
Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09557570701680720

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Cambridge Review of International Affairs on 05/12/2007, available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09557570701680720.
THE ONE GREAT HYPERPOWER IN THE SKY
ANTI-AMERICANISM IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN LITERATURE

JESPER GULDDAL, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Abstract In this article, three recent works by French, English and German authors are analyzed as examples of anti-Americanism in contemporary European literature. Luc Lang's travel book, 11 septembre mon amour (2003), John Le Carré's spy novel, Absolute friends (2003) and Frank Schätzing's apocalyptic 'eco-thriller' Der Schwarm (2004) were all written in response to the ongoing 'war on terror' and each present remarkably antagonistic interpretations of the United States and its role in the world today. Although the literary strategies employed in these negative representations of the US are very different in each case, the three books share a deep disgust not only with American foreign policy, invariably interpreted as a reckless, deranged bid for global hegemony, but also with American culture and society in general. This article interprets this disgust as an expression of a deep-seated, irrational Americanophobia—that is, of 'anti-Americanism'.

Introduction

In the wake of September 11, the concept of anti-Americanism has become prominent as a framework for analysing the apparently growing aversion to the United States in all parts of the world, not least in Europe. At the same time, the concept has remained controversial, especially with regard to its applicability in specific cases. But that anti-Americanism is 'real'—that it exists outside the often heavily politicized debates in which the word is brought into play—has been well documented in recent literature on the subject. A large part of this literature originates in the social sciences and is particularly interested in the causes and diffusion of anti-Americanism and its impact on international politics. Another part approaches the phenomenon from the perspective of Cultural Studies, regarding it as a culturally determined way of thinking and speaking about the US, which has evolved in the course of a long historical process. Although methodologically different, these approaches to anti-Americanism have in common the fact that neither takes any particular interest in fictional literature—if they make use of literary sources at all, it is usually in a purely anecdotal way, which contents itself with extrapolating examples of anti-American statements, but fails to address the larger, structural significance of anti-Americanism in the works in question. This is perhaps not surprising, for the anti-Americanism of the 'real' world is of course in many respects more important than that of fiction. Nevertheless, literature has always played a crucial role in the history of anti-Americanism, not only as a means of dissemination, although this is very important, but also as a medium in which the discourse has reached some of its highest levels of intensity, variety and creativity. In short, literature has served as a hotbed of anti-Americanism, and for that reason alone a study of the literary history of anti-Americanism would be a valuable addition to the topic.

This article considers three works of literature, written by French, British and German authors respectively, as examples of how anti-Americanism manifests itself in contemporary European literature. The common denominator of these books is that all are written in response to the international conduct of the US after September 11 (9/11), especially to the 2003 invasion

---

2 Roger (2002); Markovits (2007); Diner (2003); Hollander (2004).
of Iraq. However, it is not the fact that they oppose the war that makes them anti-American. In accord with the literature in the field, anti-Americanism in this article is viewed as an attitude that goes beyond what can be characterized as a rational political critique of the US. The concept refers to a kind of resentment—an ingrained disposition to perceive everything American with scepticism, which in terms of intensity spans from chronic distrust to deadly hatred, and in terms of its method relies primarily on generalizations, distortions and stereotypes, but in more extreme cases builds on essentialist conceptions of the inherent vileness of the Americans. Of course, this distinction between rational criticism and irrational resentment cannot always be upheld. The boundary between the two poles is fuzzy, and in many specific instances of anti-Americanism one can discern a rational basis, yet it has been eroded or contaminated by malicious rhetoric. The study of contemporary anti-Americanism is to a large extent the study of such contaminations—of the ways in which political criticism degenerates into chauvinism.

The examples of literary anti-Americanism investigated in this article have all crossed the line between criticism and resentment. At a fundamental level, their objective is a perfectly legitimate one: in all three cases it consists in denouncing the American foreign policy in the period following the terrorist attacks of September 2001. In practice, however, the authors simply use their local, circumstantial criticisms as a pretext for an uncompromising, global rejection, not only of the Bush administration and its policies, but of American civilization in its entirety. The result is a relentless insistence on the inferiority, arrogance and depravity of the Americans, and it is above all this totalization that makes the critical project lapse into literary anti-Americanism.

Luc Lang

Although this article focuses on literary reactions to the Iraq War, it is worthwhile to begin with French writer Luc Lang’s 11 septembre mon amour (2003)—a book whose main concern is 9/11, even if it regards the terrorists attacks mainly from the perspective of their ‘Mephistophelian consequences’. The author of six, for the most part critically acclaimed novels, Lang has established himself firmly in the literary scene in France. However, an international breakthrough has not materialized and so far only the prize-winning Mille six cents ventres (1998) has been translated into English (Strange ways, 2000). A travelogue of sorts, 11 septembre mon amour marks a digression from Lang’s novelistic production and is the author’s first attempt at an American theme. The book describes what was initially planned as a visit to a Native American reservation at Flathead Lake, Montana. However, as the journey happened to coincide with the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the Indian theme is from the outset interwoven with an extended reflection on terrorism, particularly on the proper ways of countering it. The result is highly ambiguous and typical of a certain intellectual reaction to 9/11, which aims at counterbalancing or even subtly undermining the international sympathy offered to the Americans in the aftermath of the attacks.

