



The American Cancer of Western Civilization According to Robert

Aron and Arnaud Dandieu

The book *Le Cancer américain* (1931) by Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu is often mentioned in the literature, e.g. by Philippe Roger as “the most virulent of the anti-American essays of the interwar period” in France.¹ Such characterizations often fail to situate it² in the context of many joint writings where these two authors had been hammering out their own critical theory in polemical language equally unsparing of all forms of conventional thinking, singling out America simply as the matrix of its dominant system, namely global capitalism. Summing up and fleshing out a critique they had developed up to then in articles for *Europe*³ (aside from dissident Surrealist publications⁴), this book was written as a topical response to current developments, as they left Romain-Rolland’s review to its Marxist drift, to contribute to the more constructive doctrinal elaboration of the fledgling Ordre Nouveau Personalist movement, as a Third-Way alternative to capitalism, Communism and Fascism and as a federalist challenge to the centralized nation-state; a collaboration culminating in the group’s Bible, *La Révolution nécessaire*⁵, on the eve of Dandieu’s untimely death at 35 in 1933.

Thus their “pamphlet against the Yankee spirit is not anti-American in the usual sense of the word, i.e. the nationalist sense,”⁶ since the U.S.A. they are critiquing is “not a people, still less a land”, but a method, which happens to have “grafted itself onto a whole human

group, like a disease”: that of “reason reduced to its technical role,”(237) “allowing our rationalist civilisation to find in the colonies ... a kind of *tabula rasa* to erect its inhuman constructs”, without the reality checks of an older culture to provide any balance. For as Aron and Dandieu already pointed out in their no less iconoclastic first book *Décadence de la Nation française* (1931), people rightly say America is “not a nation, but a disease”, but then so is France as a Jacobin nation-state, only at a less advanced stage, since “America is the rationalist disease, isolated and prepared as in a culture medium”⁷, a perfect breeding ground for “science reduced to an instrument, not so much of brutal destruction as of uniform and massive production”⁸. Pity more than hatred is owed to the poor souls fated to live and die in this maelstrom, insofar as “for lack of an affective past and a deep philosophical tradition, the U.S.A.’s social body, entirely given over to the economy’s tantrums, is compelled to consume itself from crisis to crisis, now in euphoria, now in panic, incapable of any genuine distance to become aware of spiritual and personal values;...” But “should the genuine Jeffersonian inspiration, anti-bank, anti-urban and individualistic, reawaken in the United States, we will be the first to recognize in it the indelible mark of the human spirit, the unquellable love of both land and freedom belonging to the purest revolutionary spirit”(238), which Aron and Dandieu had been trying to reformulate for their own times since they first teamed up in 1927 to write their (unpublished) “Discourse against Method” —or rather its abuses, aiming to produce “the Discourse against Technique our generation awaits”(236), as they reiterate in *Le Cancer américain*.

So “this book is not a call to some kind of holy war,” impotent against spiritual ailments and actually furthering their spread, since “war is a contact more dangerous than any other, and we become Americanized even faster against America than with her”(239). A “holy war” of Old World culture against American materialism would be a self-deception if waged on the stage of power politics (as Axis powers would attempt), requiring of states that they modernize following American methods in order to remain competitive, thus ironically furthering that same technological hegemony other cultures purport to question in resisting financial globalization and cultural homogenization. This paradox of technological modernization as self-defeating nation-building resistance was meant as a warning to “all those in France or abroad, in America or Asia who feel ... their existence threatened by crises they undergo without being able to understand them, to the peoples who witness the demise of their basic traditions, —to individuals oppressed in their welfare and in their joys—”. Aron/Dandieu’s call was meant to rouse them all to a bold break with conformist routines, whose techniques remain helpless against the accumulating ruins of an accelerating spiritual cancer, as “mankind is about to face a laborious but inevitable moulting season”(241-242), shedding its old skin of outworn assumptions. At the onset of the Great Depression (as again nowadays), it becomes apparent that artificial prosperity cannot go on in defiance of common sense, so that “it is possible, even certain, that an inner necessity will drive the United States to their ruin: but if America falls, she will fall on us —or we will fall along with her.”(23)

It would therefore be mistaken to describe the American disease as a local one or even as a racial flaw, “as most scribblers and scholars do” when they ride the anti-American

bandwagon at that time in France. “The current crisis is not just a social, national or economic crisis,” Aron-Dandieu maintain: “it is a crisis of conscience, and thus universal”(15-16), as it affects the moral and psychological consciousness of the whole Greco-Christian world(24), in a malaise often expressed in modern literature, that boils down to “mankind’s loss of contact with the world.” Hence the psychological, even metaphysical basis of the future revolution, despite its inevitable political extension(38), since the American spirit is a misdirection of true spirit, a “hegemony of rational mechanisms over concrete and emotional realities, the deep wellsprings of genuine human progress” that are clogged by the “supremacy of industry and banking over the era’s entire life.”(17)

