How Understanding Emotions in IR Can Help Explain Anti-Americanism

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'Why Do They Hate Us?': How Understanding Emotions in International Relations Can Help Explain Anti-Americanism

America's ever-increasing influence in global politics and culture, and the demands placed on the United States by political actors around the globe means "the demands on America to listen to and be concerned about the outside world have never been greater" (O'Connor 2004: 421). This has led to vigorous contemporary debate in international relations about anti-Americanism as a political belief system, and its ramifications for how the United States engages with the rest of the world. Reflecting the United States' role as both a material and a normative power within the international system, this debate is currently centred around the question of whether negative attitudes towards the United States are predicated on 'who it is', or on 'what it does'. The former refers to the United States' culture, political system, and hegemonic position within the international order, whilst the latter refers to its policy actions, particularly in the foreign policy arena (Walt 2005: 69). Drawing upon this debate, this essay argues that negative attitudes towards the United States are generally specific to foreign policy choices rather than a broader statement about American culture or society. Experiences of foreign policy are filtered through the historical, cultural and political contexts and circumstances within which they occur, and therefore elicit emotional reactions that encourage anti-American sentiment. A focus on anti-Americanism in the Middle East, the region most invoked by American scholars and politicians seeking to answer the question of 'why do they hate us?', demonstrates the complex relationship between American foreign policy, emotions, and politics, culture and history (Friedman 2012: 224).

This essay will explain how emotions are commonly understood in the context of international relations, including the relationship between emotions and questions of politics, history, and culture. It will also draw on various definitions of anti-Americanism within the literature to demonstrate the contingent nature of reactions to the United States that makes emotion such a powerful force in determining both the substantive content of anti-American sentiment, and the political actions that follow. It will then examine several United States' foreign policy actions to demonstrate how poor experiences of American foreign policy, in particular political contexts, can be translated into anti-Americanism through emotions. Understanding how American foreign policy engenders particular emotional reactions, and the relationship between emotions and the political context in which they are situated, is crucial due to the implications for both American foreign policy, and the future of American conflict more broadly.

In the context of 9/11 and the so-called 'war on terror', literature dedicated to explaining conflict between militant Islamism and the West initially emphasised realist interpretations that considered the costs and benefits of conflict for both sides, limiting accounts of the role that emotion plays in creating or reinforcing conflict (Fattah and Fierke 2009: 69). However, states are 'more than the sum of individuals', meaning that a state's national interest is derived from the social and emotional identity of its people, including the range of non-state actors that exist within it (Mercer 2014: 517). This makes understanding the complex role that emotions play in creating and reinforcing global interaction crucial. Crawford (2000: 125) defines emotions as "the inner states that individuals describe to each other as feelings, and those feelings may be associated with biological, cognitive, and behavioural states and changes". However, she acknowledges that this definition is 'agnostic', as it fails to explain the subjective nature of emotions and the influence of society, culture, and politics on how emotions are constructed and understood.

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The difficulties in developing a universal conceptualisation of emotions is encapsulated by globalisation, as political, cultural, and economic decisions have impacts at a localised level, but also have emotional consequences for people across geographic and temporal borders (Wright-Neville and Smith 2009: 86). Emotions are not simply psychological phenomena but are a 'lived practice of collective resistance' that emerges from particular social and political environments and contexts (Ross 2010: 111). The reification of anti-Americanism during the Cold War, and marginalisation of emotions within political accounts of conflict, has perpetuated the idea that emotion is the antithesis to traditional Enlightenment values such as reason and therefore has little place in political analysis (Pitchford 2011: 698-699). This has led to a focus on negative emotions such as anger and hatred, reinforcing cultural stereotypes such as the 'angry Muslim' and negating the social and political realities that underpin emotions (Ross 2010: 110-114). As Bleiker and Hutchinson (2008: 128) argue, although emotions cannot be judged with reference to an objective set of criteria, they provide analytical value as they can demonstrate the socially constructed nature of political action, particularly when political action occurs as a direct result of emotional experience. Understanding particular emotional reactions to the United States is essential to avoid reliance upon essentialist ideas about ethnic and religious groups, which do not reflect the changing nature of anti-Americanism and of global politics.