In 11 septembre mon amour, the strictures on America follow in rapid succession. Although triggered by contemporary events, Lang’s critiques echo almost word for word the traditional patterns of French anti-Americanism with its heavy emphasis on the perceived cultural

---

3 A fuller attempt at conceptual clarification would go beyond the scope of this article. For discussions of the concept of anti-Americanism, I refer to the above-mentioned studies. Introductions found in Hollander (2004) and Katzenstein and Keohane (2007) are particularly useful.
inferiority of the US. The country is persistently represented as the vulgar and uncultured antithesis to France and Europe. Physically, its predominant feature is empty landscapes pierced by endless highways connecting almost identical and equally dreary cities, whose urban grids are lined by prefabricated houses, shopping malls and fast food restaurants. The inhabitants of these soulless places are obese, heavily armed cowboys in oversized cars, who concern themselves exclusively with the American trinity of God, dollars and American greatness. Like the cities they live in they are all more or less the same, the US being ‘the country where everyone is free to do like everyone else’ (Lang 2003, 187).

Although observations such as these may not be completely without reference to the realities of American life, they are hardly more than trite repetitions of age-old stereotypes and the relentless accumulation of negative features is in itself indicative of a strongly anti-American mindset. More significantly, however, Lang goes on to offer a number of highly tendentious interpretations of what is seen as permanent, unalterable properties of American culture. Thus, the US is essentially a ‘cowboy civilisation’ (Lang 2003, 50). The Americans are a greedy, primitive people, whose ‘belligerent spirit and ‘expansionist will’ are attended by an incessant hypocrisy about universal values and rights (Lang 2003, 83). The English they speak is an ‘Anglo-American porridge’, where words are kneaded in the mouth like chewing gum, while thoughts degenerate into a ‘swampy pâté of bun-hamburger-ketchup’ (Lang 2003, 70-71 f). For Lang, there is something inherently childish about the US. Culturally, it has not yet reached what psychoanalysis calls the ‘mirror stage’ and therefore has no awareness of the alterity of other cultures. This cultural narcissism, or ‘autism’, as Lang calls it (Lang 2003, 166), is one of the root causes of American imperialism. The US has ‘the energy and the vital force to absorb the entire planet’ (Lang 2003, 189), and it can do this either by military force or through export of American culture, which the author finds it reasonable to describe as a ‘global cancer’ (Lang 2003, 88).

Such ideas crop up repeatedly throughout the book and, in a way, constitute the backdrop for Lang’s imaginative interpretation of 9/11 and its repercussions. On the day of the attacks, Lang is staying with a Native American contact, who is also entertaining two other European visitors. When news breaks of a plane having crashed into New York’s World Trade Center, the host and his guests have just sat down for a typically ‘Pantagruelian’ breakfast. It is astounding to note how quickly Lang recovers from the initial shock and is able to assume a composed, coolly analytical attitude towards the events. After having followed the early development on CNN, characteristically leaving the emotional responses to his ‘Americanized’ companions, he manages to tear himself away from the television, and when the Twin Towers collapse, he is demonstratively having a morning shave in the bathroom. Although listening to the voices of the dead is repeatedly presented as an ethical imperative, Lang himself appears incapable of serious empathy with the largely American victims of the terrorist attacks. On the contrary, every little fit of compassion is immediately stifled by means of descriptive and interpretative strategies aimed at relativizing and minimizing the significance of the attacks.

The first of these strategies consists of a fanciful attempt to show that the Americans actually wanted the attacks to happen. While still shaving, Lang starts to ponder on the way in which ‘American thought’—note the singular—is characterized by an ‘obsessive desire for catastrophe’ (Lang 2003, 108-9). One possible explanation for this desire is that the Americans

---

4 This metaphor is perhaps the best example of the way in which Lang recycles the French tradition of anti-Americanism; it originates in Arnaud Dandieu and Robert Aron’s Le Cancer américain (1931). See Roger (2002, 385-91).
feel guilty for living in a country founded on a ‘genocide’ and therefore long to suffer themselves so as to rid themselves of the ‘cohorts of plumed ghosts’ haunting their conscience. Another explanation lies in the belief of the Americans that a catastrophe would finally unite the nation: in the face of ultimate disaster ‘les États-Unis’ would be transformed into ‘les Étazunis’, an indivisible and invincible unity (Lang 2003, 109). However, the most important reason for this ‘deep, reptilian desire’ for catastrophe is that the threat of total destruction would provide the Americans with an opportunity to demonstrate to the world what epic exertions they are capable of to salvage their ‘prepubescent civilisation’ (Lang 2003, 101). This idea is clearly inspired by Hollywood blockbusters such as Independence Day or Armageddon, where the human race is saved from annihilation by heroic, heavily armed Americans. To Lang, however, these films are not mere fictions, but rather symptoms of an American culture obsessed with cataclysmic challenges—and with ruthless violence as the only imaginable response.

