpation of Britain's traditional self-image as a haven of liberty. It was then only logical to ask if the American republic really was as exemplary as the Americans professed, and usually the answer to this question was negative.

A large part of the romantics' political anti-Americanism was directed against the contradictions and inconsistencies which were said to characterise democracy in America. A wide range of writers pointed out the palpable contradiction between the lofty rhetoric of freedom and the continued existence of slavery in the southern parts of the Union, and many with ill-concealed glee told the story of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, with its words on the "self-evident" equality of all men, who was at the same time a slave owner and father of several mulatto children.<sup>15</sup> Indignation about slavery was of course perfectly legitimate, and more often than not the indignation was sincere. However, it is worth noting that in many cases it was subordinated to a more general strategy aimed at exposing the hypocrisy of American politics. Therefore it typically turns up in association with a critique of the high-minded political ideals of Americans, all seen to be covering up a

less high-minded reality. Thus, when Americans talk about freedom, they not only choose to forget about slavery, but also overlook the fact that freedom in America has degenerated into licentiousness, as is, for example, painfully clear in the workings of the American press, sensationalist and intolerably intrusive.<sup>16</sup> The ideal of equality similarly entails the cultured élite being reduced to the level of the mob and the political leadership of the country put in the hands of crude, uneducated men (Moore, 1806: 178 ff.). And when Americans claim that democracy has created a moral sensibility unknown at Europe's princely courts, this is in clear contradiction of the facts; on the contrary, American politicians are notoriously corrupt, and with regard to citizens' patriotism, it is well-known that it – like all other values in the United States – is subordinate to the power of the dollar (Dickens, 2004: 266).<sup>17</sup> Charles Dickens provides a striking example of these incessant attempts to expose the hypocrisy of democracy, when, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, he lets the protagonist's faithful servant contemplate how the American eagle ought to be portrayed: "I should want to draw it like a Bat, for its short-sightedness; like a Bantam, for its bragging; like a Magpie, for its honesty; like a Peacock, for its vanity; like an Ostrich, for its putting its head in the mud, and thinking nobody sees it." (Dickens, 2004: 516).

Significantly, this strategy of exposing American democracy rarely implied that the authors accepted the democratic ideals as such. The aim was rather to show that democratic institutions necessarily bred corruption and that democracy was therefore an illusion. This anti-democratic attitude is particularly visi-

ble among conservatives, who often used the United States as a proxy to lash out against liberal reformers in their own countries. A case in point is English novelist Captain Marryat, author of classics such as *Peter Simple* (1834) and *The Children of the New Forest* (1847). Marryat's occupation with the United States has roughly the same background as Dickens'. After the success of his first novels, Marryat in 1837 decided to visit America, and upon returning to England after eighteen months of extensive travelling, he published his impressions as *Diaries in America* (1839). Like Dickens' *American Notes*, this book raised an outcry among Marryat's American readership, for Marryat did not care much for the United States either, and he is particularly severe regarding what the Americans themselves were most proud of, i.e. their democratic institutions. Like most conservatives of the period, Marryat had no doubt that democracy was an inferior form of government based on blind faith in the notoriously irrational and fickle masses. This viewpoint is expressed as early as the introduction, where Marryat proposes a distinction between republicanism and democracy. In a republic, he explains, the most enlightened citizens govern on behalf of the people as a whole, whereas in a democracy decisions are ultimately made by the people itself – by “the majority, who are as often wrong as right.” On the basis of this distinction, Marryat claims that the United States actually started out as a republic, but over the years degenerated into something as despicable as a “pure democracy” (Marryat, 1960: 47 f.).

The contempt for American democracy and its institutions and values is a recurrent theme in Marryat's travel diaries, but it is particularly prominent in

his description of Washington D.C. The political parties on Capitol Hill are primarily concerned with acquiring and holding on to power, and this reduces the well-being of the nation to “a very secondary consideration”. Very little gets done; individual members deliver two or three speeches in each session, not for the benefit of the people, but to prove to their constituencies that their representatives “make some noise in the house”. The speeches consist of commonplaces smothered in a mixture of inconsequential chatter and patriotic platitudes – “eagles, star-stangled banners, sovereign people, claptrap, flattery, and humbug.” Marryat admits that there might be a few decent and intelligent gentlemen in the assembly; like flowers on a dung heap, these rare individuals shine all the brighter for having grown in a “hot-bed of corruption” (Marryat, 1960: 189 f.). The vast majority, however, are dishonest, vulgar hypocrites, who furthermore fight their political enemies in such dirty and personally injurious ways that duels are commonplace; as is well known, “slander and detraction” are the “inseparable evils of a democracy” (Marryat, 1960: 195), and for that reason duels are by necessity a side effect of democracy. According to Marryat, the United States is simply a “mobocracy” (Marryat, 1960: 190) governed by unprincipled, greedy men, who themselves are nothing but puppets of the ignorant masses. After such a tirade, it is hardly surprising that Marryat later declared that the aim of the book had been to “do serious injury to the cause of democracy.”<sup>18</sup>