Anti-Americanism is a not a singular or a static concept. The reassertion of American exceptionalism post-9/11 has created a foundation for increased anti-American rhetoric in recent years, including specific reactions to President Bush's consistent 'them and us' rhetoric and his promotion of unilateral policies wherever possible (Patman 2006: 978). While this political context has reinvigorated anti-Americanism, including its consequences, it is often expressed in a number of ways that can be difficult to incorporate in a single definition of anti-Americanism (Chiozza 2009: 46). Katzenstein and Keohane (2006: 27) define anti-Americanism as a "psychological tendency to hold negative views of the United States and of American society in general", suggesting that it goes beyond merely negative opinions of particular aspect of American culture or policy to incorporate a generalised dislike of America as a whole. Anti-Americanism can be expressed as cultural prejudice, envy of American success, resistance to globalisation, and modernity, or as an all-encompassing political ideology (Friedman 2012: 5). Furthermore, criticism of American hypocrisy and America's focus on consumption and marketisation among Europeans appears very different from radicalised anti-Americanism accompanied by nationalist rhetoric that has resulted in vocal protests and violence in a range of states across the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia (Katzenstein and Keohane 2006: 26). This suggests that perhaps the only consensus on anti-Americanism that can be reached is on the fact that there are multiple definitions of anti-Americanism, each dependent on the context from which it is derived. This subjectivity frames the entire debate regarding whether anti-Americanism is the result of the United States' cultural position or its foreign policy action. Indeed, some scholars (Blaydes and Linzer 2012: 227-228) disagree with the parameters of the debate overall, arguing that perceptions of the United States can be determined on the basis of either cultural incompatibility or dislike of American foreign policy, arguing instead that anti-Americanism in majority-Muslim countries is largely the product of elite-group opinion, with political factions using anti-Americanism as a rhetorical device to gain an advantage over their opponents. However, the narratives of anti-Americanism that these leaders draw upon are not fixed, meaning there is value in investigating what causes anti-Americanism to be such a persuasive political force. Understanding the factors that mobilise public opinion against the United States is at the centre of the debate about the sources of anti-Americanism.

America as a symbolic entity is polyvalent, meaning that the wide range of symbols that represent American culture are translated and interpreted differently across individuals and cultural groups (Katzenstein and Keohane 2006: 34). For example, Applebaum (2005) notes several pro-American countries, including India and the Philippines, where American power and globalisation have provided positive benefits and the American ideal of social mobility serves as an aspiration to the rapidly growing middle class, rather than a sign of the excesses of American culture. Meanwhile, most 'clash of the civilisations' narratives, popular with American leaders immediately post-9/11, suggest that that there is an intractable cultural and ideological divide between opponents of the United States and the West that cannot be resolved (Ross 2010: 109-110). However, despite the popularity of these narratives, a wide range of evidence, including statements of prominent anti-American leaders such as Osama Bin Laden, international attitudinal surveys, and research conducted by the Pentagon and United States' State Department all suggests that negative attitudes towards the United States have little relationship with the United States' cultural and political values, and are instead more positively correlated with its foreign policy decisions (Walt 2005: 108-109).

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Furthermore, Chiozza's (2009: 105) analysis of global attitudinal surveys found that whilst a number of respondents rated American culture highly but were critical of its policy choices, the reverse was unlikely to occur, meaning that views about policy choices were only loosely connected to broad patterns of approval for the United States' culture and its people. This indicates that, whilst cultural interpretations of the United States may be important, perceptions and experiences of American foreign policy action are more attributable to anti-Americanism.

Examples from Iraq during the last decade demonstrate how American actions have invoked a range of negative emotional responses that are directly related to the impacts of the United States' foreign policy, and that encourage anti-Americanism as a result. For example, in Iraq, American efforts to build hospitals and schools, and to ensure security after the 2003 invasion were not the diplomatic success that United States' officials intended. Instead, it reinforced opposition to America's presence in Iraq as it reinforced a sense of subordination among the Iraqi people, which was linked to feelings of humiliation, shame, and anger (Lebow 2006: 434). Pitchford's (2011: 704) analysis of online blog posts by Iraqi citizens from 2000 to 2007 shows the evolution of Iraqi attitudes towards the United States, as the American military's attempts to break up the allegedly fanatical Ba'ath party led to widespread job losses and entrenched poverty among Iraqi families. This was linked to feelings of hatred towards America that were linked to everyday experiences of American occupation and overall military strategy. As one blogger wrote:

"I hate American foreign policy and its constant meddling in the region… Are tanks, troops, and violence the only face of America? If the Pentagon, Department of Defense and Condi are ''America'' then yes – I hate America" ('Riverbend', cited in Pitchford 2011: 713).