The second strategy for undercutting compassion amounts to an insistence that 9/11 should not be seen as a singular event, let alone as a historical watershed, but rather as yet another manifestation of a long tradition of murdering civilians. Therefore, when commemorating the victims of the terrorist attacks, one should commemorate the victims of past atrocities as well. Since it is primarily atrocities committed by the US that Lang asks us to consider, heeding this principle would cause the Americans to appear not only as victims, but also as perpetrators. According to Lang, 9/11 was undoubtedly a despicable act, but the terrorist attacks might nevertheless prove beneficial in that they present the notoriously forgetful American with a call to remember the victims of their own crimes: one can only hope that ‘the compassion of today will bring back the past, contaminate History, and give birth to a retrospective compassion for other civilian populations to which the US acted as butcher’ (Lang 2003, 149). Unfortunately, all the signs are that the Americans will squander this opportunity of becoming what Lang tentatively describes as more ‘human’, ‘compassionate’, ‘remembering’, ‘humble’, before finally hitting upon the appropriate predicate, ‘ethical’ (Lang 2003, 151-52). On noting the word ‘Japan’ in a newspaper headline on 12 September, Lang is for a brief moment filled with a sense of hope, assuming that the article will compare the terrorist attacks with the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II (incidentally, the title of the book makes precisely this connection, via the reference to Alain Resnais’s and Margarite Duras’s 1959 film Hiroshima mon amour). However, the headline in fact refers to the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbour, until September 2001 the bloodiest attack on American territory and therefore an obvious historical parallel to 9/11. Lang finds the comparison repulsive, albeit typical of the misguided ways in which the Americans react to the terrorist attacks. First, it testifies to their unwillingness to face up to their own crimes. Second, it subjects the attacks to a ‘military logic’, thereby paving the way for the Bush administration’s ‘war on terror’. The appropriate reaction would have been very different. It would have consisted in offsetting the victims of 9/11 against the countless victims of American genocides—thereby making them appear as sufficiently insignificant.

Lang’s third strategy is likewise an attempt at attaining what is regarded as a more balanced view on the terrorist attacks. Rather than focusing on the events in themselves, Lang argues, 9/11 ought to be seen as part of a causal sequence, that is, as a bridge linking preceding causes and subsequent effects. The result of this change of perspective is once again that the Americans are transformed from victims into perpetrators, for Lang is confident that the real responsibility for the attacks lies with the Americans themselves. As to the causes, we have already seen how Lang links terrorism to a deep-seated American desire for disaster. More
demonstrable reasons can be found in Washington DC, not least in the shape of George W Bush, who is systematically referred to as ‘Double V Bouche’ and portrayed as a moronic, trigger-happy cowboy. Lang does not pull his punches when voicing these accusations. Meditating on the American dream of global hegemony, he admits, makes his compassion give way to a feeling of ‘impotent rage’ directed not against bin Laden, but against ‘the people carrying the main responsibility for this fatal day’, that is, ‘the residents of the Congress and The White House, first and foremost Double V Bouche’ (Lang 2003, 189).5 Lang stops short of claiming, like a multitude of conspiracy theorists, that 9/11 was ordered by the US government itself. However, he does represent the attacks as acts of righteous or at least understandable revenge. And, as if having brought about the attacks was not enough, ‘Double V Bouche and his gang of gunslingers’ (Lang 2003, 156) have subsequently orchestrated a disproportionate, characteristically violent response. In doing so, however, they were wholeheartedly supported by the American people. Instead of listening to the voices of the victims who, Lang claims, speak of love and understanding rather than ‘hatred, revenge, war, and murder of other women, other men, other children’, the Americans have let themselves be herded together by their cowboy leaders, who cynically exploit the attacks to further their ‘false justice of revenge’ and ‘true will to hegemony’ (Lang 2003, 247). For as Lang explains once more by way of conclusion, the ultimate goal of the US is precisely worldwide supremacy:

Double V Bouche and his little gang want to conquer the planet, they are constantly at work bringing forth the Mephistophelian consequences of that Tuesday in September, they force us to renounce their empire, which is represented by a star-spangled banner and called the empire of You Esse Eïe. (Lang 2003, 248)

John Le Carré

That political disagreement and cultural chauvinism should coalesce in Luc Lang’s travelogue to form an all-embracing rejection of American civilization is perhaps not surprising given the longstanding, remarkably vigorous tradition of anti-Americanism in France. However, it would be wide off the mark to think that contaminations of this kind are specific to French literature. Neither the linguistic and cultural bonds between the United Kingdom and the US, nor the ‘special relationship’, nor Britain’s participation in the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq have prevented British writers from denouncing the Americans in equally chauvinist terms. A case in point is John Le Carré, the renowned master of the spy novel, whose recent international bestseller Absolute friends (2003) in a sense begins where Lang’s essay lets off, that is, with the ‘war on terror’ and the American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. A nostalgist for the good old days of gentleman spying, Le Carré has always harboured a grudge against the ‘cousins’, as his British protagonists call their American counterparts; by substituting duplicity and gung-ho tactics for the cultured professionalism that still prevails in the London headquarters of MI6, the cousins have fundamentally changed or even ruined the ‘game’ (Le Carré 1999a, 15).6 This pattern was already discernible in Le Carré’s international breakthrough novel, The spy who came in

---

5 It is worth recalling in this context that the planning of 9/11 began well before George W Bush took over the presidency in January 2001, less than eight months before the attacks.
6 For a characteristic example of this long-standing scepticism towards America, see Le Carré (1999b, 140-41): ‘Alleline had always had a fatal reverence for the Americans … . Whereas Control, like most of the Circus, despised them and all their works, which he frequently sought to undermine’.
from the cold (1963), it became a prominent feature of The honourable schoolboy (1977), the second part of the acknowledged Karla trilogy, and it has become the ideological crux of the novel Absolute friends. Instead of taking occasional swipes against the Americans, this novel in its entirety appears to be written primarily in view of its anti-American effect.

