

Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane (2006) Anti-Americanisms. *Policy Review*, October and November.

## INTRODUCTION

Arab reactions to American support for Israel in its recent conflict with Hezbollah have put anti-Americanism in the headlines once again. Around the world, not just in the Middle East, when bad things happen there is a widespread tendency to blame America for its sins, either of commission or omission. When its Belgrade embassy is bombed, Chinese people believe it was a deliberate act of the United States government; terror plots by native British subjects are viewed as reflecting British support for American policy; when aids devastates much of Africa, the United States is faulted for not doing enough to stop it...

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### Ill-defined

[PsyCrit, October 25, 2006](#)

What is happening to political science when leading thinkers can pretend to advance knowledge by little more than re-defining words?

In their article *anti-Americanisms*, an abstract of a forthcoming book, Katzenstein and Keohane, distinguished professors at Cornell and Princeton respectively, begin thus: “*Basic to our argument* is a distinction between opinion and bias. Some expressions of unfavorable attitudes merely reflect opinion: unfavorable judgments about the United States or its policies. Others, however, reflect bias: a predisposition to believe negative reports about the United States and to discount positive ones.” (my emphasis) They go on to argue that anti-Americanism is often what they call a “bias” rather than an “opinion” – meaning (I think) that it may be resistant to contrary evidence.

But this is a very odd way to use the word “bias” and it also obscures what is really going on when people make judgments. Look first at dictionary definitions. The OED says: *opinion*: a view held about a particular issue; a judgement formed or a conclusion reached; a belief”. And for *bias*: “An inclination, leaning, tendency, bent; a preponderating disposition or propensity; predisposition *towards*; predilection; prejudice.” So, bias may be a *property* of an opinion; it is not itself an opinion. There are ‘biased opinions,’ but bias on its own exists only in textiles.

The real questions, therefore, are “what constitutes ‘bias’”; “what are the sources of bias in opinions about America?”; and “How receptive to evidence is anti-American opinion?”

The authors say that “Bias implies a distortion of information processing”, using the fashionable language of cognitive psychology – but what exactly do they mean? Are the logic chips broken so that two and two no longer reliably make four? Probably not; doubtless hostile jihadis are quite capable of doing their sums. Or do they mean that biased observers do not evaluate data as we do? (Some logic chips *are* broken.) Or do they mean that that acts we think well of are not so judged by others who do not share our values? Allowing women to drive; giving them the vote; even having a vote at all: all these are things Westerners cherish but many in the Arab world despise. Are their view biased? Sez who? Such views are surely *not* biased by some standards.

The authors do not frame the problem in a way that looks to sources of bias – past history (the Bayesian aspect) and strongly held beliefs. A history in which a country has been deceived or unjustly treated (according to its lights) by America will naturally lead its people to opinions resistant to a moderate amount of contrary evidence. The evidence must be strong if people are to believe that the leopard has changed his spots. Any strong beliefs, religious or other (the result of many individuals’ personal histories) will also be a bar to influence. If you think the Al-

lah is the one and only God, you will naturally resist, even unto death, those who would persuade you otherwise.

But Katzenstein and Keohane offer no answers to these questions. Instead they conclude “The view we take in the volume is that much of what is called anti-Americanism, especially outside of the Middle East, indeed is largely opinion. As such, it is volatile and would diminish in response to different policies, as it has in the past.” Well, of course it’s “opinion”, any view about anything is “opinion”. What they mean is that it is *labile* opinion, opinion that is changeable by new facts and judged according to (more or less) American standards. The authors offer no real defense of their conclusion. They don’t tell us *why* some anti-American opinion is open to change, nor why some is not.

What they do do is define what they call “four major types of anti-Americanism, based on the identities and values of the observers.” The four are 1. Liberal anti-Americanism; 2. Social anti-Americanism; 3. Sovereign-nationalist anti-Americanism; 4. Radical anti-Americanism. 1. is conventional left-wing liberalism, which has always been hostile to some aspects of America; 2. Strikes me as a variant of 1, but more Scandinavian; 3. is conventional nationalism; and 4., well you might think that 4 would include the Islamists, but they are barely mentioned. The Marxist-Leninists, now largely extinct, get more space. And then there are two other subclasses of anti-Americanism. This classification is fascinating, no doubt. But it is just that, a classification; it gives only a few hints on why anti-American prejudices exist, how persistent they are likely to be in the face of contrary evidence, and what actions may be fruitful in reducing them.

But perhaps this is what political science, scorched by the crash-and-burn of so many grand theories of the past, has become these days.

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