So instead of abdicating before this “world of tomorrow” —as famously observed in America by Georges Duhamel in his *Scènes de la vie future* (1930)— that is all-too beholden to the past, we should start by properly diagnosing the American disease: for “it is not an infectious disease that is caught and could be cured from outside”, with proper prophylactic measures to preserve Europe from the contagion of an alien life-form. “It is a cancer, that is a deep and, as it were, spontaneous disorder of life. It is a part of a being, an isolated faculty that suddenly breaks life’s balance, repudiates any solidarity to develop apart as a monstrous parasite, incidentally destined to die with the very being on which it is born.”(22) For “the modern world is in the throes of an ailment that, like a cancer, is tied to the very nature of this world.”(14) Thus, “from the metaphysical standpoint, it can be shown that American rationalism is but the monstrous and colonial

development of the Cartesian method”, so that Europe is not as innocent of its own misadventures as she would like to think.(17-18)

American imperialism, with its economic and mystical base, is the direct heir of Europe’s colonial tradition: but the Old World was dumbfounded to see that its colonists, having become independent and masters of the soil, had never demobilised, keeping instead in peacetime for themselves, and soon turning against Europe, this spirit of rigid *a priori* organization that is used in the event of war and that is imposed in colonies.(19)

Dandieu (the real brain of this intellectual tandem) seems to have in mind here something not unlike the “total mobilization” of the world by Technique that Ernst Jünger was then theorizing as the *Gestalt* of the Worker, a universal process he had seen emerge in the Great War and the new styles of social organization it ushered in, influencing Heidegger’s formulation of his own concept of Technique as *Gestell*, the positing of the world as “standing-reserve” for its further mobilization. But for Dandieu, if “there is no difference in the worker’s action between production and destruction”, turning modern war into an unspiritual, drearily mechanical process of pure destruction, this is due to the myth of production and abstract prosperity, causing all feelings to atrophy while action that is denied creation has no other outlet but in the technical realm.(243) The symbolic turning point was therefore not so much 1914/1918 in Europe as 1913 in the United

States, with the creation of the Federal Reserve System, making bank credit autonomous by severing its links to actual exchange, that the Young Plan of 1929 would then expand to Europe and the world as the matrix of the global financial system whose full reach would eventually be achieved by the World Bank. There lies the epicentre of the American cancer engulfing the world: “from the primacy of banks to unemployment, then from unemployment to ruin and war, such is the unstoppable march of the present determinism” —“a *danse macabre* of nations led by the United States,” from which “none is exempt.”(58)

This eerily prescient vision of a dysfunctional globalized economy reaches further than international financial networks, into the increasingly uniform management styles they command in all areas of life, under whatever flag, since “America is not a territorial framework”, but a method, a technique, a disease of the mind,” knowing no borders. “America is her cancer. It is thus, alas, not only across the Atlantic, but here, on our soil, in our cities, and even our universities, that we must get to know the deep nature of the peril threatening us,” impossible to isolate, and thus to amputate, “since America has spread everywhere.”(80-81)

The United States are beyond time as they are above space. Their measureless increase, their monstrous proliferation can only be explained by their lack of contact with the real, of contact with duration and of contact with the soil.

For the Yankee spirit is nothing but the mass exploitation, on a gigantic scale, of the most dismal error Europe has ever committed: the rationalist error. ... Rationalism is not reason: in all its efforts, reason is an instrument of conquest, which always entails passion. As such, it is respectable and can only be beneficial. But the rules it compels a hostile universe to reveal, once passion is spent and conquests are organized, gradually collapse into techniques, convenient no doubt, but imperious, and soon nefarious. The American spirit ... is none other than the use of this degraded rationalism in a purely technical realm. A civilisation of technicians, where the scientist is but a tool like any other, at best a machine-tool.(82-83)

Descartes could not have anticipated this degradation of his method into “industrial and financial rationalisation”(83), depriving it of its human value by “taking it down to the street or up the skyscrapers”, as the procedures of narrow specialties. Likewise showing “contempt for individualism in the revolutionary sense of the word”, “the modern American spirit asks from statistics what the authentic European spirit asks of man,” as a “means to eliminate personal factors to reduce everything to the laws of large numbers, more inhuman and more abstract”(84), applying rational rules “with hurtful impartiality to what is alive as to what is inert. Industrialism is its fief; the myth of production replaces the creative drive; Taylorism or Fordism are held to be harmless and beneficial, at least as long as statistics do not indicate an increase in workplace accidents or physical exhaustion.”(85) Playing its role in this system as loyal opposition or king’s jester, “anti-Americanism in America, and perhaps in France as well, has remained until now the

province of mandarins and aesthetes,” while “the lament of craftsmen, lovers of work well done, that sometimes rises as a ballad, plays the endearing but silly role of the stagecoach overrun by the locomotive in Buster Keaton films.” But nobody dares touch the regime’s nerve centres, i.e. “the myth of production, the religion of credit”, nor put the technicians and statisticians in their place(86-87). On the contrary, because of the prestige of abstract expertise these retain, “were we to destroy New York and Detroit, we would only push faster, towards a more tyrannical concentration, the monstrous apparatus of production and credit,” not just in the guise of Communism, but of that “*Communism from above*” of a technocratic Welfare State that may rally philanthropic industrialists, “and which would only strengthen the myth of production and the religion of credit” now entrenched by the psychological means of advertising.(132)