Absolute friends was completed in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq War, to which Le Carré, too, was vehemently opposed. Like his Nobel prize-winning compatriot Harold Pinter, who repeatedly and in the harshest possible terms spoke out against the war, Le Carré went on public record as a war opponent in January 2003, publishing the article ‘The United States of America has gone mad’ in The Times (Le Carré 2003). An uncompromising attack on American warmongering, this article takes exception to the perceived Manichaeanism of the Bush administration, its unilateralism, its puritan leanings, its links to the oil industry and what the author claims to be the real motivation for going to war—‘the economic imperative of US growth’ and ‘America’s need to demonstrate its military power to us all’ (Le Carré 2003). Anti-war invectives such as these are a recurrent feature in Absolute friends, in which several of the principal characters regularly launch into enraged soliloquies against the American-led invasion—so regularly in fact that the novel at times reads as a fictionalized version of the author’s diatribe in The Times. The interpretation provided by the mysterious Dimitri epitomizes both the novel’s attitude towards the war and its indignant tone of voice: ‘It was an old Colonial oil war dressed up as a crusade for Western life and liberty, and it was launched by a clique of war-hungry Judaeo-Christian geopolitical fantasists who hijacked the media and exploited America’s post-Nine Eleven psychopathy’ (Le Carré 2004, 272). The obvious similarities between these views and the ones aired by Le Carré himself in The Times make it unnecessary in this case to distinguish sharply between the voice of the author and that of his fictional character. Both speak of America having lost its mind, and both unequivocally refer to America in general, and not simply to the American government. In both cases, political criticism gives way to psychiatric diagnosis.

Although several of the novel’s war opponents, in a fairly obvious way, serve as mouthpieces for Le Carré himself, it is not always possible to ascribe to the author the views expressed by his fictional characters. Herein lies an important generic feature of the anti-American novel: in Luc Lang’s travelogue, the anti-American statements come unmediated to the reader, as direct expressions of the auctorial voice. Conversely, the anti-Americanism of a novel like Absolute friends does not reside primarily in the hostile remarks about America made by its characters. It manifests itself much more forcefully in the way in which the novel from beginning to end is structured to paint a negative, stereotyped image of the US and the American people. Rather than simply scanning the dialogue for overt expressions of anti-American animosity, it is therefore necessary to analyse the narrative structure of the novel, especially the role of its American characters in the unfolding of the plot.

It requires no extraordinary powers of perception to notice that Absolute friends differentiates sharply between Americans and Britons, endowing them with negative and (relatively) positive traits respectively. In describing the American characters, the novel relies heavily on cultural stereotypes, all of which seem to be expressions of a deep-seated Americanophobia. A case in point is their quaint, all-too American names. The CIA agent most commonly referred to as ‘Jay’ is in fact called Orville J Rourke, which, the narrator muses, ‘if it

---

7 See The Guardian (2003); Pinter (2003). In December 2005, Pinter used his Nobel Prize acceptance speech to launch a furious attack on the US, which he describes as ‘brutal, indifferent, scornful and ruthless’ (Pinter 2005).
isn’t a made-up name, ought to be’ (Le Carré 2004, 216). His less important colleagues and subordinates are collectively referred to as ‘Hank and Jeff and Nan and Art’ (Le Carré 2004, 315)—it is as if the very names of the characters express their indelible American-ness and thereby stigmatize them from the moment of their first appearance in the novel. Another stereotype concerns the way the Americans speak—something that has always been central to English anti-Americanism. Americanisms pronounced with a ‘Boston Irish drawl’ are thus key elements in the characterization of Rourke as a sort of easy-going, amiable patrician: ‘Oh my God, you think that? … Well, you’re a scream, I will say. Why don’t you tell me all about it?’ (Le Carré 2004, 216) Similarly, we hear an anonymous source in the Pentagon defend the American anti-terrorist forces against claims of disproportionate use of force: ‘When the bad guys shoot first, it’s true we get kind of testy’ (Le Carré 2004, 371). In cases like these, Le Carré employs his stereotypical, at times antiquated conceptions of American linguistic usage—pronunciation, choice of words, expressions and colloquialisms—to stamp the American characters as shallow, simple-minded and disturbingly unpredictable. A third stereotype concerns what is seen as the values and typical behaviour of the Americans. Religious Puritanism combined with massive hypocrisy and extreme proneness to violence are constantly put forward as distinctive American features, but the baseness of the Americans is also represented in other, less commonplace ways. Thus, at the end of the novel we are told of a female reporter at The New York Times interviewing the secretive Rourke, who is now cheered all over the world as a hero of the ‘war on terror’. In a paragraph directed simultaneously at the quality of the American news media and the irredeemable shallowness of the Americans themselves, she describes the agent as ‘the kind of man I just dream of being taken out to dinner by, and never am’ (Le Carré 2004, 374).

Individually and in themselves, these ways of describing the American characters are not necessarily anti-American, and it is not a foregone conclusion that they do not point out something typically American. However, the persistent amassing of stereotypes, as well as the complete lack of any redeeming features, make it clear that the novel does in fact stigmatize Americans as morally and culturally inferior: with their smoothness, their cynicism and the hypocrisy with which they conceal their lust for power behind a veil of self-righteousness, they consistently come across as perfect psychopaths.