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, too, had little affection for American democracy. Like many of his contemporaries, Schopenhauer saw

democracy as the fundamental corrupting principle in American society, from which all the country's other evils derived. In the section on jurisprudence and politics in *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1851), the philosopher endorses the romantic-conservative tenet that state institutions must necessarily rest on a historically contingent basis and points to the United States as an example of a state which has eliminated contingency and instead imposed a rule of "abstract law" (i.e. law according to pure reason as opposed to customary law). However, such an attempt to step outside history comes at a high price:

[I]n spite of all the material prosperity in the country, we there find as the prevailing attitude sordid utilitarianism with ignorance as its inevitable companion, which has paved the way to stupid Anglican bigotry, shallow conceit, and coarse brutality, in combination with a silly veneration of women. And in that country even worse things are the order of the day, such as revolting Negro slavery coupled with the utmost cruelty to the slaves, the most iniquitous suppression of the free blacks, lynch-law, assassination frequent and often unpunished, duels of unprecedented brutality, sometimes open ridicule of all rights and laws, repudiation of public debts, shocking political defrauding of a neighbouring state followed by predatory incursions into its rich territory. Such raids had then to be covered up by the highest authorities with lies that were known as such and laughed at by everyone in the country. Then there is the ever-growing ochlocracy, and finally we have all the pernicious influence

which the above-mentioned denial of integrity in high places is bound to exercise in private morality. And so this specimen of a pure constitution of right on the other side of the planet says very little in favour of republics [...]. (Schopenhauer, 1913: 277).<sup>19</sup>

That conservative anti-democrats such as Marryat and Schopenhauer – or Moore, Hegel, Balzac, and Trollope – were hostile towards American democracy is perhaps not surprising; in fact, it is an almost inevitable consequence of their politics. Far more surprising is the fact that their hostility was often shared by liberals, who in their own countries fought for civil liberties and political representation on broadly American lines. This paradox is perhaps most striking in the German context. During the restoration and particularly in the years before and after the failed revolutions of 1848-49, numerous German liberals decided to give up the fight for democracy and emigrate to the United States. However, many key figures chose to remain in Germany and regarded democratic institutions in America with the utmost scepticism and contempt. The intensely anti-American Ferdinand Kürnberger was, for example, also an impassioned liberal. After participating in the revolutionary uprisings in Vienna, he was exiled from his native Austria in 1848, and the following year he took part in the May Revolution in Dresden, which landed him a nine-month prison sentence. Kürnberger had in other words given ample proof of his liberal leanings, but apparently saw no special connection between his own political ideals and those of the United States. On the contrary, *Der Amerikamüde* is

probably the longest and most aggressive novel about America in the German language, and it by no means limits itself to criticising American table manners and religious practices, but also paints a vitriolic portrait of American democracy. The poet and scholar August Hoffmann von Fallersleben also had immaculate liberal credentials. In the 1830s and 1840s he published a stream of liberal nationalist poems (including most famously the *Deutschlandslied*, the lyrics of the German national anthem), where he castigated political repression and demanded German unification. Because of his radical views, he was dismissed in 1842 from his professorship at the University of Breslau and expelled from Prussia. Nevertheless, Hoffmann had little positive to say about the only sizeable liberal democracy of the period – the United States. The poem “Die neue Welt” (1843) thus collates the most prominent motifs of romantic anti-Americanism, including the political critique: Americans are irredeemably materialistic, they have no appreciation of art and culture, and their democracy is marred by a fetishist overvaluation of freedom (quoted in Meyer, 1929: 49).

The most prominent among the German *Vormärz* writers, Heinrich Heine, reflects the same pattern. A political dissident, Heine spent 25 years in self-imposed Parisian exile, and on account of his repeated attacks on political repression in the German states, his writings were banned by the Federal Diet in Frankfurt am Main in 1835. In his early writings, Heine had expressed admiration of the United States, but with age his fascination gave way to contempt – as it is obvious from the already quoted lines on American vulgarity in the poem “Jetzt wohin?” and the attack on American materialism in *Ludwig Börne*.