For they are the new opium of the people, lending prestige to wage labour as the price of the pursuit of happiness through consumption, fuelling production by addiction to credit. In this productivist system, people are caught in a vicious circle closed by advertising and credit: buying on credit to consume and producing to pay the debts incurred buying diversions from the drudgery of this very process. In what will one day be known as consumer society, “we feel disgusted by humility and sacrifice, but no material failure, no economic crisis has until now been able to erase the myth of prosperity. With each catastrophe, followed without fail by renewed concentration, it is reborn from its ashes. The American cancer is now inoperable by material means because it has become above all else a cancer of the spirit.”(133)

That is why “the question is really not going to be put in terms of capitalism nor in terms of Communism. The struggle that is about to be established is that of human conscience fighting for its freedom against all rational and abstract mechanisms that capitalism now exploits, but that others could adopt.”(132-133) It will not do therefore to expect a readymade alternative to the U.S.A. to come from the opposite geopolitical pole of the U.S.S.R., with its even more absurd and ruthless State capitalism and coercive propaganda in lieu of seductive advertising. And if Europe is being colonized by the United States, through the fascination of their prestige that is better than brute force at advancing conquest by commerce and credit(142) (as will become apparent in the post-war process of Americanisation), it will not do either to look South instead of East for support from the other colonies of her crumbling empires or from any such unspent forces (as radical Islam now claims to be) rising from what will one day be known as the Third World.

The day spiritual Europe will have given in to the American power of abstraction, the last resort against invading materialism will be to call on the barbarians, if there are any left. But if, as it appears, for the first time in the history of the world, degenerate reason has attained such technical power that no barbarism can directly threaten it, if, by a tragic confusion and a degradation of all values, modern barbarism is none other than reason in its American form, then no force is to be seen outside of our civilisation that could free us from it by fighting it or by destroying it. Any call on the barbarians is in vain if the barbarians do not have American-style weapons, and if the

barbarian is Yankee, he is doubly barbaric. It is thus within our world that the decisive drama of human history is to be played out. The spirit does not have the right to retreat before the abstract because, by its very effort, the latter has toppled in advance all barriers and eliminated all possible interventions from still virgin human forces. It is now therefore that the decisive battle has to be waged, where there is only and can henceforward only be, at least for a long time and barring any unforeseeable collapse of all of modern civilisation, but two adversaries facing each other: the living and creative spirit and, in open struggle against itself, its fossilized, materialised emanation. A struggle for spiritual values that goes to show the primary importance of colonisation by prestige in the colonisation of Europe.(144-145)

In breaking, “by corruption if possible, by force if necessary,” all that disrupts the capitalist dance they lead, “the deep aim of the United States in Europe as in America is to avert the toppling of the myth of capitalist production, that is the revolutionary psychological explosion”(162) that must attack and destroy it “if we are to escape the shipwreck that the materialist determinism of the banks threatens to engulf us in”. Here it is hard not to think of the global youth uprising against consumer society in 1968, since this “spiritual revolution”(163) consists in “freeing man’s psychic faculties, invaded by abstraction and now denying themselves as a necessary consequence of the American cancer” of the modern world.(134) Aron/Dandieu’s anti-American writings thus cogently express some enduring motivations and dilemmas of “counter-cultural” currents both within and outside the United States, while avoiding their fellow-travelling pitfalls. Their

critique cannot be dismissed as mere antimodernism or xenophobia, as though a dysfunctional U.S.-led world-system could not join Communism in the dustbin of history.

Dr. Christian Roy

c_roy11@hotmail.com

Department of Political Science, Université de Montréal

Home address: 2485 rue Coursol, Montreal, Quebec H3J 1C9 CANADA

¹ Philippe Roger, *L'ennemi américain. Généalogie de l'antiaméricanisme français* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 363.

² An exception being Olivier Dard, "Le Cancer américain: un titre phare de l'antiaméricanisme français de l'entre-deux-guerres", in Olivier Dard and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, eds., *Américanisations et anti-américanismes comparés* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2008), 115-133.

³ See Christian Roy, "Transpositions of Mauss' Theory of the Gift in the Personalist Social Critique of Arnaud Dandieu (1897-1933)", in Antoon Vandavelde, ed., *Gifts and Interests* (Leuven : Peeters, 2000), 177-189.

⁴ See Roy, "Arnaud Dandieu and the Epistemology of Documents", *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 7: "The Use-Value of Documents", 2007.

(<http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal7/index.htm>).

⁵ Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu, *La Révolution nécessaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1933; reprint Paris: Place, 1993).

⁶ Aron and Dandieu, *Le Cancer américain* (Paris: Rieder, 1931; reissued Geneva: L'Âge d'Homme, 2008), 236 (original edition).

⁷ Aron and Dandieu, *Décadence de la Nation française* (Paris: Rieder, 1931), 208-209.

⁸ Aron and Dandieu, *Cancer*, 238.