However, in comparison with these rather trite clichés, the plot of the novel presents us with a much more intense and comprehensive variety of anti-Americanism. The novel is set in three different periods in the life of protagonist Ted Mundy, the drifting, socially unadjusted son of a British army major, who by chance becomes involved in Cold War espionage and later in a deadly post-9/11 conspiracy. First, we follow Mundy as an exchange student in Berlin 1968, where he meets his ‘absolute friend’, Sasha, and becomes part of the city’s flourishing radical scene. The second period is the Eighties. Mundy has become involved with the British Secret Service and carries out complicated espionage operations in close collaboration with Sasha, who, after having had to flee West Germany in favour of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), now works as a communist spy, but nevertheless lets himself be recruited by the British as a double agent. Finally, we meet the two friends for the third time in the wake of the Iraq War, where Sasha re-emerges after having disappeared more than a decade earlier. It is in this period we encounter the novel’s most pronounced outbursts of anti-American sentiment. One day the German suddenly shows up at Lindenhof Palace in Bavaria, where Mundy works as a tour guide,
having gone bankrupt with his language school in Heidelberg. Ever the idealist, Sasha persuades Mundy to join an anti-capitalist, anti-globalization network planning to create a ‘counter university’ consisting of public libraries of subversive literature spread across all of Europe. Mundy’s role will be to turn his failed language school into such a library, but before he is ready for the opening, he is suddenly abducted by the CIA and subsequently informed by Rourke, his former American contact, that Sasha, presumably without knowing it, is in fact working for an Islamist terrorist organization plotting to attack the American military base in Heidelberg. By means of undisguised threats against both Mundy himself and his newly established family in Munich, Rourke succeeds in turning the ex-pat Englishman into a spy against his old friend.

As it turns out, the whole story and both explanations of the library plans turn out to be pure invention, cooked up by American agents with the purpose of realizing what is supposedly the strongest desire of the American government: to reveal a connection between the anti-globalization movement and Islamist terrorism that would not only discredit the critics of US ‘conservative democratic imperialism’, but also drive the frightened Europeans back into the arms of their American ‘Big Brother’ (Le Carré 2004, 369, 340). The mysterious masterminds behind the scheme, believed by Sasha and Mundy respectively to be leftist intellectuals and Arab terrorists, are in fact American agents. It is also the Americans, who turn Mundy’s school into ‘the Heidelberg school of Euro-terror’ (Le Carré 2004, 381) by planting weapons and terrorist handbooks among books by Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy and presumably what Rourke labels ‘the leading European professors of anti-American studies’ (Le Carré 2004, 321). Finally, it is ‘Hank and Jeff and Nan and Art’, who at the end of the novel carry out a dramatic assault on the school, which ends in the brutal shooting of Sasha and Rourke’s cold-blooded execution of Mundy.

The reason why the two friends have been taken hostage in this duplicitous game is that their common background on the extreme left makes them credible in the roles as bridge builders between Al Queda and the European globalization critics. Since they die before fully realizing the truth, it is Nick Amory, Mundy’s former supervisor in the British Secret Service, who gets ‘the final word and the most authoritative’ (Le Carré 2004, 363). Disillusioned by the duplicity of the Americans and the subservience of the British he decides to blow the whistle. On a non-profit website dedicated to the fight for political transparency Amory publishes an anonymous article entitled ‘THE SECOND BURNING OF THE REICHSTAG—THE AMERICAN RIGHTISTS’ CONSPIRACY AGAINST DEMOCRACY’ (Le Carré 2004, 377), which ultimately fails to attract the attention of the public. The fact that the title compares the US under Bush with Nazi Germany under Hitler seems fairly extreme in itself. However, the point of the comparison is even more shocking. The gist of Amory’s article is that just like the burning of the German Reichstag was a Nazi conspiracy to guarantee Hitler’s seizure of power, present-day terrorism—presumably including the attacks of 9/11—is in fact an American conspiracy to create a false war on terror. This accusation is not only the novel’s most extreme example of anti-Americanism, but also one of the core ideas of its plot.

Whether one finds such a story-line plausible or not is likely to depend to a certain extent on one’s prior attitude towards the US and its status as sole surviving superpower—and on one’s susceptibility to conspiracy theories. It is safe to conclude, though, that Absolute friends represents a drastic simplification of the highly ambivalent world-view that distinguishes Le Carré’s Cold War novels. Instead of ambivalence, the novel seems based on a Manichaeanism strikingly similar to the one the author himself attributes to the US, as when in the novel he lets Rourke ask Mundy if he is ‘for us or against us’ (Le Carré 2004, 321), or when, in the article for The
Times, he writes about the Bushite belief in ‘Absolute Good and Absolute Evil’ (Le Carré 2003). In Absolute friends, the US—‘the one great Hyperpower in the Sky’ (Le Carré 2004, 356)—comes to embody an evil so absolute that even comparisons with Nazi Germany, hitherto the epitome of evil, are barely sufficient. The country is described as striving relentlessly for global mastery, while its people, homogenized to such a degree that the novel seems clinically cleansed of ‘good’ or even neutral Americans, are consistently attributed a string of dubious qualities from bigotry and greed to hypocrisy, ruthlessness and proneness to violence. By thus totalizing the critique, Le Carré has let his indignation over the Iraq War transform itself into an uncompromising, irrational hatred against the US, thereby causing all real and legitimate concerns to disappear in a fog of paranoia, conspiracy theories and anti-American clichés. In short: Absolute friends represents the US as the absolute enemy.