*Eine Denkschrift* (1840). In the latter essay, Heine states his genuinely political – and not just cultural – reasons for not emigrating to the United States. In full agreement with the doctrines of the conservative anti-Americanism, he insists that the celebrated freedom in the United States is an illusion, for equality undermines freedom by handing over power to the populace – the “mob”, as Heine writes:

Or should I go to America, to this immense prison house of freedom, where the invisible chains would cause me even more pain than the visible at home, and where the most abominable of all tyrants, the mob, exercises its rude supremacy! You know what I think of this accursed country, which I used to love, when I did not know it... And still I have to laud and praise it, out of professional duty... My dear German farmers! Go to America! There they have neither princes nor nobility, all men are equal there, equally loutish... (Heine, 1978: 37).<sup>20</sup>

French liberals, too, were often highly sceptical towards the American notion of equality. Having served Napoleon as a young man, the novelist Stendhal harboured the deepest possible contempt for the police states of the restoration, not least the Habsburg Empire, which regarded him as a dangerous enemy for precisely this reason (Litto, 1965: 248 ff.). However, in spite of his liberal views, Stendhal's opinion of American democracy was unswervingly negative. In *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830), he alleges in the opening chapter that the

small town of Verrières, where the first part of the novel is set, is just as narrow-minded and *petit bourgeois* a place as the United States. The chapter's concluding lines even turns the United States into the yardstick of base, inane provincialism: "Public opinion [...] exercises a tyranny that is every bit as *mindless* in small towns in France as it is in the United States of America." (Stendhal, 1952b: 222). In *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), the author's disdain is even more marked. Throughout the novel, the noble protagonist Fabrice del Dongo is constantly harassed by reactionary forces in Austria and Northern Italy, and as he is himself a rather inept figure, his courtesan aunt and her lover have to make ever-increasing efforts to save his life. When the idea of sending him to America presents itself, however, it is rejected out of hand. Count Mosca regards political equality as tantamount to social and cultural levelling and considers this to be too high a price to pay for freedom: "[I]n America, in the Republic, one must waste a whole day in paying serious court to the shopkeepers in the streets, and must become as stupid as they are; and over there, no opera." (Stendhal, 1952a: 427). That it is in fact the voice of Stendhal himself we hear in these harangues becomes evident if we turn to his drafts for a preface to the unfinished novel *Lucien Leuwen*. The verdict here remains the same: "[I]he author would be in despair if he lived under the government of New York. He prefers to pay court to M. de Guizot rather than to his shoemaker. In the nineteenth century democracy, in literature, inevitably entails the reign of men who are [...] mediocre, sensible, limited and dull." (Stendhal, 1952c: 763)<sup>21</sup>

Although they were fierce antagonists in the national and European setting, conservatives and liberals thus often came together in a pronounced hostility towards the young American republic. The common anti-democratic opinion was that democracy in America with its principle of equality had relinquished political power to the “mob”, whose views were rooted in arbitrary sentiments and narrow, short-sighted interests. The United States was ruled by the majority, and the sovereign majority gave rise to an overwhelmingly powerful public opinion, encouraging citizens to conformism and politicians to populism. The result was a deterioration of political debate and a lower standard of elected representatives, which transformed political life into a loathsome, undignified affair. However, the noxious effects of democracy also extended to culture. Democracy undermined the social distinctions that were not only seen as the basis of philosophy, art and literature, but also more generally of taste and manners. Thus, it was not least because of their democracy that the Americans were a vulgar people lacking all sense of the higher, more refined aspects of life.

## **Conclusion**

As the examples in the preceding sections show, the European élite of the early nineteenth century had a marked tendency to anti-Americanism. Of course this does not rule out that its representations of the United States could have some truth to them. It seems beyond dispute, for example, that American high culture in this period was not on par with that which flourished in the capitals of

the Old World, and it is certainly true that the Americans were a highly religious people who expressed their faith in ways very different to those common in Europe. It may even be true that Americans were less refined and more materialistic in comparison with their European cousins. However, romantic anti-Americanism has no purely descriptive interest in the United States. It does not deduce its verdicts from facts, but passes the verdicts and then makes the facts fit – often in an altogether fictitious way. Therefore, its descriptions of the country are at best caricatures, and at worst mendacious and driven by pure hatred. Anti-American bias is perhaps most visible in the methodical, all-encompassing character of the critique, which, incidentally, in the literary examples often causes the plot to evaporate in favour of mere catalogues of complaints. No real attempt is made to intersperse a few positive observations, if only to forestall the charge of one-sidedness. On the contrary, the portraitists of America paint only in drab colours and attack virtually every aspect of American life – from democracy to religious beliefs and table manners. The discourse is characterised by a remarkable lack of generosity, an unwillingness to await a more unambiguous outcome of the great American experiment.