The process of policy-making, as well as the decisions that result, can also influence perceptions of the United States. Fabbrini's (2010: 569-570) analysis of foreign policy under Clinton, Bush, and Obama suggests that anti-Americanism is limited in cases where the United States' policy decisions have a broad, multilateral support base, and is heightened where the United States chooses to act unilaterally or has failed to check the power of the president. For example, Obama's decision to continue military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq was viewed more favourably than Bush's initial decision to invade Iraq, due to the fact that the policy-making process included a broader range of states and was seen as more democratic and multilateral (Fabbrini 2010: 568). The hypocrisy of American failure to engage with the institutions it promotes, and to follow the values of democracy and accountability, reinforces a sense of betrayal among countries that are subject to American visions of liberalism (Katzenstein and Keohane 2006: 28).

The emotional responses to American foreign policy can also be seen in relation to historical subordination of the region's people by Western countries. Historical accounts of tension between predominately Arab nations and the United States demonstrate that the shift from benevolence to a more interventionist foreign policy by the United States throughout the twentieth century, including support for Israel, and military action to support pro-Western regimes in civil conflicts, still influences contemporary understandings of American foreign policy as it creates wariness about American motives and reinforces historical experiences of betrayal (Makdisi 2002: 548-560). More specifically, interrogation tactics used by American officials at Abu Ghraib were designed to humiliate prisoners by forcing them to act in a way that was inconsistent with their cultural and religious beliefs. For example, forcing Muslim detainees to shave their facial hair, a symbol of honour and piety in Islamic culture, limited their sense of respectability and righteousness, whilst public simulation of sexual acts humiliated detainees by removing their sense of control over their own sexuality, something that is central to masculinity within the Islamic faith. The global exposure of these photos, including among detainees' peer groups, intensified this humiliation among both its intended targets and the communities and countries from which the detainees originated (Saurette 2006: 507-508). This demonstrates the inseparability of emotions from questions of culture and politics, and provides the imperative for militant Islamists to politicise emotional responses to United States' foreign policies, including recruiting those who feel humiliated by the United States (Fattah and Fierke 2009: 76). Although not every person who feels emotionally aggrieved by American foreign policy seeks to undermine the United States through terrorism, social experiences of negative emotions, and the relational nature of humiliation by a particular state or group, is often a factor in operationalising resistance (Wright-Neville and Smith 2009: 94). Understanding the United States' actions through a lens of emotional experience, informed by historical, cultural, and political circumstances, therefore not only sheds light on the phenomenon of anti-Americanism but also has implications for future American foreign policy

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decisions.

In particular, understanding anti-Americanism is essential for determining if anti-Americanism should even have an influence on policy at all. Ross (2010: 110) argues that, if tensions between the United States and other countries are policy specific, then a reconsideration of policy choices will improve its international relations, but that if it is a result of differing cultural and personal belief systems, then tensions will be much more difficult to resolve and conflict may be unavoidable. However, rather than enabling such a distinction, the filtering of emotional responses to American foreign policy through political and cultural lenses, as seen in the above examples, suggests that the two cannot be separated so easily. United States' foreign policy must become more responsive to both the emotional consequences it may have, and the cultural context in which such emotional reactions are cultivated. As Walt (2005: 109) argues, disagreement with policy does not mean that the policy is wrong, but that the policy comes with a price. Where the United States' foreign policy decisions directly create a negative emotional environment within a political context already primed for American hostility, this price may include continuing conflict and strengthened anti-Americanism.

Although there are undoubtedly some groups whose resistance of the United States is founded on opposition to American culture and ideology, anti-American sentiment is largely derived from its explicit foreign policy choices. Examples from the Middle East, particularly Iraq, show that these choices are understood and interpreted in the context of their emotional consequences, as American policies that hinder the livelihoods of their subjects, or invoke feelings of humiliation, betrayal and shame, help to foster anti-American sentiment and the expression of hatred for America. In this way, anti-Americanism becomes an all-encompassing political statement, even where it is rooted in particular policy choices and their manifestations. This is particularly evident where the emotional impacts of American foreign policy intersect with historically, culturally and politically contingent emotional narratives, intensifying the relationship between emotional experience and anti-Americanism and reinforcing conflict. Here, anti-Americanism may be the result of 'what America does', but it has the potential to continually reinforce negative perceptions of America and encourage those who have experienced the impacts of American foreign policy to produce emotionally charged narratives about 'who America is'.

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