Frank Schätzing

For historical reasons, German authors are in general much less prone to easy comparisons of the US to Nazi Germany. In Germany, airing ideas such as that of a ‘second burning of the Reichstag’, or making claims such as Luc Lang’s that the Indian reservations served as a major source of inspiration for Hitler in devising the Nazi extermination camps (Lang 2003, 52), would not only expose the author to fierce criticism, but most likely place him more or less permanently beyond the pale of society. Of course, this does not mean that anti-Americanism is absent from contemporary German literature. Germany may be unique among European countries in that parts of the national tradition of anti-Americanism have been discredited by history. Thus, the official anti-American propaganda of Nazi Germany and communist GDR seem in part to have inoculated Germans against the crudest manifestations of the discourse. However, there are other, more subtle ways of representing the US as the acme of evil.

A striking example of such a historically sanitized, yet still remarkably aggressive type of anti-Americanism is provided by Frank Schätzing’s novel Der Schwarm (2004). This massive 1000-page ‘eco-thriller’ topped the German charts for months on end, and has since gone on to repeat its local success globally with translations into multiple languages; it was recently published in English (The Swarm, 2006) and rumours abound of a forthcoming Hollywood adaptation for the screen. It would be more than a little ironic should such a film ever materialize, for the novel is unrelenting in its denunciation of American culture and society. In fact, Schätzing’s anti-Americanism even extends to Hollywood itself, although Hollywood is evidently the place where the author has learned his craft.

Superficially, Schätzing’s thriller has little to do with 9/11 or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Structurally, however, the relation is impossible to miss. An apocalyptic tale of a breakdown of the relationship between man and nature, Der Schwarm deals with a series of devastating, quasi-terrorist attacks with millions of casualties in all parts of the world—and with the subsequent, primarily American response to them. The carnage is caused not by Islamic fundamentalists, but by an intelligent, collective life form, the so-called Yrr, which lives in the depths of the oceans. These highly advanced beings have existed far longer than man, but hitherto there has been no contact between the two species. However, the ecological recklessness of man has caused

---

9 In the run-up to the German election in 2002, Minister of Justice Hertha Däubler-Gmelin reportedly compared Bush’s Iraq policy to the burning of the Reichstag, much along the lines of John Le Carré. Although the Schröder government was re-elected, Daubler-Gmelin had to resign her post.
increasing alarm in the deep, and the Yrr, who serve as wardens of the oceans, finally decide to rid the earth of the pestilent bipeds. As these intelligent microorganisms are capable of controlling all marine life, the human race suddenly comes under attack from a motley alliance of whales, mackerel, crayfish and lugworms, which initially target individual swimmers and fishermen, but soon move on to spread lethal viruses and bring about giant tsunamis. Threatened by total annihilation, the nations of the world turn to the most powerful amongst them, the US, which is put in charge of organizing the defence. According to the logic of Luc Lang, a nightmarish scenario such as this would answer the Americans’ strongest desire, in that it would afford them an opportunity for demonstrating their strength and spirit of self-sacrifice. Schätzing’s novel, however, diverges from the Hollywood movies it draws inspiration from as the Americans are anything but world-saving heroes. With the extremeness of their counterstroke, they in fact come closer to sparking off Armageddon themselves.

As in Absolute friends, the anti-Americanism in Der Schwarm resides to a large extent in the way in which the novel portrays its American characters, in this case the political and military leadership of the US. As it turns out, pinning one’s faith on the last remaining superpower is a grave mistake, for Schätzing’s American decision-makers are hardly conscientious or even sane individuals. The most powerful of them, the anonymous president, is evidently modelled on George W Bush and consistently shown as weak and dim-witted, yet at the same time self-righteous and cynical to the point of callousness. The American president’s predominant feature is his strong evangelical faith, which he manages to bring up every single time he makes his appearance. Religion serves as his permanent frame of reference and exclusive supplier of answers. First, he recommends his advisors to pray to God for help, for the US is God’s own country, and God can be relied on to rescue his people. Later, the president rejects the notion that the attacks are carried out by intelligent beings on the grounds that Genesis does not allow for any other intelligent being than man. And when he finally faces up to what is really going on, he immediately puts an optimistic, theological spin on the endless string of bad news: ‘It is truly amazing how many people of different nationalities embrace God, when the Devil emerges from the ocean’ (Schätzing 2005, 848).

The role of the president is limited, however, and so is that of Jack Vanderbilt, the director of the CIA, who incidentally is endowed with the same mixture of cynicism, blindness to facts and arrogance, which the novel brands as typically American. The real arch-villain is Judith Li, ‘general commander’ of the US Navy, who at an early stage is appointed chief of the joint American-Canadian emergency task force. In the course of the novel, Li, who in some respects resembles Condoleezza Rice, develops from a somewhat calculating, politically gifted career officer with presidential ambitions to a full-blown psychopath, who personally kills off her adversaries one by one.