Of course there were numerous examples of a positive or more balanced attitude towards the United States among members of the European élite – a case in point would be Goethe, who seemed to have regarded the United States with a mixture of curiosity and sympathy far removed from the crude bigotry we find in many of his contemporaries.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, contempt – ranging from mild ridicule to outright hatred – was undeniably the predomi-

nant attitude to America among the romantics, and although xenophobia and irrational animosity do not always have identifiable causes, this attitude seems at first glance particularly puzzling. When polls show that anti-Americanism surged on a global scale during the presidency of George W. Bush, this can be explained to a large extent by the controversial policies of that administration.<sup>23</sup> However, in the early nineteenth century, the United States did not wield enough power to provoke reactions of such intensity. Obviously there was friction, at times even severe friction, between the Americans and one or the other of the Great Powers of the Old World, but they were normally limited in scope and never hardened into permanent conflicts of interest. In short, political differences cannot explain the romantic animosity against the Americans.

Rather than explaining them as “reactions” to American life in the period, the negative perceptions of the United States must therefore be seen as fictional constructs, which, while preserving some connection with the realities of contemporary America, are primarily determined by the ideologies and attitudes of the observer. A reflection on the “who” of romantic anti-Americanism thus reveals a number of recurrent features. The archetypical European observer of the United States belonged to the educated, affluent élite. Politically, he would be conservative and a sworn enemy of democracy, and even when he was a liberal he would regard the “mob” with a great deal of suspicion. As regards moral values, he would place great emphasis on personal decency and virtue, and he would demand that his private life and social status were respected at all times. If he furthermore adhered to the tenets of romanti-

cism proper, he would be a lover of art, music, and literature, and would find these “spiritual” pursuits incompatible with a life devoted to business and money. With values such as these, anti-Americanism was almost unavoidable. Americans clearly subscribed to a different set of values, and in the anti-American imagination these differences were made out to be complete contrasts, so that the United States came to be seen as a classless country – in both senses of the word – ruled by the vulgar and excessively materialist masses.

It would no doubt be tenuous to argue that the ultimate purpose of romantic anti-Americanism was to circumscribe a common European identity by pointing out the cultural distinctiveness of Europe vis-à-vis the United States. The relationship between Europe and America was still so asymmetrical at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the United States could not in any credible way take on the part of Europe’s “other”. However, romantic anti-Americanism *is* undoubtedly a strongly self-affirming and Eurocentric discourse. Its representations of the United States are coloured, at times beyond recognition, by European values and concerns. Furthermore, by constantly pointing towards cultural differences, romantic anti-Americanism aims to reinforce the sense of belonging to a specifically European culture, which in every important respect is distinct from American culture. Thus, romanticism not only invented the basic vocabulary of anti-Americanism, as has been argued throughout this article. It also accustomed Europeans to think of Europe and America as ontologically distinct or even antithetical entities. In a historical situation where crude prejudices and simple-minded hate speech are increasingly

marginalised, this institutionalisation in thought of an unbridgeable transatlantic divide might well be the most enduring legacy of romantic anti-Americanism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Keats, 1982: 375. The lines derives from the poem “What can I do to drive away”, which was presumably written in 1819 and deal with the author’s beloved brother George’s emigration to America.

<sup>2</sup> This line of reasoning is undeniably a feature of many recent books on anti-Americanism, e.g. Revel 2002, Rubin & Rubin 2004 and Hollander 2004. The point is often vigorously pursued by (neo-)conservative publications such as *The Weekly Standard* and *National Review*.

<sup>3</sup> This viewpoint is of course most widespread among leftist intellectuals, perhaps most notably Jürgen Habermas, who argues that anti-Americanism historically was widely disseminated among right-wing extremists in the Interwar years, but that today the concept is “counterproductive” and serves mainly as a way of discrediting opposition to the present American foreign policy, cf. Habermas, 2004: 11, 64, 109. For similar views, cf. Eagleton, 2003: 188; Monbiot, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> For fuller discussions of the concept of anti-Americanism, cf. Hollander, 2004: 5, 9 ff.; Rubin & Rubin, 2004: ix f.

