

Review of: Yankee no! Anti-Americanism in US-Latin American relations by Alan McPherson
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Foreign relations

Alan McPherson's slender book addresses the nebulous, yet pervasive, phenomenon of anti-Americanism in US-Latin American relations. Anti-Americanism, defined in very broad terms 'as the expression of a disposition against US influence abroad' (p. 5), is treated, not as a 'pathological prejudice, but [as] a complex cultural and political concept' (p. 169). Less sweeping than its title suggests, the work focuses on the years following Vice President Richard Nixon's fraught tour of South America in 1958, which constituted a sharp wake-up call to the largely unsuspected depth of anti-US feeling existing in the region.

McPherson warns that anti-Americanism has been a highly politicized concept, utilized by the political right, who see it as the product of envy, the misunderstanding of US values and institutions and the criticism of 'perverse' ideologies, and by the left, who view it too narrowly as a facet of anti-imperialism.

Three distinctive features of anti-Americanism are discerned in the proffered case-studies: first, its variability (a revolutionary response in the case of Cuba in 1959; a conservative stance by the Panamanian elite prior to the January 1964 riots; and the 'episodic' character of anti-Americanism witnessed in the Dominican Republic in 1965-6); second, its ambivalence (in which the popular response could be markedly more pro-US than that of the elite, itself often of two minds); and, third, the resilience of the US response to such manifestations of apparent ill will.

McPherson opens with a brief, but useful, survey of the four historical pillars of anti-Americanism in Latin America: the elite cultural critique, which found its embodiment in Arielismo (named after Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó's 1900 book Ariel, this 'challenged positivist thinkers infatuated with Western notions of progress and order' [p. 13]) and Indigenismo (which glorified Latin America's mixed racial heritage as a counter to white racism); the resentment at US military interventionism, expressed in Sandinismo (named after Augusto César Sandino who led the resistance to the US occupation of Nicaragua from 1926 to 1933) in the 1920s and 1930s; antithetical political doctrines such as socialism; and populism, which emphasized autochthonous development. He also traces the US response to the opinions that others held of the United States.

Nixon's May 1958 tour of the region, it is claimed, changed the US perception of the nature of anti-Americanism, from one which viewed it as 'a priori misguided, malicious, or controlled by extra-hemispheric powers' (p. 10) to one which accorded it a degree of legitimacy. The significance of the tour for the US understanding of anti-Americanism lay both in its coincidence with other anti-US protests across the globe and in the lack of evidence that it was orchestrated by communists.

The succession of events in Cuba, Panama and the Dominican Republic, it is argued, perturbed Washington 'because each was a mass-based, cross-class, verbally or physically violent rejection of US power that spoke to others in the developing world who seethed with similar sentiments' (p. 3).

These three crises, according to McPherson, illustrate the utility of anti-Americanism as a conscious political strategy. He imputes an almost Machiavellian cunning to Fidel Castro, portrayed as a consummate dissimulator before the triumph of the revolution with his ambivalent anti-Americanism and as a master manipulator thereafter, who rode the tiger of anti-Americanism to consolidate political power and independence vis-à-vis domestic opponents, the United States and his future Soviet ally. In Panama, the conservative elite used anti-Americanism as a means to wrest concessions from the US on the question of sovereignty over the Canal Zone. Since this was viewed in Washington as 'insincere and opportunistic', the successful US counter-strategy was to strengthen elite rule through concessions 'so that conservative anti-Americanism would never again have to co-opt the street-level tactics of popular anti-Americanism' (p. 100). In the Dominican Republic, for historic reasons, anti-Americanism was too weak and divided to present a serious challenge; it was 'an elusive sentiment and strategy, contained most effectively with a patient, pragmatic approach' (p. 161).

McPherson's work is essentially a US reading of the nature of anti-Americanism. This is reflected in the imbalance of his sources; limited access to Latin American archives is hardly compensated for by interviews with participants (and few of those from Cuba at that) decades after the events in question. We learn, then, more about the contemporary US response to anti-Americanism than about its genesis and development, which is largely couched in suppositions. Latin Americans are also too easily, and unfairly, portrayed as cynically using anti-Americanism principally as a vehicle for political advantage, rather than as attempting to rebalance the asymmetrical relationship with the US. The discussion of the events of 1959 in Cuba is entitled 'The Anti-Americanization of Cuba'; as such it diminishes the process of redefining the deeper meaning of Cubanidad (the notion of what it means to be Cuban, in part defined by Cuba's historically dependent relationship with the US). The conservative Panamanian elite should not so readily be denied a claim to sincere nationalist sentiment.

Anti-Americanism, as a construct, can also seem too reified, with a life of its own. For example, McPherson writes that in the Dominican Republic '[h]ostility to the United States typically lay dormant for years, after which it would wake, thrash about, then go back to sleep' (p. 118). The conservative-radical dichotomy as well appears, at times, etched too starkly. Apropos the choice of 'case-studies' at this particular historical conjuncture, these all come from the circum-Caribbean, where US influence has been overly predominant; all have had a long historical

experience of overt US interventionism. A contemporary consideration of anti-Americanism in, say, Argentina or Canada would have been beneficial for comparative purposes.

Although this book does not fully deliver on its promise, it makes a singular contribution to our understanding of a generally neglected aspect of inter-American relations. It represents a bold attempt to add a cultural dimension to diplomatic history. The current upsurge in anti-Americanism across the globe in the wake of the Iraq war makes its appearance most timely.