Furthermore, she single-handedly brings humanity on the verge of annihilation by masterminding the secret American plot to develop a biological poison that would wipe out the Yrr. Such a poison might sound like a justifiable counter-measure given the enormous destruction caused by the attacks. The problem is, however, that the Yrr in rather obscure ways are connected to the principle of marine life itself, and poisoning them would therefore destroy the planet’s entire ecosystem. Wholly bent on securing world domination for the US, Li never appreciates the dangers of her approach. In a climatic scene towards the end of the novel, Li, as required by the genre, takes time to explain her motives to Norwegian scientist Sigur Johanson before she kills him. As it turns out she has never believed that peaceful coexistence with the Yrr would be in the best interest of the US and therefore never seriously considered entering into
negotiations with them. Opting for peace, she claims, would have been ‘admittance of our defeat, of a defeat for human kind, for the faith in God, for the confidence in our supremacy’ (Schätzing 2005, 939). Furthermore, a peaceful solution would have given rise to a ‘new world order’, for in relation to the Yrr all nations would be equal, everyone would be free to form alliances with them and gain access to their advanced technology (Schätzing 2005, 939). As this would spell the end of US global hegemony, there is no alternative to total extermination:

The whole world always wants the US to do the dirty work, and now we’re doing it! And rightly so! We cannot allow the world to divide up the knowledge of the Yrr, therefore we must destroy them and keep this knowledge to ourselves. Afterwards we will finally control the fate of the planet, and no dictator and no regime that is not friendly disposed towards us will ever be able to question this supremacy again. (Schätzing 2005, 940)

When Johanson objects that poisoning the Yrr would mean poisoning the whole world, the American general replies with chilling cynicism: ‘You know what, Sigur? Decimating humanity is also an opportunity of sorts. In a way it would be quite good for the planet if it was a little less overcrowded’ (Schätzing 2005, 940).

Schätzing never explicitly compares the US to Nazi Germany, but when he lets his American characters dream of mass extermination and world domination, the comparison nevertheless seems to be lurking just below the surface. Be that as it may, Li’s confession in any case makes it abundantly clear that humanity’s real enemy is the Americans, not the Yrr. The submarine species only launches its offensive because of man’s ecological irresponsibility; in a sense the attacks amount to an extreme, yet from the perspective of the perpetrators fully justifiable, form of environmental policy. Conversely, the actions of the Americans are wholly irrational, deriving as they do from a ruthless will to power. As represented in this novel, the Americans aim to subjugate the whole world, and in order to attain this goal they are willing to set aside all considerations, not only to international law, but to nature and ultimately to the human race itself.

The novel’s animosity against the US and the Americans is by no means visible only in the descriptions of the American characters or the way in which the narrative logic of the novel points out the Americans as enemies of man. Schätzing’s anti-Americanism is also inscribed in the ideological structure of the novel, which consistently opposes an American and a non-American worldview as distinct, clearly delimited entities. In setting up this value system, the novel focuses particularly on two ‘wedge issues’, the first of which concerns the outlook on nature, while the second separates opposing views on the appropriate reaction to external security threats.

Beginning with the first issue, the novel presents us with two fundamentally different attitudes towards nature. The first attitude is one of domination. It is one of the novel’s main points that modernity has caused people to lose touch with nature, and that we therefore have become more familiar with our own copies and models of nature than with nature itself. This loss of ‘feeling for the world’ makes man ‘arrogant’, causing him to regard nature no longer as his own indispensable habitat, but as an object of ruthless exploitation. The second attitude conversely stresses the necessity of ‘understanding’ nature and comes in several varieties. Native American shamans and European environmentalists thus share the view that nature constitutes an organic whole, and that the harm humans do to it will inevitably bring harm to themselves (this of course is the core idea of the novel: nature striking back after having endured the environmental recklessness of humans for centuries) (Schätzing 2005, 309). Even in the natural sciences, the otherwise quintessential domain of attempts to subdue nature, one comes across
individuals who advocate a more respectful and restrained approach to nature. Scientists of this type aspire to ‘understand’ nature rather than to ‘bend it into place’ (Schätzing 2005, 273).

The decisive point is that the desire to dominate nature is seen as typically American, whereas the more harmonious, ‘understanding’ approach is reserved for non-Americans like Native American-Canadian Leon Anawak, Norwegian Sigur Johanson and German Gerhardt Bohrmann. Americans and American scientists are of a different breed from these more ecologically minded scientists, apparently because man’s estrangement from nature is far more advanced in America than anywhere else in the world—in fact, the ‘feeling for the world’ among Americans has deteriorated to such a degree that American children paint chickens with six legs, drumsticks being sold in packs of six (Schätzing 2005, 273). Out of touch with the real world behind the glossy illusions of Hollywood and Disneyland, the Americans have become arrogant and, as this arrogance is reinforced by the belief that God has placed man on earth as deputy ruler of Creation (Schätzing 2005, 588), they have embraced the idea of dominating nature like no other people on the planet. Consequently, Der Schwarm represents American scientists as unscrupulous, overly ambitious men, who do not shrink from conducting cruel experiments on dolphins or arming whales with nuclear warheads. The most prominent among them is the celebrity-craving Mick Rubin, the antithesis to the novel’s ‘understanding’ Native American or European naturalists. Rubin’s unrelenting scientific ambition not only leads to the loss of the aircraft carrier that serves as operational platform for the American-led investigation team (it is significantly named USS Independence), but also puts him in charge of developing the ill-considered biological weapon that Li hopes to use against the Yrr.