<sup>5</sup> Enlightenment discussions about the American climate are analysed meticulously in Gerbi, 1973; see also Roger, 2002: 21-57. Buffon’s climatological anti-Americanism continued to make its presence felt well into the 1800s, and it was often limited in scope, so as to refer not to the two Americas in general but specifically to the United States. Thus, it remains very visible in Thomas Moore’s and Nikolaus Lenau’s writings on the United States (see below), and in the lines by John Keats quoted at the beginning of this article. The notebooks of German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel offer an extreme condensation of this peculiar theory of American degeneracy: “The Americans are *strayed*, degenerate *Englishmen*.” Cf. Schlegel, 1958: 240. This particular entry was written around 1817.

<sup>6</sup> In this paper the concept is used epochally and refers simply to the first half of the nineteenth century, not to a specifically romantic world view or view on art or literature.

<sup>7</sup> Later in his life, Moore regretted his youthful attacks on the United States, cf. Mumford Jones, 1937: 67-88.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Moore, 1806: 177 f.

<sup>9</sup> The narrator's shocked, expressly "German" reply: "Spirit, not money, is made from man!"

<sup>10</sup> On Nikolaus Lenau's travels in America, cf. Ritter, 2002: 105-130. The critique of American materialism often had a touch of hypocrisy to it. Dickens may have fumed about the "almighty dollar", but he was not too grand to accept a princely sum in dollars for his lecture tours of the country. Cf. Bradbury, 1995: 114 f.

<sup>11</sup> The famous answer is quoted enthusiastically by Fanny Trollope in Trollope, 1997: 241.

<sup>12</sup> Balzac's description of the United States is strangely ironic given the fact that the novel itself describes France as a country marked to an extreme degree by selfishness and avarice. Philippe Roger, who makes a brief mention of *La Rabouilleuse*, notes that in contemporary French literature only the villains emigrate to America. Cf. Roger, 2002: 62 f.

<sup>13</sup> For a more extensive discussion of Dickens' perception of America, cf. Bradbury, 1995: 84-117.

<sup>14</sup> Dickens in particular repeatedly pokes fun at the complacent ways in which Americans celebrate their democratic institutions. Cf. Dickens, 2004: 205 f., 256, 262, 354.

<sup>15</sup> Moore, 1806: 209 f.: "The weary statesman for repose hath fled /From halls of council to his negro's shed, /Where blest he woos some black Aspasia's grace, /And dreams of freedom in his slave's embrace!" See also Trollope, 1997: 57 f. and Dickens, 2004: 327.

<sup>16</sup> Both Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Kürnberger's *Der Amerikamüde* begin their characterisations of the United States by attacking what is perceived as abhorrent abuses of the freedom of the press. Kürnberger's Moorfeld complains about the existence in America of "Liberty of the press [*Preßfreiheit* ] and abomination of the press [*Preßscheußlichkeit* ] connected in the most intimate way!" Cf. Kürnberger, 1986: 18.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Moore scandalised his American readers by accusing the national hero George Washington of embezzlement, cf. Moore, 1806: 178.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Jules Zanger's preface to the edition used here. Moore, 1960: 28.

<sup>19</sup> The events referred to at the end of the quotation are the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Mexican War three years later.

<sup>20</sup> Heine continues with an attack on slavery in the United States: "... with exception, of course, of some millions, who have black or brown skins and are treated like dogs!"

<sup>21</sup> Stendhal was apparently unaware that New York had not been the capital of the United States since 1790. Besides being an influential historian, Guizot was also the leader of the French conservatives under Louis-Philippe.

<sup>22</sup> Goethe's famous poem "To the United States" (1827) is not the unambiguous homage it is routinely taken for, though. The poem in full runs like this: "America, you've got it better / Than our old continent. Exult! / You have no decaying castles / And no basalt. Your heart is not troubled, / In lively pursuits, / By useless old remembrance / And empty disputes. // So use the present day with luck! / And when your child a poem writes, / Protect him, with his skill and pluck, / From tales of bandits, ghosts and knights." (Translation by Daniel Platt, cf. [http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/trans\\_goethe.html#America](http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/trans_goethe.html#America)) A full interpretation of this poem and its historical context lies outside of the scope of this article. However, it is worth noting that Goethe actually does not praise any *positive* aspects of the United States, only *privations*: the absence of history ("castles"), the absence of volcanoes ("basalt"), and the absence of literature ("when your child a poem writes...").

<sup>23</sup> The Global Attitudes Project of the Pew Research Centre has provided ample evidence for the recent rise in anti-Americanism. Cf. Pew, 2005.