The second of the issues that the novel uses to isolate a specific set of American values, concerns the appropriate way of addressing the threat from the deep—or, in more general terms, the right way of dealing with terrorism. The novel once again distinguishes between two opposing strategies. Under the leadership of Judith Li, the US advocates an extremely aggressive approach aimed at launching a devastating counterstroke against the Yrr. This American belligerency is consistently represented as arising from American ignorance and from the uncanny ability of the American characters to always draw the wrong conclusions. Furthermore, it is represented as grossly hypocritical: in opting for a military solution, the Americans pretend to serve the interests of the human race, while in fact they are exploiting the conflict to achieve their dream of global hegemony. The more sensible approach sees military force as a last resort. By placing greater stock in research and information gathering, it suggests we understand the Yrr, make contact with them and seek peaceful coexistence as an ultimate end—a conciliatory strategy represented in the novel by the United Nations, which authorizes the American-led task force to contact the Yrr, but not to attack them. In the same vein, Sigur Johanson repeatedly warns the Americans of the dangers of a too aggressive approach and instead advocates a policy of ‘giving space’ to the enemy, ‘falling back’ and attaining a more comprehensive understanding of nature, so that the Yrr might change their minds about the human race (Schätzing 2005, 775). The novel is unambiguous in its choice between these approaches. The American strategy, had it been put into effect, would have spelt the end of the world. Conversely, the European preference for negotiation and reconciliation turns out to be successful. At the end of the novel, British journalist Karen Weaver succeeds in delivering a sort of peace note to the Yrr, which

---

10 Schätzing’s president is very clear on this: ‘God says, make yourselves masters of the Earth, and he didn’t say that to some creature in the sea’ (Schätzing 2005, 588).
demonstrates to them that man has finally understood the interconnectedness of everything living. It is this gesture that finally brings the attack to a halt.

Not content with portraying his American characters as greedy, violent psychopaths, Schätzting takes great care to place the US on the wrong side of the novel’s main ideological fault lines. It is primarily the Americans’ irresponsible, religiously misguided quest for domination over nature that provokes confrontation with the Yrr. And when they subsequently try to save the world, they come within a hair’s breadth of destroying it themselves. In the light of this remarkably one-sided distribution of guilt, it is difficult not to see Der Schwarm as a massive indictment, not only of specific American policies, but of America and Americans as such.

Conclusion

The books suggested in this article as examples of anti-American sentiment in contemporary European literature are unique, to themselves, in more ways than one. They represent different literary genres and styles, are addressed to different audiences, and spring from different national, linguistic and cultural contexts. Importantly they employ varying literary strategies to attain the desired anti-American effect. In Lang, anti-American sentiment is expressed freely and directly in the form of the narrator’s vocal contempt for all things American. In the two other works, anti-American animosity resides primarily in the literary structure of the works. This results in less conspicuous but, for that reason, all the more alluring varieties. In Le Carré, anti-Americanism forms the guiding principle behind the stereotyping of the American characters and the unfolding of the conspirational plot. In Schätzting, it not only informs the novel’s value system with its clear divide between American and European values, but also drives its apocalyptic tale, which serves as an allegory of the American ‘war on terror’.

In spite of their differences and the fact that representations of the US are everywhere rooted in national traditions of anti-Americanism, there are also strong similarities between the three books. Thus, the criticisms raised against the US are essentially the same in all three cases. The country is seen as ‘Nazi America’, a malevolent and unpredictable superpower that aspires to world domination. The Americans are consistently described as violent and greedy madmen, who incessantly speak about morals and religion and universal values, but in fact are driven by a ruthless will to power. American foreign policy in the wake of 9/11 is everywhere regarded as rooted in a set of inherent, unchangeable features of the US and the American people. At the same time, the US is also blamed for the terrorist attacks themselves: if they were not planned and executed by Americans, they were in the very least natural, predictable consequences of America’s superpower arrogance.

At a more fundamental level the three works share two additional features. First, they all refer either directly or indirectly to 9/11 and the military interventions in Afghanistan and especially Iraq. In other words, their representations of the US are to a certain extent based on historical reality, although this at times can be hard to see. Second, the three books present a literary interpretation of this historical reality, which is pervaded by contempt for the American people and extreme paranoia concerning the political intentions of the US. These interpretations constitute a fictional, imaginary dimension in the books and thus weaken ties to historical reality. Literary anti-Americanism arises precisely out of such interplay between fact and fiction, judgement and prejudice, legitimate concern and blind resentment—it is an attempt to make sense of reality by means of fictions, metaphors and narratives, all of which serve to paint the US
in the worst possible light. However, the question is whether this play of fact and fiction is not simply one of the core constituents of anti-American discourse. If so, literature would not only be important for the study of anti-Americanism because it historically has contributed to the development and dissemination of the discourse, but also because it provides us with rare insight into the inner workings of anti-Americanism as such. If anti-American discourse can in fact be understood as a catalogue of narrative and metaphorical misrepresentations, then literature is a valuable, even an indispensable place to study it.

References
Dandieu, Arnaud and Robert Aron (1931) Le Cancer américain (Paris: Rieder)
Diner, Dan (2003) Feindbild Amerika (München: Propyläen)
Judt, Tony and Denis Lacorne (eds) (2005) With us or against us (New York: Palgrave)
Lang, Luc (2003) 11 septembre mon amour (Paris: Stock)
Le Carré, John (1963) The spy who came in from the cold (London: Victor Gollancz)
Le Carré, John (1999a) The honourable schoolboy (London: Hodder and Stoughton)
Le Carré, John (1999b) Tinker tailor soldier spy (London: Hodder and Stoughton)
Schätzing, Frank (2005 [2006]) Der Schwarm [The Swarm] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer [London: Hodder and Stoughton])